Think Before You Click: An Analysis of

Facebook as a Source of News

The Honors Program

Senior Capstone Project

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to analyze how millennial college students perceive and interpret the news-related content that is posted on the social networking website Facebook. The news that this study is focused on is related to major events in American politics, especially this past Presidential election. One research question was developed to compete this study: what influence are news stories being shared on Facebook having on millennials? In order to determine the answer to this question, focus groups with college students at Bryant University were held in which the students were asked to evaluate a news article and give their thoughts and opinions on current American events and how they are portrayed on social media.

<u>INTRODUCTION</u>

Social media are a growing force. They act as a form of social interaction and as sources of information. For quite some time, I have been interested in the way that using social media as sources for important information has impacted and influenced our society. I believe the first time this thought crossed my mind was back in high school when the shooting occurred at Sandy Hook elementary school. Due to incorrect information released online by overly-eager media outlets, the wrong person was being accused of this horrible crime. The idea of social media as sources of news came back into my mind this past year when it seemed that every article on Facebook or tweet on Twitter was about the election. It got me wondering how many of these sources were accurate and how many were just considered factual because of the number of hits the article received or who shared it. This also had me wondering how many voters were influenced by inaccurate articles that they deemed reliable. This is where the idea for my capstone project originated. I want to see how many people use social media as their primary source of news, what their criteria are for the sources they get their news from, and the influence that these potentially inaccurate articles are having on people's opinions.

In order to conduct this study, the term "news" needs to be defined. As I learned through my research, there is no clear cut definition of news that is accepted by all. Everyone has their own perceptions of what they believe to be considered news. For the purpose of this study, the definition of news is an event that affects a community on a national, regional, or local basis with a specific focus on American politics. This is the definition I was working with and based my

research on, but as part of my initial research question, I was interested in what others considered to be news and made a point to ask about that as well.

There is a lot that can be discussed about news presented on every social media platform that students are active on. It would be difficult to complete a study on all social media in general because the topic is broad and every social platform is different. The content posted on Facebook varies from the content posted on Instagram which varies from the content posted on Twitter. The reason for this is each medium has different groups of users and is geared toward a specific type of content. This study focuses on Facebook because it is a platform that most college students still use and it is easy to share articles from other sources with friends on this medium. It is not that social media such as Twitter and Instagram are more difficult to share news stories on, but college students typically share more of their own thoughts and photos on these platforms. My interest in this study sparked when I saw my peers sharing stories about presidential candidates Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, and Donald Trump on my Facebook timeline and on my own social media accounts. Facebook is where I saw this happening the most and so Facebook is the platform I decided to focus on with my research.

I have noticed since my initial decision to look at the accuracy of news on Facebook, other scholarly sources have become interested in this topic as well. From the concept of fake or false news to Russia's propaganda posted on Facebook during the most recent presidential election to the more recent scandals with Mark Zuckerberg and the privacy issues of Facebook, it seems there is more and more research being added every day that focuses evaluating online news or determining what is reliable. While there are many scholarly studies out there that are

looking at this, my specific study focuses on the impact politically-based news content is having

on the college students which is a specific topic that I did not find much literature on.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The First Amendment

An issue that is always brought up when it comes to journalism and the news is the First Amendment. Technically, the First Amendment states that Americans have the right to free speech and freedom of the press, but over time we have learned there are necessary limitations when it comes to this freedom. Some of these limitations include hate speech and libel, but libel only covers people not facts. The is a constant debate over journalism ethics and what is protected by the First Amendment, especially when it comes to anonymous sources. (Shepard 2011) Jason Shepard's *Privileging the Press* attempts to examine this. Shepard interviews journalists and media lawyers involved in recent legal cases concerning the protection of anonymous sources. While the ethics of journalism may lead a writer to protect a source, when the question of whether or not the source's information is truthful is concerned the identity might need to be revealed. (Shepard 2011) Another factor is if journalists are not being ethical, there is the idea that they may be making up their source and claiming them to be anonymous which is something to take into consideration when researching false or misreported news. (Shepard 2011)

The Use of Anonymous Sources in Journalism

When a journalist posts an article and uses unnamed sources, it can call the journalist's credibility into question. Why does the source want to remain anonymous? Is the source reliable? Is there a reason the author good not reveal his or her source? Journalist Perry Bacon Jr. took the time to look into how to determine when an article with unnamed sources can be considered

trustworthy and credible. (Bacon 2017) He gathered a group of journalists and other professionals with political experience to help him conduct his research study. Many are often quick to discredit a story with unnamed sources. (Bacon 2017) There are times where the source's name is left out because it is not credible or as Bacon points out the journalist wants more focus on "showing how savvy and in the know they are than truly informing and enlightening readers." (Bacon 2017) That being said sometimes, it is the journalist's ethical duty to leave out their source's name. If a reported is doing an investigative piece and someone could be in jeopardy of harm or losing their job if their identity is revealed, some might say it is the journalist's ethical duty to protect that identity. (Bacon 2017) Sometimes the source just simply refuses to give information unless they are promised to be kept anonymous and the journalist needs to comply to get the story. Many stories covered in politics have sources that want to be kept anonymous. (Bacon 2017)

