ECHO CHAMBERS AND MISINFORMATION: HOW SOCIAL MEDIA USE CONDITIONS INDIVIDUALS TO BELIEVE FAKE NEWS

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of SAMUEL CALLAHAN RHODES find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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I had no idea how much I would love college when I first enrolled. I received a world-class education from Shippensburg University, a state institution with brilliant professors who made it their mission to ensure that their students left college with the moral compass and knowledge to make the world a better place. There is no
way I would have continued my education if it hadn’t been for the dedicated and loving political scientists there. I have multiple memories of Mark Sachleben showing up on Saturdays to screen political films for students or meet for coffee to explore post-graduation opportunities; never, ever, too busy to sit down and talk about the next steps.

Alison Dagnes deserves a lengthy special mention. Her classes were some of the most inspiring moments of my education. Working closely with her to plan activities with Pi Sigma Alpha or College Democrats helped me understand that a world of education exists beyond the doors of a university building. I am honored to call her more than a professor or mentor; a true friend and guiding light in life. Most importantly, she always, always brought the funny and taught her students the awesome power of laughter and satire in politics. Reflecting on my time in her classes, I have no recollection what grades I earned. The only thing that mattered was making sure she understood that I worked hard on assignments and that I was willing to work harder.

Graduate school was simply not on my radar in the mid 2000s. It wasn’t that I didn’t consider it important. I just had a lot of other things I wanted to do; campaign for Pennsylvania Democrats, work in state capitols, explore East Asia and study Tae Kwon Do. After a while, the importance that college left on me became painfully apparent. Every month that passed after graduation felt like a growing, painful
distance. My mind was eager to consume and produce knowledge. This sensation ate away at my consciousness until I woke up on a Sunday morning in 2013 and realized what I had to do. I put my two weeks’ notice into my job at the time and then left a bizarre voicemail on Alison’s phone. The uncertainty was terrifying, but her guidance was one of the strongest comforts of my professional life.

Alison held my hand throughout the process of applying to graduate school. One of the first things she did was give me a giant stack of political science journals to read. After discarding dozens, I discovered a real connection to political communication research. Dannagal Young was incredibly kind and helpful when I asked to meet her for lunch six years ago in Philadelphia. For such a brilliant, productive scholar, she wasn’t too busy to mentor a stranger who was simply fascinated by her work and wanted to throw his hat into the ring.

When I first started graduate school, it seemed risky to pack all of my belongings into a small car and drive across North America to start a Ph.D. program. I now understand how risky it is for advisors and committee members to gamble on a young student they know little about outside of test scores and application letters. I was downright lucky to have a committee that was not only willing to teach me, but make me feel at home in a community of scholars. Cornell Clayton never stopped pushing me to examine the theoretical importance of any project I was working on. Mike Salamone was never too busy to trouble shoot a research design or write and re-write
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the stress of earning our doctorates at the same time, we always managed to find
time for one another and start a little family.

Finally, a note to current and future graduate students. There were many times
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something essential to my education that others had discovered but was out of my
grasp for one reason or another. But as I got closer to finishing, I realized that this
was simply part of being an academic and truly wasn’t something to worry about.
Rather, it’s actually pretty cool; a realization that I am one small piece in an inter-
connected web of knowledge. The fact that I can leave a conference with critical
feedback or a correction for an oversight is amazing. The fact that there are other
scholars out there with different perspectives and tools to share can be a powerful
source of growth. And like the unshackled prisoner being dragged out of Plato’s cave,
that growth can be intimidating and painful. But in hindsight, the most fun I had in
school was when I was being challenged to grow.
Research has suggested that personalized information streams on social media platforms (i.e., echo chambers) contribute to the proliferation of fake news. Using a combination of laboratory and survey experiments, I find that homogeneous discussion groups and echo chambers cause individuals to engage in more impulsive, affect-driven thought over deliberate, critical analysis. I also find that even when controlling for other factors, high social media use conditions individuals to believe fake material. While removing individuals from partisan echo chambers does make participants less susceptible to believing fake news, these effects appear confined to Democrats. Republican participants in echo chambers believe fake news to be true at similar rates to their counterparts who receive more heterogeneous information
streams. This is important considering that the vast majority of fake news consumers are Republicans. My research suggests that breaking up echo chambers may only make a marginal difference in the spread of online misinformation.
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Dedication

