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How Different Generations Perceive Political News

Abstract

The 2016 presidential election was one of the first elections to see new media play a large role. While also being the first presidential election many millennials could vote in, this research paper looks at how different generations used various news sources to receive political news in 2016. The paper is supported by a documentary video case-study of the author's close family and friends' perception of political news in 2016.

Keywords

generational news perception, social media and news, generational political participation

Disciplines

American Politics | Communication Technology and New Media | Journalism Studies

Comments

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How Different Generations Perceive Political News
By: Elizabeth Hilfrank
IDS 464

I affirm that I have upheld the utmost principles of honor and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

The 2008 presidential election marked a transformative moment in the media's role in politics. With Facebook emerging in 2004 and Twitter making its debut in 2006, President Barack Obama's presidential campaign was the first to appear on, and to be influenced by, social media. Since 2008, more social media and web platforms have developed to compete with the mainstream media. Research on the 2016 presidential election shows that younger generations tended to approach politics through these newer media forms, while older generations continued to choose traditional mainstream media as their primary source for political news.

The voters studied in most of the political research projects fell within three generations: the Millennial, aged 18-29 at the time of the election the Baby Boomer, aged 54-72, and the Silent, aged 73 or older ("Voting Rate for the Non-Hispanic Black Population Dropped in the 2016 Presidential Election"). There is some leeway within these age groups, but the important factor to each is the way in which it grew up with media. The Millennial generation is the only age group to reach their voting age alongside social media. Being that the 2016 election was the first presidential election they could vote in, this group is especially interesting to study. Meanwhile, "Baby Boomers grew up as television expanded dramatically," while the Silent generation broke into politics alongside television's initial debut (Dimock). Given that now all generations may have the ability to access all forms of media, it is a wonder as to who uses what platform, how, why and how the platforms in turn influence the voter.

A 2010 study conducted by the nonpartisan think tank, the Pew Research Center broke down generations into news consumption categories, and it identified local television as the most popular news source for all Americans (Purcell et al. 11). The researchers found that, in general, the Millennial demographic consumes the least amount of news out of any adult generation, yet for those who do, they go online to receive it. According to this study, 66% of all online news

users are under the age of 50 years old (Purcell et al. 21). Even more specifically, for those who access news online, those under the age of 30 years old tend to receive information from journalists, news organizations, and others via Facebook or web portals rather than their official news websites (Purcell et al. 27). These online news consumers tend to be the type of consumer who “happens upon” news rather than one who reaches out to find news. The news comes to them via alerts, emails or by popping up on their social newsfeeds (Purcell et al. 29). The 65-years-old and older demographic was found to consume the most news overall, as 70% of that age group reported following the news “all or most of the time” (Purcell et al. 9). The reasoning for this factor could be that most people in this demographic no longer work, and their children are grown, so they have more time to dedicate to following the news. At the same time, because this demographic is the least likely to access online news or to use smartphones, the results question the impact and value of political news in the online form.

Despite web portal and social media growth, the Internet did not prevail as the top news source for any age group the 2016 presidential election. A Pew Research Center survey conducted six years after Purcell’s study found that Americans continued to select cable news as the most helpful way to receive election information (Gottfried et al. 2). Of the 2016 voters the general hierarchy of news reception was first television, then digital, then radio, and then print newspapers. Yet there was a clear generational divide between the young voters’ and the older voters’ choices. 43% of the 65-years-old and older age group chose cable television to be the most helpful news source, while only 12% of the Millennial generation reported cable television as its top choice (Gottfried et al. 3). While the 65-years-old and older demographic blends the Baby Boomer and Silent generations, this study continues to be beneficial in seeing the differences between older and younger political news consumers. On the other end, the most

popular news source for Millennials was in fact social media at 35%, and this news source ranked in the first-percentile for those aged 65 years old and older (Gottfried et al. 3). Thus, the general news reception hierarchy seems to be because of the overall electorate being older in age. It is also important to note that none of these statistical numbers are very high. So, there was no strong favoring of any one media platform for any of the age groups. The Pew Research Center also found that of these social network news receivers, the majority received information from more than one site, and those that did receive news from a variety of sources were more likely to participate in the state's primary or caucus than those who engaged with only a few sources (Gottfried et al. 6, 8). This fact is congruent with other research studies.