Bacon and his colleagues were able to put together a list of five suggestions for readers who want to evaluate the credibility of an article with unnamed sources. The first being that there is strength in numbers, in regards to both the number of sources in an individual article and the number of articles reporting the same fact. (Bacon 2017) Point number two to consider is that a source sound more suspicious if they predict something as opposed to reporting what has already happened. (Bacon 2017) Thirdly, if the author cannot reveal the exact identity of the source, what other details do they give? It is important to look at the specific details to see if they give the reader an idea on how to determine the reliability of the source. (Bacon 2017) Next, look at the author themselves. Is this author known to produce credible stories? Finally, the last thing to consider when looking at an article with unnamed sources is how do those involved with the

story respond to it. (Bacon 2017) For example, when it was reported that the Trump had

disclosed information in a meeting with Russian officials and his administration could not deny it

outright, it makes the article reported it seem a bit more accurate. (Bacon 2017) While the

information gathered from this study is important, I wonder what the role it has in regards to

articles posted on Facebook. Do the millennials reading these articles pay attention to whether

the authors name the sources they use or not? Knowing this could give an indication into how

much thought college students put into choosing reliable news sources.

Journalism in a Digital Age

The next logical step in the research process would be to find out where social media fall in the

world of journalism, which is exactly what Henry Neil discusses in his book *American Carnival:*

*Journalism Under Siege in an Age of New Media. (*Neil 20017) Neil talks about how the rapidly

increasing use of technology is impacting the field of journalism. He examines people's use of

traditional forms of news media such as newspapers and he researches all forms of media used to

cover contemporary American news stories like the war in Iraq. (Neil 2007) Neil concludes that

the decline of traditional media could be troubling as many American institutions are filled with

corruption, and journalism is needed to expose those issues. (Neil 2007) This book shows the

importance of news outlets, whether they are traditional or not, remaining accurate and reliable.

This highlights the argument fueling my research, which is that social media should be posting

only articles that are reliable and that doing otherwise will negatively impact society.

Continuing with research about social media as a form of journalism brought me to the book

Journalism and Media Convergence. (Nienstedt 2013) The authors discuss the pressure

journalism is under to adapt to the world around it. It looks at the way media are affecting fields such as advertising and public relations and how these relationships in turn affect journalism. (Nienstedt 2013) It asks the question if the digital age is impacting the quality of journalism and concludes that "excellent and investigative reporting can still be found," but there are rising factors that are affecting journalistic credibility (Nienstedt 2013). In order to understand the influence unreliable sources are having on their readers, it might help to understand why the sources are not reliable in the first place. Is there a difference in the influence a source that may not have triple checked its facts has versus a source that blatantly did not do enough research? This is something that I want to find out.

The authors of "From 'Information' to 'Knowing'" confirm the what many other sources have stated: the internet is changing journalism. Authors Pentina and Tarafdar discuss the idea of information overload. (Pentina and Tarafdar 2014) Yes, the internet is making information more accessible, but is it too much? With the rapidly growing use of the internet, it seems everywhere we turn, information is there waiting for us. Having all that information available can make it hard to distinguish the accurate from the inaccurate. Pentina and Tarafdar conclude with what they believe to be helpful suggestions for news outlets on how to use social media and the internet to their advantage. (Pentina and Tarafdar 2014) I found this article useful in determining the proper way to use social media as a source of news.

Social Media as a Form of Journalism

Researchers Radim Hladik and Vaclav Stetka took a look at how social media are impacting the world of news in the Czech Republic in "Powers that Tweet." (Hladik and Stetka 2015) They

collected six months' worth of samples of news in 2013 to determine how social media was influencing news in the country. The found that it was hard to create a generalized statement about the role that all social media have when used as news because each medium is different. (Hladik and Stetka 2015) News is viewed differently on Facebook than it is on Twitter and they need to be examined separately. The one generalized statement that they were able to make is that most news media sources do not use social media to their full potential. (Hladik and Stetka 2015) This article is proof that is the future social media will be used more in journalism, which is why I believe it is important to understand the role each social networking site will play in this field now to make sure they are used correctly. It also supports why my research is focused just on Facebook because it would be hard to get results on all social media when is platform is being used so differently.

In the article "'It's Only a Pastime, Really,'" Malin Sveningsson observes that today's youth are not following the news as much as past generations have, which creates a decrease in political participation. (Sveningsson 2015) He states that it is not necessarily true that young people are disinterested in news; they are simply getting their information from atypical news sources, including social media. To determine the effects of this trend, Sveningsson analyzed how social media users understand these social networking sites, specifically Facebook and Twitter, as news sources. (Sveningsson 2015) He conducted interviews to determine that users appreciated the immediacy of social media and felt these sites made stories more relevant, but also felt that at times these sources were biased and sometimes even presented false information. (Sveningsson 2015) Another interesting aspect of the study was that while the young people reported using social media to read news, they felt these sources were not "real news sources" and therefore

often reported themselves as uniformed citizens. (Sveningsson 2017) This study is helpful to my research because it looks at the good and bad of journalism on social media and points out the negative effects it is having on readers.