To Meredith, Michael and Tobias. My little family.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The role of factual information is placed at the nexus of several core political communication theories. Any democratic system would become an increasingly difficult project to maintain if the voting public were unable to discern truthful statements from inaccurate or misinformed views. This concept is not new; the notion of promoting society-enhancing information at the expense of fiction dates back to Plato’s *Republic* (Plato 1992).

Accurate information serves at the crux of reasoned thought that fueled both the English Enlightenment (Locke 1860), its modern iteration in the form of rational decision making (Downs 1957) and theories of voting choice (Campbell et al. 1960). Several deliberative democratic theorists have also cited accurate and truthful information as a necessity in reasoned, democratic debate (Habermas 1981, 2015; Fishkin and Luskin 2005; Fishkin 2009). Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996, 5) described it as “...a keystone to other civic requisites” that allowed for democratic principles to be understood, accepted and acted upon in meaningful ways.

Just as reliable knowledge serves a requisite of the democratic process, unreliable misinformation can be disruptive or hazardous to crucial democratic acts such as voting or debate. This issue requires a reexamination an era of heightened polarization, media fragmentation, a lack of credibility in news organizations, foreign intervention
and uncivil discourse that has characterized recent elections.

This is not an issue confined to academic exercise. Leaders from both political parties have addressed misinformation as a serious challenge to the American political system. President Barack Obama has asserted that misinformation plays a normatively undesirable role in contemporary political discourse, saying that it’s critical for citizens to disagree on issues of substance, “not these wild misrepresentations that bear no resemblance to anything that’s actually been proposed” Herbst (2010, 95). Similar sentiments are frequently shared by President Trump. Referencing tensions in the Middle East, President Trump tweeted on May 17, 2019 that “The Fake News Media is hurting our Country with its fraudulent and highly inaccurate coverage of Iran. It is scattershot, poorly sourced (made up), and DANGEROUS” (Trump 2019b). As of this writing, President Donald Trump has tweeted the term “fake news” 472 times since being elected (Trump 2019a). However, there is reason to believe that President Trump may be conflating negative political attacks with fabricated information. In may of 2018. President Trump tweeted “…91% of the Network News about is negative (Fake). Why do we work so hard in working with the media when it is corrupt? Take away credentials?” (Trump 2018).

The American public has also expressed concern over the danger that fake news poses to good governance and a healthy society. A 2019 Pew Research poll found that 50% of respondents viewed “made-up news/info” as a “very big problem in
the country today” (Mitchell et al. 2019). Americans ranked the problem of fake news higher than racism, violent crime, climate change, or terrorism. A majority of respondents also believed that fake news has had “a big impact” on Americans’ confidence in government, confidence in each other, and the ability for politicians to get work done (Mitchell et al. 2019).

While overall fake news consumption in the United States is fairly low, some groups read fake news at higher rates than others: Republicans, older Americans and those with more political knowledge (Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2017). The fact that political sophisticates read more fake news than other groups is of particular interest; theory would suggest that individuals with high political knowledge should be better equipped to resist fake articles that conflict with their partisan predispositions (Zaller 1992) and less persuaded by ideologically-biased information (de Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2016).

When and why does fake news flourish? What are the conditions that cause individuals to find fake news credible and share false information? Directionally-motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990; Taber and Lodge 2006), along with the familiarity and fluency biases (Pennycook, Cannon and Rand 2017), have been found to be important explanatory factors. However, I believe social heuristics and homogeneous information streams might help scholars better understand why politically knowledgeable individuals can be duped by misinformation.
This research is has added urgency considering that more and more Americans are getting news from places like Facebook and Twitter (Gottfried and Shearer 2016) - social networks that reinforce pre-established partisan beliefs in an effort to keep users engaged with their platforms. Scholars have suggested that breaking up this personalized content is a possible solution to stemming the effects of fake news (Lazer et al. 2018, 1096). This research seeks to test that possible solution.