In 2010 Purcell et al. found that "The overwhelming majority of Americans (92%) use multiple platforms to get news on a typical day" and "(59%) get news from a combination of online and offline sources in a typical day" (Purcell et al. 2 & 21). Most people want to know a little bit about every part of a candidate before casting their vote, and they use different platforms in order to receive different information. When voters want "hard news," or more specific in-depth stories on an issue, they may gravitate towards more mainstream media, such as stories found in a print newspaper (Thorson et al. 243). When they want more personal information, citizens may gravitate towards social media under the belief that this platform brings more transparency into candidate personality. With the Millennials using social media the most of any generation, it is now common for young people to live within a mixture of cool, objective content and hot, passionate opinions (Robertson et al. 361). Older voters, such as those in the Silent generation, who do not gravitate online, may then operate in a less mixed media world, but, while all on the same platform, they continue to access a variety of media sources. In 2016 University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu computer science professor Stephen P. Robertson

stated, “The contemporary media environment is characterized by extreme type hybridity, dense interconnection and an “always on” functionality” (Robertson et al. 360). There are now a large variety of media companies on every style of media platform. This always on functionality may refer to the news alerts sent to one’s phone. The news is thus now everywhere for the young voters, and it is hard for them to avoid it. This factor is important when looking at youth political participation, as they tend not to be able to turn off news like the older generations who can turn off the television or close a newspaper.

The Pew Research Center’s 2016 findings also fall in line with its findings from 2014. That year, Mitchell et al. reported, “social media look to be the local TV of the Millennial generation” while 60% of Baby Boomer Internet users continue to report local TV as its top news source (Mitchell et al. 2). The lack of change in results for the Baby Boomer generation over the course of two years suggests that while new media continues to develop, it is still not to the point of complete takeover, and this realization could be due to the lack of acceptance of the new media by older generations. What is important to note with this study, titled “Millennials and Political News,” is that the researchers did not include the Silent generation in the survey at all. The researchers’ reasoning to not include the oldest generation was that this generation is not very likely to use the Internet in general, so, those who the researchers did survey within that age group would not be an accurate representation of the group as a whole (Mitchell et al. 3). The researchers thus assumed the general news reception structure as proved by earlier generational media studies.

To briefly look beyond age differentiation, Purcell et al.’s study showed that Republicans of all ages are more likely to see political coverage as biased than are all Democrats. They are also more likely to look for news sources supporting their own point of view (Purcell et al. 17-

18). Republicans tend to go to fewer news sources for their information, and for those who receive news online, they typically gravitate towards the website of a major news organization rather than towards social media. The numbers behind this fact are equal amongst both the Millennial and Baby Boomer Republicans (Purcell et al. 26-27). Gottfried et al.'s study also showed that cable television was twice as popular with Republicans aged 65 years old and older than it was with Democrats of the same age group (Gottfried et al. 3). This information regarding political party is important to note when analyzing generational differences because it alludes to factors other than age that may play a role in media outlet and platform choices.

The idea of the youth using social media for politics the most of any generation relates to the idea of youth sub, or counter, cultures. Barber et al. writes, "modern alternative media was born when those opposed to the status quo thought it necessary to produce news products that told the "truth" as they saw it" (Barber et al. 14). Oftentimes, the public sees youth as the rebellious ones who question the societal norms, and receiving political news via social media is an extension of this characterization. Dissatisfied with the news sources available, youth sought out and created alternatives to the media norm. Some think mainstream media's objectivity prevents the whole story from being told, and social media allows for transparency (Barber et al. 14). Many youth translate uncensored material to authentic material.

While there is a general difference in age of Internet and non-internet news consumers, there is also a differentiation within the Internet group of who uses what type of Internet source. If going online, some people, typically those in the Baby Boomer generation, choose to only go to news sites. They like that the official news sites have clear sources, and often report the same, if not very similar reports to those found in hard copy issues. This group tends to only access news online for convenience purposes. Unlike the youthful skeptics, who use the Internet as an

alternative to traditional news, older users trust the mainstream press but appreciate the ease of reading news on a phone or tablet (Go et al. 237). They remain wary of social media sites and web portals because of the difficulty to identify the sources of shared information. The lack of censorship that thrills the youth frightens their elders.