Misreported News

In *Getting It Wrong,* Joseph Campbell analyzes the importance of accurately reporting news. He takes a look at myths that the media have led people to believe and the impact misreporting stories has on the public. (Campbell 2010) Some of the top ten misreported stories include the Watergate scandal and the media's coverage of Hurricane Katrina. After using traditional research methods to gather the information, Campbell concludes that misreporting stories feeds stereotypes and helps defend corrupt policymakers. (Campbell 2010) When we as consumers rely on a new source to report the facts accurately, we tend to believe every story which can cause problems when media report a story inaccurately. (Campbell 2010) This book will be extremely helpful to me because it shows there is already a belief that misreported or false stories have a negative impact on those who view them. It just needs to be applied to stories reported on social media.

Fake News

In Olivia Solon's article, "The Future of Fake News", she brings up an interesting point as to why fake news is a more prominent issues than it ever has been before. The advancement of technology is allowing users to make more and more realistic-looking content. (Solon 2017) Certain computer programs are being created that can make it look like prominent figures are saying things that they have never said. (Solon 2017) As this technology is only going to get

better and make this false audio and visual content more realistic, it is important that media users have a foundation of media literacy as this concept will need to expand and grow as this technology does.

"2016 may have been a good year for news…but it wasn't a good year for journalism." (Harding 2017) This is a statement expressed by journalist Phil Harding in his article "Journalism versus Lies and Fake News." While it seemed there were breaking news stories everywhere one looked, especially during the past presidential election, the credibility of much of this news is being questioned. (Harding 2017) Another point Harding mentions in this article is that while most Americans still got their news from television during the election, during the last three month of the election the top 5 stories proven to be false on Facebook received more engagement than most of the major news outlets like CNN and Fox News. (Harding 2017) The instantaneous access to information makes social media the perfect outlet to share fake news with thousands or millions immediately and many that are accessing this information are unable to notice a difference between the stories that are true and those that are false. Harding quotes someone in this article stating "'media literacy will become as important as math or science.'" (Harding 2017) This proves the importance of this study. It is crucial that millennials are able to distinguish reliable sources from sources and remain uninfluenced by news that has no truth to it.

Clickbait

An important issue to discuss when talking about online news articles is clickbait. Many online sources' revenue is determined by the number of visits their sites receive. This leads sites to create what are known as "clickbait articles" with headlines that try to entice the reader to click

on the article to learn more. (Chakraborty et al. 2016) Many of the articles shared on Facebook during the most recent election were clickbait and journalists are left wondering whether or not this is an ethical method to attract readers. According to Abhijnan Chakraborty and others in "Stop Clickbait," clickbait should not be used by journalists. The authors of this article stated clickbait articles often use these headlines solely to attract readers to the website, and often the reader is left with a subpar article that disappoints them. (Chakraborty et al. 2016) Through their research they attempt to discover if there is a way to detect clickbait right away and then build a browser to block them. If this browser were to be successful it would help readers avoid article that are not worth their time and eventually cause these websites to create more meaningful articles which would increase the credibility of online news. (Chakraborty et al. 2016)

Often times the method used by clickbait articles to draw the reader's attention is putting a question in the headline, but that does not mean every article that uses this method is a form of clickbait. James Cook and Dawn Plourde examine this in their article "Do Scholars Follow Betteridge's Law?" (Cook and Plourde 2016) In order to understand what they are looking at, one has to know what Betteridge's Law and Hinchcliffe's Rule are. The two basically state that it is only acceptable way to use a question in the headline of an article is when the question can be answered with a "no." (Cook and Plourde 2016) Cook and Plourde look at top articles from 2014 with questions in their headlines and analyze whether or not the headlines are yes or no questions and then if the answer to the question was "no." When analyzing this they only looked at academic articles to see if clickbait was a concern and they found that it was not. (Cook and Plourde 2016) This study could potentially be applied to articles shared on Facebook and give readers a way to detect clickbait and avoid fake articles.

As discussed in the article on clickbait, companies publishing content online will try to use attention-grabbing headlines in order to get users to click on their articles and generate money for their website. The issue then becomes that these headlines are more focused on gaining website traffic than being accurate. The solution journalist Sierra Filucci provides for this issue is that parents should teach their children from a young age to more critically analyze a story before they accept it as truth. (Filucci 2017) While Filucci focuses on a demographic much younger than the young featured in this research it reiterates the point that a background in media literacy and critical thinking can drastically change the way people look at news. (Filucci 2017)

Facebook and Fake News

After the most recent presidential election, some Facebook users began to question the integrity of the articles that were being shared on the website. Some of the articles shared during that time were either clickbait articles posted just to entice people to go onto their website or sometimes the author just did not check their facts before publishing it. (Kafka 2017) Now we are learning that some of these articles may have even been propaganda posted purchased by other countries in attempt to influence the election. With all these potentially untrue stories floating around on Facebook, the website is trying to find a way to distinguish the true articles from the fake one. (Kafka 2017)

The website has decided that instead of removing these fake stories from a user's newsfeed, they will be tagging some of them with a warning label. (Kafka 2017) The article written by Peter Kafka about this news gives the example of a story about President Trump and how hos phone is the source of information leaked from the White House. While Facebook is hesitant to use the

term fake, this story was labeled that other news sources are disputing it. (Kafka 2017) Kafka criticizes that the company uses this term instead of calling the story what it is: fake. He also criticizes the method to how they determine what articles to label as disputed. (Kafka 2017) This article shows that Facebook realizes that fake news is an issue and taking steps to get users to think twice before accepting an article as truth. My research can add to this because if millennials are still accepting false media or questionable sources, it will show websites like Facebook they need to do more against these articles.