I will show that individuals are more likely to share and find fake news credible when it is presented in an ideologically homogeneous group setting (Chapter 3). I will also show how social media conditions individuals to believe fake news (Chapter 5). Finally, I will show how being placed in a homogeneous information stream makes individuals more likely to believe fake news (Chapter 6). However, the results suggest that partisans consume and share news in very different ways. Chiefly, Democratic participants are much less likely to believe fake news when they are removed from echo chambers compared to their Republican counterparts.

1.1 Outline

Research suggests that when an individual is comfortable, reading agreeable news or engaged in discussion with like-minded peers, cogitative processing should decrease, while reliance on social and heuristic processing should increase (Lodge and Taber
In other words, I posit that a relaxed individual is more likely to engage in an unconscious/implicit affect-driven (System I) model of thinking and reasoning at the expense of more explicit, self-aware (System II) processing (Lodge and Taber 2013).

In order to identify whether social heuristics and echo chambers influence susceptibility to believing and sharing fake news, I conducted a series of in-person, discussion-based experiments along with online survey experiments via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk service. Table 1.1 provides an outline of the empirical chapters in this research.

**Table 1.1: Outline of Empirical Chapters**

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For the lab experiments, the placement of Democrats and Republicans into discussion groups were manipulated in order to ascertain the effects of group homogeneity.

In Chapter 3, the homogeneous groups were made up entirely of Democrats or entirely of Republicans, while the heterogeneous groups were made up of half Demo-
cratic participants and half Republican participants. I hypothesize that homogeneous discussion group participants will rate fake news as more believable compared to heterogeneous group participants.

In Chapter 4, half of the discussion group members were primed with a short video about media literacy and how to spot fake news stories. Homogeneous groups were made up entirely of Democratic participants and Heterogeneous groups were made up of an even number of Democratic and Republican participants. Each lab group read two real news stories and two fake news stories. After each story was read, participants discussed their thoughts and opinions on the news item in semi-structured discussions before rating the perceived believability of the item and their likelihood of sharing the news item online. I hypothesize that discussion groups primed with information about how to spot fake news should rate fake articles as less believable compared to groups that are not primed.

Social media has been found to be the gateway through which most individuals are exposed to fake news (Lazer et al. 2017; Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2017; Fourney et al. 2017). In order to better understand the relationship between social media use and believing fake news, Chapter 5 replicated the lab design from Chapters 3 and 4, but placed it on Amazon Mechanical Turk to gather a larger sample with a wide range of social media use. I hypothesize the more often participants use social media, the more likely they are to believe and share fake news.
Chapter 6 examines the role of partisan echo chambers in the likelihood of believing and sharing fake news. To understand the effect of reading fake news inside an echo chamber, participants recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk were randomly assigned to a homogeneous or heterogeneous information stream with real and fake news items congenial to either Democrats or Republicans. This was done to simulate the type of political content that partisan social media users interact with on platforms like Facebook; the algorithms learn what the user likes, and display more agreeable items and fewer disagreeable news items. I hypothesize that when a participant is exposed to a series of politically agreeable news items (i.e., an echo chamber), they will rate fake news items as more believable compared to participants in heterogeneous news streams.

A summary of the hypotheses:

1. Homogeneous discussion group participants will rate fake news as more believable compared to heterogeneous group participants (Chapter 3).

2. Discussion groups primed with information about how to spot fake news should rate fake articles as less believable compared to groups who are not primed (Chapter 4).

3. The more often participants use social media, the more likely they are to believe and share fake news (Chapter 5).
4. If participants are exposed to a series of politically agreeable news items (i.e., an echo chamber), they will rate fake news items as more believable compared to participants in heterogeneous news streams (Chapter 6).

