



The Impact of Fake News on Perceptions of Candidates Among Millennial Voters in  
the 2016 Election


Senior Project

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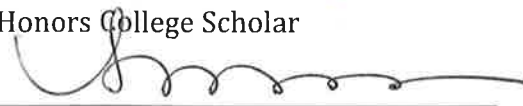
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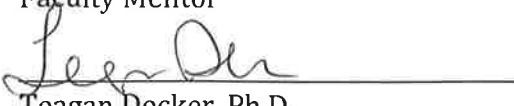
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### Abstract

The internet is continuing to become a critical factor in political election cycles. Information about candidates is published on news websites and social media platforms. Given the vast nature of the internet and the great number of users who have access to it, some of that information is bound to be false. This article examines how prevalent fake news, or intentionally false published content designed to deceive readers, was in the 2016 presidential election. Specifically, the role of this content in relation to millennial voters is evaluated with references to past research. Ultimately, the internet usage habits of millennials combined with the widespread publication of fake news provide a strong basis for the argument that the cohort was significantly exposed to, and impacted by, false content.

## The Impact of Fake News on Perceptions of Candidates Among Millennial Voters in the 2017 Presidential Election

### **Introduction**

The 2016 presidential election was contested over multiple media platforms. In addition to traditional campaigning methods such as television advertisements and live rallies, candidates utilized social media to reach citizens quickly and provide updates on their respective pursuits of the presidency. This ability gave the candidates a convenient way of delivering up-to-date messages that would be presented much differently in broadcasts. However, that convenience brought with it an inherent risk of fraudulence. With a great number of users circulating information about the election cycle online, the concept of fake news reports quickly became an issue. The intentional publication of false and deceptive information was widespread and was prevalent enough to cause a significant change among millennials in the perceptions of the two leading candidates, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton.

### **What is fake news?**

In order to understand the impact of fake news on the 2016 presidential election cycle, it is important to understand how to define the concept. Fake news does not mean information that is inherently biased. Rather, the term encompasses news that is “intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers” (Allcott and Gentzkow 213). This content could be published in a variety of different forms. For example, a website set up to mirror the appearance of a major news organization’s online format, with only a small number of changes giving away its lack of integrity, qualifies as a vehicle of fake news. Additionally, an account on a social media platform such as Twitter

could share sensitive information under the guise that it is representing a popular newsgathering company. Regardless of the circumstances, the publication of fake news is generally blatant and deliberate.

Tabloids like the *National Enquirer* routinely use falsified or sensationalized information in their reporting, but other publications almost exclusively distribute fictional material in order to contribute to an overall satirical theme. *The Onion* is an example of this. *The Onion* uses purposely false or sensationalized content as a way of creating humorous and ironic reports of current events.

The spread of fake news is a concern partially because the public is typically not particularly knowledgeable about current events in the realm of politics (Flynn et. al. 1). A study by Pew Research found that just 33 percent of 3,147 respondents knew how many justices on the U.S. Supreme Court were female. Just 52 percent of the respondents could recall how many Democrats and Republicans make up the Senate ('What the public' 2015).

### **Social Media and Millennials**

Millennials are especially susceptible to fake news published in digital environments because they generally rely less on traditional platforms to learn about current events. In a recent study that included 61 high school students, for example, less than 10% of the participants said they read newspapers on a daily basis (Marchi 4). Instead, many cited blogs and social media sites as their preference for learning about events (Marchi 6). The utilization of social media platforms in general is rising among millennials. Social media use among teens with internet capabilities was already at 73

percent in 2010, according to a study performed by the Pew Research Center. That was an eight percent increase from two years earlier (Lenhart and Purcell 2010).

A study conducted by several business professors in the United States, based on the idea that millennials are “digital natives,” helped measure the interactions of millennials with various forms of media. (Williams et al. 2). In this case, millennials were defined as a group of individuals born between 1981 and 2000. The label of digital natives was based on the on the fact that millennials were consistently impacted by technology since the earliest stages of their lives. They continue to have opportunities to interact with various forms of technology both inside and outside of the workplace. This continued relationship makes the generation more inclined to use various forms of media in their everyday lives (Williams et al. 2).

The study, which featured 74 undergraduate college students as participants, highlighted a number of revealing statistics concerning millennial involvement with social media. Seventy-one of the students admitted to using some form of social media consistently; Facebook and Twitter, two frequently used applications for campaign efforts, were among the most preferred platforms. Sixty-nine of the students said they used Facebook, while 31 said they used Twitter. Usage of YouTube was in the middle of the two options with 53 users (Williams et al. 5).

In a separate investigation, the *American Journal of Pediatrics* found that 22 percent of adolescents reported frequent use of social media sites, logging on a minimum of 10 times per day. However, 75 percent of those adolescents did so at least once per day (O’Keeffe et al. 800). That is a significant total when evaluating the overall participation of millennials in the social media realm.