Source credibility is not the only concern that surrounds online news sources. The ability to customize what one sees on these web portals and social media networks may also limit the diversity of news received and lead towards a more marginalized, and incomplete, political view. With the millennial generation being the youngest of voters, and the most likely to access news via the Internet, this group is at a heightened risk for having only a superficial level of political knowledge. Taking a cultural cognitive approach to their study, which focuses on individuals conforming their beliefs to cultural identities, Reedy et al. argue, “one can generate beliefs from mere exposure to issues” (The Cultural Cognition Project at Yale Law School, Reedy et al. 1414). Related to media, this theory argues that one will naturally form an opinion on an issue by simply knowing the issue exists, which can happen after seeing one online post. Other media can then help to amplify that initial opinion.

Just as mainstream media may choose to not tell the whole story in order to pursue company interests, an online news consumer may choose to not read the whole story even when both sides are available, thus reaffirming his own opinion as the best one. Purcell et al. reports, “Some 28% of internet users have customized their homepage to include news from their favorite source or topics and 40% of internet users say an important feature of a news website to them is the availability to customize the news they got from the site” (Purcell et al. 5). This customization takes away from the possibility of a positive, diverse array of news sources available in modern day. Similarly, Go et al. claims that while web portals offer the opportunity

for customization, which exercises the right to free choice, the ability to do so may narrow viewpoints along the way (Go et al. 237). With the development of new webpage analytic systems, Baby Boomers report that the majority of content seen on their Facebook profiles are in line with their own viewpoints (Mitchell et al. 3). So even if not purposefully, because of the business side of media, social media users of all ages will naturally end up reading posts already in line with what they already know.

The capability to multitask while receiving political news also presents a problem in regards to political knowledge, and this issue too can be argued for any generation. Ran et al. found that “bundled forms of media multitasking were negatively related to factual political knowledge” (Ran et al. 356). Because one may be texting or checking social Facebook posts at the same time as reading or listening to news, he is less focused on one source of information, so he receives only a superficial understanding of each subject. The individual may then develop a “façade of learning” where he thinks he knows a lot about a subject just because the news is present in his life (Ran et al. 357). What’s more, multitasking can reinforce point-of-view news because if one is doing something while having the news on the television in the background, for example, he may stop to listen only when something said sparks his interest. With all generations using a mix of auditory and visual news, this problem is relevant to all voting age groups.

There is much debate as to if online news enhances voter intelligence beyond what one can receive by way of traditional platforms. In 2001 Eagles and Davidson argued that digital media use did not translate to a more-informed or better-engaged citizenry (Eagles et al. 240). Fifteen years later, Beam et al. argued that sharing news online is related to an increased structural knowledge, where individuals find connections between problems, but not necessarily an increased factual knowledge, or the comprehension of the news received (Beam et al. 218).

The increase of structural rather than factual knowledge can then lead to a larger web of information that may not be correct or complete, and this argument tends to be the one made when regarding the Millennial generation's political knowledge.

Relatedly, while it is argued that digital media may have more influence in offline political participation than does traditional media, people reading the news from print media tend to outperform Internet newsreaders in terms of political knowledge (Hao et al. 1231). If only looking at this statement, then based on the generational divides regarding media, the Silent generation should have the highest political intelligence of all three age groups. The finding of online political reading influencing offline political action, however, may contribute to answering the question of why the Millennial generation was the only generation to have an increase in voter turnout during the 2016 presidential election ("Voting Rate for the Non-Hispanic Black Population Dropped in the 2016 Presidential Election"). Thus, one of media's roles in the 2016 presidential election could be seen to be the ability to increase the number of voters, but this is not to say that it fulfilled the role of adequately informing the new voters prior to entering the booth.