Groupthink is the idea that people will agree with the ideas of others instead of voicing their own opinions in order to avoid conflict. As it turns out, this concept can be applied to how likely people are to examine the credibility of a news story. Researcher Shankar Vedantam recently presented his findings about this on NPR. (Vendantam 2017) He discovered that when people are in a group there is this mentality that someone else will do the fact check. In fact, when people are in a group they are 30-50% less likely to check the facts presented and this group mentality includes reading an article on social media. (Vendantam 2017)

The Social Media Reader

The Social Media Reader, by Michael Mandiberg, follows the history of technological advances and analyzes how they have influenced the spread of knowledge. It discusses the idea of user-driven content and how its popularity is increasing. (Mandiberg 2012) This immediately stood out to me and brought me back to the articles shared during the election. Many of these articles came from websites like the Odyssey, where users who are often college-aged are able to post and share their own opinions. This leads me to wonder how these writers do their research and how

many people used articles such as these as a source of information during the election. The author also discusses how user-generated content coexists with typical sources and how the two converge to create what is currently defined as journalism. (Mandiberg 2012) This book has given me a lot to think about in regards to what I analyze in my research when considering sources of news.

Bots

A piece of technology that has rapidly increased the ability to spread false news is bots that can automatically create posts and interact with users in the comments section. They look like normal social media users but can post in some cases over a thousand times a day. This invention allows governments, companies, and other organizations to spread their propaganda online without having to even have a human being creating the posts. (Timberg 2017) The most well know use of bots to influence public opinion being Russia's attempt to influence the most recent U.S. election. Writer Craig Timberg believes that as these bots become cheaper to use, more and more large organizations will purchase them in attempt to influence the general public's opinion online. (Timberg 2017) It is difficult for users to tell whether the person responding to their comment or posting an article is real or a bot, and so social network websites such as Facebook and Twitter are feeling more pressure to do more on their end to prevent the use of bots.

Russia and the Most Recent Presidential Election

Russia has been implied in trying to tamper with the 2016 presidential election for almost a year now. They have been accused of leaking several files including the email scandal that former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton was implicated in. What becomes even more interesting is

that as I was in the beginning stages of this research topic, the news came out that Russia took to

Facebook to anonymously spread anti-Clinton propaganda. In his article "To Sway Vote, Russia

Used Army of Fake Americans," Scott Shane sheds some light on how Russia was able to

attempt to influence so many Americans during the past presidential election. (Shane 2017) At

first, the propaganda websites they create attacking Hillary Clinton were not gaining much

traffic. It was not until Melvin Redick, family man from Pennsylvania, posted a link to the

DCLeaks website on his page encouraging others to check it out that people started to notice it.

Soon other Americans were posting links to this website and other pages attacking Clinton.

(Shane 2017) Upon a closer look, something seems off about Melvin Redick's page and it was

discovered that there is no one in Pennsylvania by that name. Part of what made Russia's anti-

Clinton propaganda during the election so effective is that they were able to create fake

American online profiles to use to spread it. (Shane 2017) The issue is that some of these profiles

are so well encrypted it is hard to connect them directly to Russia. Shane stresses the importance

of understanding this tactic used by Russia before the next major U.S. election because there is

no doubt in the minds of American officials that foreign countries will try to use this to interfere

again. (Shane 2017)

Digital Media Literacy

According to Sora Park in her study "Dimensions of Digital Media Literacy and the Relationship

with Social Exclusion," digital media literacy is defined as "the ability to access, understand, and

create content using digital media." (Park 2012) While Park is looking at the relationship

between this concept of digital media literacy and social exclusion, her study is still useful to me.

Throughout the introduction she discusses the difference between media literacy and digital media literacy. She emphasizes the importance of user-generated content and that providing people with access to technology is not enough to make someone digital media literate. (Park 2012) It builds upon the definition of traditional media literacy because a person also needs an understanding of technology and needs to be able to create their own content. (Park 2012) The definitions of digital media literacy provided by Park in this study are important to my study because by examining how college students are evaluating news on Facebook, I am looking at their levels of digital media literacy when it comes to this specific social networking website. In order to determine how digital media literate a person is, I need to understand how to measure digital media literacy and so I need to understand the definition.

News and Media Literacy

In the research study "Measuring News Media Literacy," Maksl, Ashley, and Craft, and define the term news media literacy as "the knowledge and motivations needed to identify and engage with journalism." (Maksl, Ashley, and Craft 2015) My study combines this definition and the definition previously mentioned that Park created. (Park 2012) I am looking at how college students are influenced by news related media online. It is important to understand both pieces of this definition in order to understand and analyze my results properly. This study was also interesting for me to examine because it measured the levels of news media literacy among teenagers. (Maksl et al., 2016) The similarities between what Maksl and others measured and what I want to determine with this study can give me guidance on how to develop my study and

what I should be measuring when it comes to younger generations and their involvement with

news-related media.