### **Millennials and the 2016 Presidential Election**

Not all eligible millennials voted in the 2016 presidential election, but the percentage of those who did is close to totals from previous years. According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, roughly 50 percent of young adults aged 18 to 29 years turned out for the election. That mark is one percent higher than it was in the 2012 election cycle, and two percent lower than the 2008 election (Galston and Hendrickson 2016).

Ultimately, millennial voters cast an approximate total of 34 million votes, according to Pew Research – with millennials being defined as those aged 18-35. That represented 25 percent of all votes in the presidential election. This figure puts millennials just behind Generation X, which carried 26 percent of the votes. Baby Boomers led the way with a 35 percent share of the votes (Fry 2017).

Although the number of millennial voters fell short of older generations, the total was significantly increased from the preceding election cycle. Millennials cast roughly 18 million votes in the 2008 presidential election. The millennial population in the United States is increasing at a quicker rate than any other generation, increasing the potential for a greater number of eligible voters in the generation for future election cycles (Fry 2017).

### **Instances of Fake News in the 2016 Presidential Election**

Although most of the websites that published viral fake news prior to the 2016 election have since been taken out of operation, many different entities were responsible for creating false content in the months leading up to the event. Hunt Allcott, Associate Professor of Economics at New York University, and Matthew Gentzkow, Professor of

Economics at Stanford University, compiled a database of fake news articles as part of a study. The authors used a number of fact-checking websites such as Snopes and Politifact to help gather information for the database (Allcott and Gentzkow 219).

Using those resources, the authors gathered a total of 156 articles that qualified as fake news. Researchers noted that while some of the resources tabbed the same articles as fake, other pieces of content were only picked up by one or two of the fact-checking websites. This brings up the possibility that there were more examples of fake news available online that might not have been discovered by the resources in use (Allcott and Gentzkow 220).

As a part of that same study, the authors looked at how internet users accessed fake content. More specifically, they examined which platforms were used to link to the fake news sites. These platforms included social media, search engines, and direct browsing. Top news sites and fake news sites were evaluated separately, with 650 examples of the former and 65 samples of the latter being selected (Allcott and Gentzkow 222)

Researchers found that the fake news websites were accessed through links posted to social media approximately 42 percent of the time. Direct browsing followed closely behind at roughly 30 percent, while search engines accounted for 22 percent of the links. Other unidentified methods made up the remaining 5.7 percent. In contrast, just 10.1 percent of the visits to the top news sites originated from social media links. Direct browsing was much more prevalent at 48.7 percent, and search engines were responsible for 30.6 percent of the visits (Allcott and Gentzkow 222).

## **Conclusion**



As millennials continue to become active participants in democracy, the importance of the internet as a campaign tool is quickly expanding. Not only does the internet provide a platform for campaigning, but it also hosts extensive coverage of the day-to-day activities concerning specific candidates. The development of fake news as a prominent societal issue means voters are sometimes subjected to unverified and untruthful content about topics related to the election cycle. Such content is commonly spread online via social media channels, which are frequently utilized by millennials. Studies analyzed by Marchi and Williams support the idea that Millennials are highly engaged with different forms of media, and the 34 million votes cast by that demographic in the 2016 presidential election bring to light their involvement in the political sphere.

Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that millennials were exposed to, and therefore were prone to be influenced by, fake news in the 2016 presidential election cycle. This might be true for other demographics of voters as well, but millennial participation in online platforms and social media applications contributes to the concept that the generation is heavily influenced by content that is published on the internet.

Ultimately, this research is important because it brings attention to an issue that will continue to have an expansive impact on presidential elections. As millennials age and the number of active voters from that cohort grows, they will continue to be influenced by various forms of media. The impact of their social media and online content consumption is significant enough to heighten susceptibility to fake news.

The aforementioned problem will continue to impact millennials, but it also has the potential to affect future generations as well. Therefore, it is important for media practitioners to continue to pursue ways of isolating and minimizing the appearances of

fake news. Otherwise, the risk of millennial voters being falsely informed by blatantly incorrect material will grow significantly and continue to have a ripple effect.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The 2016 presidential election ended approximately one year before the publication of this article. Thus, a variety of statistics are now available concerning how specific demographics of voters contributed to the election. Multiple approaches can and should be taken in the analysis of millennial voting in the election cycle. For instance, it would be worth evaluating approximately how much fake news targeted each candidate because doing so could help provide some information as to how millennials' impressions of those individual candidates were impacted.

Another concept worthy of further attention is the ability of millennials to decipher fake news from real news. This could perhaps be done in an experiment in which selected millennial voters are presented with an assortment of headlines or links and are told to choose which ones they feel are factual and which ones are fictitious. A study like this could help pinpoint the susceptibility of millennials in terms of believing in fake news.

Finally, a study documenting the general knowledge of millennials in regard to politics would be helpful in determining the generation's civic involvement. In addition, the methods in which they achieve that knowledge – social media, word of mouth, news reports - should be examined. This would provide greater insight as to the role of technology in the voting process for millennials.

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