By providing such a wide array of information, social media can also influence an individual's perception of how well other types of media inform him. It may also complicate the ability to decipher what is important and what is not important to a presidential election. Robertson's study, for example, found that social media could actually raise new questions to consider when deciding between political candidates. When these social media users see questions posted about a candidate prior to watching a debate, and then the question goes unanswered on television, for example, the voter feels less informed about the candidate. It does not matter if the question was relevant to the debate or not (Robertson et al. 359). Here is where

generational divisions occur, as the older Baby Boomer generation members and those in the Silent generation tend to argue different points than do the Millennials. These social media postings mix hard news and personal content into one, and further complicate a young voter's political news comprehension.

The Internet's impact on voters' political knowledge is debatable, but many studies show a positive correlation of online activity to offline action, which again serves as a representation of the 2016 voting demographic. Bachmann et al. found, "people who prefer consuming news online will tend to be more politically active, both online and offline" (Bachmann et al. 42). The reasoning for this fact is because social media creates a virtual community, and by feeling as if one is a part of something, he or she is more likely to turn the theoretical into action as a means to represent his community on the ground. This community begins to be built by someone posting on a social media feed, then others sharing that information or commenting on the post. Feeling that they are safe behind a computer screen, people may be more apt to share their opinions online. Once users gain enough confidence online, they take physical action. At the same time, for some, when a post or comment is not anonymous, they fear retaliation, and the fear of backlash that is present in traditional media then integrates with new media (Boczkowski et al. 14). One must then wonder, despite the users difference in age, how much traditional and social media differ. Social media relies on user participation, and just as if a mainstream media company is afraid to share a certain fact, if an individual is afraid to share that fact online, there is a limit to information across the board. Nonetheless, by younger generations gravitating online for news, the possibility for a more politically active community can be suggested.

Despite its controversy, as social media becomes commonplace in the news world, politicians grab onto it as a new campaign tactic to reach young voters. Enli et al. write that the

2008 election made Twitter become a professional political technique rather than a simple social experiment. For the first time campaign managers began to analyze Internet statistics and to think about how they wanted candidates to be perceived online. Transparency is a factor that has been used to predict election results since the 1970s, and now, “social media represents a new means of constructing and negotiating a candidate’s image, and campaign’s social media strategies are important sources of information and perspective on a given year’s election” (Enli et al. 58-59). Because social media seems to be more personal than other media forms, and that is the primary reason as to why Millennials and Baby Boomers go to these platforms, candidates need to think carefully about what parts of their personality they wish to share with these younger citizens.

Both of the 2016 presidential candidates took to Twitter as part of their campaigns aimed at the Millennial demographic, and they took very different approaches to how they wanted to be perceived. Enli et al. write, “The 2016 Clinton campaign’s social media activity confirms theories regarding the professionalism of election campaigns in western liberal democracies, while the 2016 Trump campaign has a more amateurish yet authentic style in social media” (Enli et al. 54-55). Clinton tended to appear professional in her tweets under the assumption that voters wanted to see a presidential candidate acting with respect and knowledge. Trump, on the other hand, took the approach more representative of the everyday citizen’s use of social media, which was a more personal, uncensored approach. Trump supporters believed that the candidate’s openness allowed for more insight to his “true” personality, and his success at the end of the election suggests that most voters enjoyed this open approach. Yet since the majority of Millennial voters voted for Clinton, and Millennials represent the majority of the electorate that accessed social media, it is possible that the online tactic was only successful with the fewer

older Twitter users who accessed the feeds because they were fed up with the mainstream media's censorship.

The general trend of the 2016 presidential election seems to be that the Millennial generation leaned on the Internet, specifically social media, more than any other generation. Local television dominated for voters fifty years old or older. Despite controversy regarding social media's role in politics, and the lack of take over it has had on the older part of the electorate, the younger generation's involvement with the new media leads to a changing news dynamic that argues for more transparency. While access to more media platforms broadens the amount of information both the Millennial and Baby Boomer generations receive, it does not deepen knowledge of any one matter. The 2016 presidential election's abnormal candidate choices, in accordance with the amount of media resources available to voters, complicated the media's role in politics as each generation received, and perceived, political news a little differently.

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