<u>METHODS</u>

<u>Participants</u>

This study was conducted with a specific focus on college aged students' opinions toward news on social media. College students at Bryant University were asked to participate in focus groups to share their opinions. The students that participated were gathered from several different classes and organizations on campus. Each focus group held anywhere from two to six students and the total number of students that participated was nineteen.

<u>Procedures</u>

In order to gain insights to what college students think of the news content that can be found on Facebook, the best method is to ask them. The initial methodology for this study was to send out a survey with a link to an article. After consideration, it was determined that this gave the students too much freedom to search the article and ask for their peers' opinions. The desired results of this study were to determine the organic impact reading one of these articles had on a college student and what their initial thoughts on it would be.

Five focus groups were conducted in which students were asked to read an article (See Appendix A) and answer a series of questions (See Appendix B) about their thoughts and opinions of the article and then of media and news in general. The article used in these focus groups is entitled "The Trump-Russia Investigation: Everything You Need to Know." It was taken from a website called *Odyssey* where all stories are written by college students. The tagline on the signup page reads as the following: "Join Odyssey here to create, post and share your content. No approvals, no barriers. It's just you, your content, and your readers." Many of the articles created on this

website are opinion pieces and it is not the most reliable when it comes to facts. More often than not the article I saw my peers sharing during the election were from this platform. I wanted to use this source for my article selection because I was interested to see how legitimate college students thought a news story from this source would be. I also wanted something with an eye-catching headline so I could ask participants the influence a headline has on whether or not they click on an article. The story itself is not necessarily "fake news," but I was curious to see if students would feel inclined to check other sources.

Demographics

At the end of each focus group, the participants were sent the link to a Qualtrics survey (See Appendix c). In this survey, each participant was asked to answer a few demographic questions such as gender, age, etc. The demographics of this study were the following:

- **Gender:** 94% female, 6% male

- **Age:** 1% 18-year-olds, 1% 19-year-olds, 37% 20-year-olds, 26% 21-year-olds, 35% 22-year olds

- **Class Year:** 11% freshmen, 11% sophomores, 36% juniors, 42% seniors

- **Primary Source of News:** 10% television, 90% Internet

<u>RESULTS</u>

Although I conducted this project using a research question and not a hypothesis, I did have some thoughts about how my results would turn out. There was one group that responded to the article and my questions the way I has assumed they would, but for the most part my assumptions were wrong. Most students in these focus groups said something at one point or another that surprised me. The following is a synopsis of my results. It is broken down by question that was asked during the focus group, the major themes I found when analyzing responses to that question, and what those themes mean for the results of this study.

<u>What are your initial thoughts after reading this article?</u>

In almost every focus group, the first response to this question was about the poor grammar and lack of organization in the article. Most of the participants were familiar with the source and had read articles on the Odyssey before, but most of them were opinion-based pieces. This caused many of them to question the credibility of the article. One of participants commented "It seems more like a blog than an actual source of information," in regards to the style of the article.

<u>How does the article make you feel?</u>

This question had more to do with the content of the article than the style and formatting. When asked how they felt about the piece, many responded with different variations of phrases and statements that expressed their confusion. One participant stated "It's not like the language goes above my head, I just don't know if I could articulate what it is trying to say." Others talked about how they had to reread sections of the piece because the author made it difficult to

understand the point they were trying to get across. Some talked about how they felt the article lacked important details and that some of the details given were out of date. With a case such as the Trump-Russia investigation where new details and insights are constantly being brought up, an article written in February should not be getting its most recent facts from December. This caused many of the participants to question why the article title stated it was everything you needed to know about this investigation if it was missing important details. Without using the term, these students were touching upon the concept of clickbait. This is why Chakraborty believes clickbait is so unethical because readers are told they are getting something from an article and instead they are left completely disappointed as most of these participants were.

Have any of your opinions on this topic changed after reading this article?

Most stated that this piece would not be the one to change their opinion on the investigation for two reasons. The first being that it was not really meant to persuade. The purpose of this piece, whether or not is was accomplished, was to lay all the facts out about the investigation so the reader can be informed on what is happening. One participant touched on the fact that any statements in the article that may have tried to be persuasive were clearly opinion – based and biased including the line "Trump may not be able to dig his way out of this one." The second reason that majority of the students in this study felt they were in no way persuaded by this piece had to do with the source. They do not find the Odyssey to be credible when it comes to news and if they wanted to learn more about the investigation they would check a different source.

<u>Is this the kind of story you are used to reading?</u>

While some students admitted that they do not follow the news that often or at all, others said they try to follow it as often as they can. When asked if this story was similar to the sources they are used to reading, it was expressed that the style seemed similar. Several of them mentioned they prefer short and brief stories such as this because it makes it easier to read news article when they have a busy schedule. One participant said that the piece had buzzwords that most other articles on this topic include. This makes it so the article mirrors news stories posted on other sites, but when looking at it more closing, the participant said they could tell the writing was subpar compared to other sources. Talking about the content as opposed to the style and formatting most participants said the writing on this piece was a much lower quality than what they're used to reading. When the students were asked to name a few sources they usually check for their news, many of the same sources were mentioned over and over including the Wall Street Journal, New York Times, and MSNBC.

<u>Would you share this article on your Facebook page?</u>

Not a single participant said that they would share this article. Some mentioned that the source is the reason they would not share it. One participant said they felt it would look poorly on them to share an article whose credibility was that questionable. Another reason the students gave to explain their hesitance to share a political article in general was the environment that surrounds sharing an article of this nature on Facebook. A few students mentioned that when you share a news-related story on Facebook, people often comment and ask for you to explain your opinions or stance on the issue further. They disclosed putting themselves in that position makes

them nervous because they do not feel they have enough information on the topic to explain their opinions. Others said that this past presidential election has created a stigma among younger generations about sharing your political opinions on this social networking website.

<u>What kind of news-related content, if any, do you share on your Facebook?</u>

The previously mentioned stigma against sharing these political pieces on Facebook has created the perception that this is not what Facebook is for. The participants all seemed to agree that even though they do not like sharing stories about politics, they will share news related content that they have an invested interest in. When asked what those topics were some answers were local news, Bryant community news, and social issues such as gun violence, sexual assault, and women's rights.

<u>If you were to see this article on Facebook, would you stop and read it?</u>

When an article is shared on Facebook and it appears on a user's timeline, they can see the headline, a picture, a subtitle, and the source. Knowing only that information, the participants were asked if they would feel inclined to stop and read the article. Most expressed that they would at least click on it, but probably would not finish reading the article. Clickbait plays an important role in the answer to this question, because many stated the reason they would feel compelled to read the story was because just based on the title they are left believing the article will tell them everything they need to know about this investigation. Some said that they still would not read it because they would know it came from the Odyssey which would inform them that the article is likely not a credible source of information.

An interesting point that one participant brought up was that the person who shared the article and what they say about it makes a difference. After this comment was made, the other students in that focus group nodded in agreement. Another person added to this comment by saying that if you know a person really well, you probably know their political beliefs and opinions, and so if they share an article you most likely already know the gist of what the article will say and what bias it will have. If the person has the same opinions as you, many students agreed they would be more likely to read the article. This aligns with Vendantam's findings that in a group setting individuals believe someone else will do the fact checking and are less likely to check facts for themselves. (Vendantam 2016) When someone sees that their friend that they trust has shared an article, they are likely to believe that this friend has already made sure the source was trustworthy before sharing it. This might make them more likely to buy into what the article is saying.

<u>What do you primarily use Facebook for?</u>

If college students are not sharing articles on their Facebook pages, what are they using this social medium for? The participants in my focus group had several different responses to this question. Some said they enjoy watching videos ranging from cooking videos to dog videos and a few said they would even watch a news video if it came up on their timeline. One participant explained it by saying, "When you scroll past a video one your timeline, it automatically starts playing. If the video is only a minute or a minute and a half long, I might as well watch it."

Most of the participants said their primary purpose for using Facebook was to keep in contact with friends and family who were far away. Whether it's posting photos while abroad so their friends at Bryant can see what they're doing, or posting photos at school so their family back home can stay up to date on their life. They also really enjoy looking at what their friends and family are posting for the same reasons. One participant explained that one of their cousins is getting married and seeing what his fiancé posts on Facebook allows them to feel like they are a part of the experience even though they're not actually there for it.

How do you feel about news and the media in general today?

When it comes to news and the media, the term biased was used a lot in these focus groups. It was discussed that even a lot of the major news sources have their inherent biases and so it is important to look at multiple sources to make sure you are getting the whole truth. Some mentioned that social media have made news more instantaneous, accessible and have given everyone the opportunity to have a voice, but with the increase in the quantity of news online, readers have to be careful and check the quality of these sources. While there were various positive and negative opinions about news, there was one point almost everyone in the focus groups could agree on this one statement: "I should be following the news more than I do." They understand the importance of staying informed the their busy lives as college students and their negative perceptions of the media are preventing it from being a top priority.

<u>What are your thoughts on the news that was posted on Facebook during the most recent presidential election?</u>

After asking participants about their opinions on news and the media in general, I narrowed the focus to politics by asking them about their opinions on news and the media during the most recent presidential election. Each group echoed the negative thoughts and opinions of the other groups. They all felt as though they were hearing the same story over and over again in different words and phrasing. One participant expressed their frustration with Facebook and news during this time by saying, "I feel like the campaign wasn't really about politics it was literally about who had less skeletons in their closet and that was it. And whoever you picked you were basically hated for. You couldn't really go right with any decision."

An interesting point that was brought up in the last focus group was that the influx of political news online can positively impact younger generations if they know how to use this resource to their advantage. It was discussed that before social media, if a teenager wanted to become informed, they were reading the newspapers their parents bought or watching the news stations their parents put on. This would mean the news they were accessing often aligned with the political beliefs of their parents. When it comes to finding news online one of the participants in this group made this point "If you're going vote at 18, you need to be able to form an opinion…now you have all these different media outlets, you're more likely to develop your own identity and your own thoughts and beliefs about what you're reading." While many of the opinions on political news posted on Facebook, this proves that news accessed online can be great resource if one knows how to use it that way. This is why digital media literacy is a crucial skill for college students to have.

Key Findings

Each of these questions have their own themes among responses, but what can be said about each focus group overall? How do all of these responses come to together and what is the result of this study? As was mentioned earlier, 90% of the participants in this study are getting news-related content from the Internet. This proves it is important to determine how much time and thought students are putting into evaluating the sources they choose to get their news from. When it comes to Facebook and the political definition of news that this study is focusing on, most students expressed that the past presidential election has created a stigma against sharing political opinions on this platform. This deters the majority of them from sharing news-related content on Facebook and often causes them to pay little attention to the political content found on their timeline.

In regards to the credibility of the news they are finding online, the participants overall expressed a desire to check multiple sources before accepting a story as truth, especially if the initial source was not one they were familiar with. From the way that the students evaluated the article they were handed in the focus groups, it is clear that these colleges students were digital media literate. They knew what to look for, had prior knowledge on the subject, and expressed interest in checking other sources to see if what was being reported about this investigation was accurate.

While four out of five focus groups were measured as having high levels of digital media literacy. There was one group that appeared to be an outlier. The students in this group all discussed the article as it was and did not seem to question whether it was a reliable source or

not. Most of them also mentioned that they barely follow the news and when they do the websites they check are mostly opinion-based. Having high numbers of digital media literate college students is not enough. Every college student should know how to find factual and accurate news online, no matter if they are on Facebook, another social media platform, or any other Internet source. They should be keeping up with credible sources regularly and be able to spot fake or inaccurate news. The literature suggests that with the increase in the use of bots and other technological advances, determining what news is accurate and truthful is only going to get more difficult. This is why it is important to develop and strengthen digital media literacy skills now so that as it gets harder to the difference, readers do not become more likely to be deceived by fake news.

<u>DISCUSSION</u>

<u>Limitations</u>

In the past year and a half since this research study began, a lot of thought, planning, and research went into determining the best way to execute it. With that being said, even the best research projects have their limitations and things that could be improved upon. Focus groups are great because they provide an intimate setting to record candid responses, but they do have their drawbacks. One being that they are not as easy to mass distribute as a survey. With a survey, you can send it out to hundreds of people and have numerous responses within a week. A focus group limits the number of participants per session and is limited to a certain time black that fits into the researcher and participants' availabilities. For this study, I was only able to get nineteen participants for my focus groups, which is hardly an accurate representation of Bryant University let alone college students in general. The results may have varied if I had been able to get more students to participate in this study.

Whenever there is a group of people working on something together, there is always a possibility that groupthink will occur. While the purpose of this focus group was to gather organic and honest responses, some of the participants may have been less willing to share their true opinions. A lot of my peers are not the most vocal about their opinions and beliefs when it comes to politics and so they may not have wanted to share. It is possible that the first person in the group that spoke or the person that spoke the most influenced where the discussion went and it may have gone differently if they did not speak as much. There is a good chance that another

student may have found the article credible if someone else in the group had not spoken about the poor grammar and inherent bias.

While many college students still have active Facebook accounts, a good number of the participants in my focus groups mentioned that they do not ever go on it or do not use it as often as some of their other social media accounts. The frequency of use could be affecting how students perceive the content that is posted on Facebook. It could be that my results would have varied if I had looked at a different platform the students are using more such as Twitter or Instagram.

Future Research

As I began putting my results to paper, my mind immediately started thinking about how I could further this study if I were to continue with it. After the first focus group or two, when I began seeing the themes that were evolving from the students' responses I started to wonder if the trends I was seeing were specific to the Bryant University community. In my survey, I asked what the participant's major was because I was curious to see if the specific classes they had taken would affect their digital media literacy levels. I then realized someone's major does not necessarily tell me every class they have taken here at Bryant. That being said, I do believe the curriculum at Bryant University, especially the two media literacy courses, do promote an environment where students are encouraged to look at the quality of content that is posted online.

In the future, it would be interesting to repeat this study at different universities and see if the results are similar or if they vary. How would another private university, a public school, or even a community college compare to Bryant's results? Then after these results are compared the

university that has the highest digital media literacy rates could be analyzed. If that school has a

specific curriculum that is creating these high digital media literacy rates, it could be emulated at

other schools.

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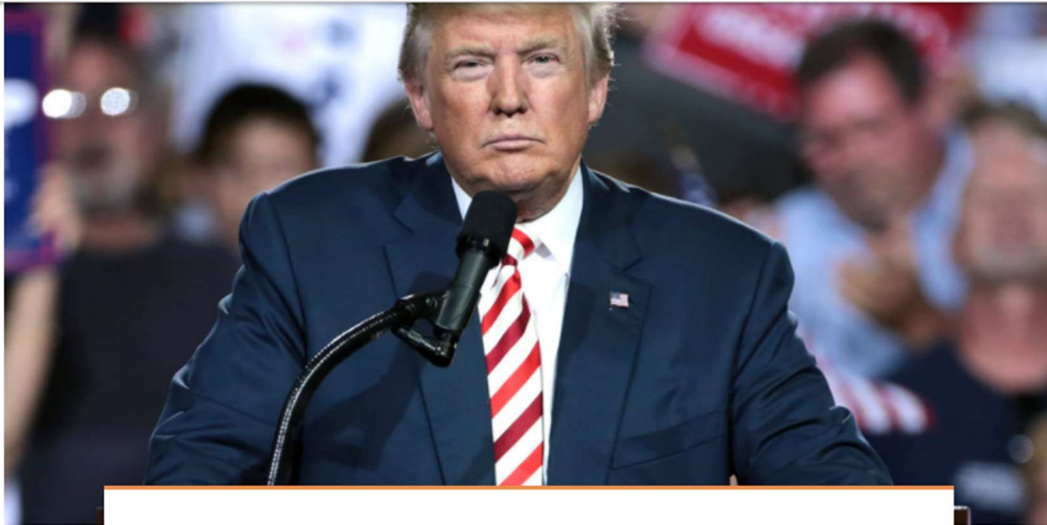   (2016). Web.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

The Trump-Russia Investigation: Everything You Need To Know.

Trump might not be able to dig his way out of this one

2016 Presidential Election

There has been speculation that Russia and President Trump were conspiring during his campaign in 2016. On many accounts, Trump and his administration have been denying communications with Russia, but the evidence says otherwise. On July 6th, 2017 Donald Trump Jr., Trump's senior advisor, and the chairman of Trump's campaign met with Russian President, Kremlin, to have a secret meeting regarding Hillary Clinton. Immediately, investigations into the Russia-Trump connections went underway. Special counsel Robert Mueller took on the investigation and discovered that Trump and Russia sought out a business deal to build a Trump Tower in Moscow (which ended up being scrapped); this debunks Trump's claims of having zero ties to Russia. Not only that, but Trump's SoHo building was made in association with Russia investors, for they helped finance a big chunk of the development.

Tyra Christina
Feb 13, 2018

At Pace University

Popular Right Now

It's Time To Thank Your First Roommate
by Katie Ward

Dear Shondaland, You Made A Mistake Because April Kepner...
by Amanda Holt

Two Pleas And Two Indictments

- Paul Manafort and Rick Gates were accused of money laundering and involvement in Russian interference by special counsel Mueller.
- The grand jury indicted both of them with 12 charges for connections to pro-Russian factions and laundering millions through foreign accounts.
- Manafort and Gates proceeded to plead not guilty and were sentenced to house arrest on bail between the two of them totaling at $15 million.
- George Papadopoulos, Trump's former campaign aide, and Michael Flynn, former national security advisor, plead guilty to lying to FBI.
- George Papadopoulos got involved with a professor who has Russian connections to gather dirt on Hillary Clinton and tried to arrange meetings between Russians and the Trump campaign.
- Michael Flynn met with a Russian ambassador to discuss creating foreign policy before Trump's inauguration; Flynn is the first to cooperate with officials on the investigation.

Nunes Memo & Rebuttal

Last week, Devin Nunes (Republican chairman of the House Intelligence Committee) aides wrote a 4-page memo about how the FBI and Justice Department have been abusing their security power. The Nunes memo claims that FBI "lied" to the court about their sources, which was Christopher Steele, and they started their investigation on trump before they applied for a wiretap to monitor, former advisor, Carter Page. It's also been revealed that Christopher Steele was hired by Hillary Clinton's and Democratic National Committee's research firm.

This puts the integrity of Mueller's "Trump and Russia investigation" in question, with the motives of the Democrats and Hillary at play. The FBI has claimed that these allegations are false, despite Trump releasing the memo in efforts to clear his name. He believes that if he can prove that the FBI and Mueller team is biased against him, he can discredit the ongoing investigation (which is unlikely).

On December 5th, the House Intelligence Committee voted to release the Democrat's rebuttal in response to the Nunes Memo. The rebuttal is 10 pages long and hopes to clear FBI and the Justices Department of any abuse or wrongdoings. As of now, the rebuttal must be sent and reviewed by the White House. Trump and his advisors also must review it over and decide whether they'll attempt to block it or let it release.
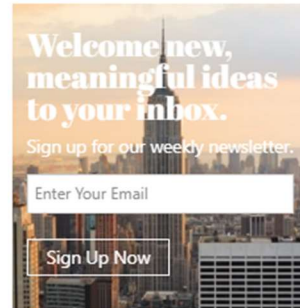
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Appendix B

Focus Group Questions
1. What are your initial reactions to the article?
2. How does the article make you feel?
3. Have any of your opinions on this topic changed after reading this article?
4. Is this the kind of story you are used to reading?
5. Would you share this article on a social media platform?
6. What kind of news related content, if any, do you post on social media?
7. If this article came up on your timeline, would you stop and read it?
8. What do you primarily use your Facebook for?
9. How do you feel about news in the media today?

10. What were your thoughts on the news posted on Facebook during the most recent presidential election?

Appendix C

Survey

Where do you get the majority of your news from?

○ Television

○ Newspaper

○ Internet

How likely are you to check multiple sources for your news?

○ Extremely Unlikely

○ Moderately unlikely

○ Slightly unlikely

○ Neither likely nor unlikely

○ Slightly likely

○ Moderately likely

○ Extremely likely

How often did you read articles about candidates during the most recent presidential election?

○ Rarely

○ About half the time

○ Most of the time

How old are you?

○ 18

○ 19

○ 20

○ 21

○ 22

○ Other (Please Specify)

What is your major?

What year are you?

- ○ Freshmen
- ○ Sophomore
- ○ Junior
- ○ Senior

Which of the following do you most closely identify with?

- ○ Male
- ○ Female
- ○ Prefer not to answer