1.1.1 2016 and Renewed Interest in Fake News

The ideas behind this project owe a great deal to the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the many changes that accompanied it. For one, the election was the first which more Americans received news from social networking sites compared to traditional outlets like radio, television and newspapers (Gottfried and Shearer 2016). As social media platforms have gained popularity, traditional news outlets have struggled to remain relevant in the face of historically low approval ratings (Gallup 2016). This may have led news consumers to drift away from institutions like CBS News or The New York Times to alternatives that may not employ a team of editors and fact-checkers, creating the potential for unverified rumors or false accounts to perpetuate.

The 2016 election was also unique because the Republican nominee for president would often disseminate fake news online (Jacobson 2016) or on live television (Savransky 2016), often acting as an amplifier to the conspiracy theories that already existed in small corners of the Internet (Haberman 2016). While usually finding their genesis on a handful of small groups, these stories were often circulated through so-
cial networking sites (Isaac 2016). With few gatekeeping and editorial mechanisms in place, platforms like Facebook and Twitter became fertile ground for the dissemination of false or misleading political information (Delk 2017).

While studies indicate that fake stories only made up a fraction of the total volume of news during the 2016 election (Lazer et al. 2017), the stories were some of the most widely circulated links on Facebook and Twitter during the lead up to election day (Silverman 2016). Their existence propelled partisans to doubt the veracity of their opponents’ arguments that lead to stifling debate and endangering a process of elections constructed around reliable and accurate information.

Since the election, citizens’ information sources have continued to fragment and multiply and the potential for Americans to use heuristics and social cues in order to assess the credibility of news items has become a growing concern (Lazer et al. 2017). Recent work has examined how many Americans are consuming fake news stories and the different groups are more likely to come into contact with it (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2017), ways to reduce or combat the effects of misinformation (Lazer et al. 2017; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Flynn, Nyhan and Reifler 2017), and ways to measure and interpret correlates of false information (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Lewandowsky, Gignac and Oberauer 2013; Malka, Krosnick and Langer 2009; Oliver and Wood 2014).
1.1.2 The Echo Chambers of Social Media

Sites like Facebook, by design, present information (including political information) that is congenial to an individual’s established preferences and worldview (Mims 2017). At best, this can cause a fractured media ecosystem that makes a pluralistic democracy increasingly difficult to manage (Sunstein 2001; Benkler et al. 2017). At worst, fake news-fueled echo chambers can enable discriminatory and inflammatory ideas. Once misinformation enters into public discourse, it can create scapegoats, normalize prejudices, harden divisions and even lead to violence (Greenhill N.d.; Greenhill and Oppenheim 2017; Sunstein 2009).

A communication environment brimming with misinformation exacerbates confusion in open societies where freedom of speech limits the ability of governments to control access to information - fake or not. It also impedes the ability of individuals to accurately express their needs to elected representatives if they are approaching problems with different sets of information. Ultimately, the consumption of fake news creates a lack of shared reality. This is a necessity for any polity, but fake accounts are especially pernicious to democratic states where citizens vote on policy and candidates (Benkler et al. 2017).

Social forces, even in low-pressure settings, should lead individuals to prioritize motivated reasoning. I believe that a substantial component of Americans’ attraction
to fake news is the way it is presented to them - in partisan, social, echo chambers. These homogeneous, congenial information steams encourage an unconscious, affect-laden (System I) model of thinking that takes precedence over a conscious, deliberate (System II) mode of thought when encoding new information (Taber and Lodge 2006; Lodge and Taber 2013).

While it’s been suggested that fake news contributes to echo chambers (Lazer et al. 2017), scholars have also hypothesized that echo chambers are part of the reason why fake news spreads (Lazer et al. 2018, 1096). Previous studies have simulated fake news exposure (Polage 2012; Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Pennycook, Cannon and Rand 2017), but fail to consider the conditions by which most Americans come into contact with erroneous material on social networks such as Facebook and Twitter (Lazer et al. 2017; Fourney et al. 2017; Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2017). In other words, while researchers have simulated fake news exposure, scholars have not tested whether being a member of an echo chamber makes one more susceptible to sharing fake news articles or finding them more credible.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE

2.1 What is Fake News?

Misinformation can be defined as “information that is presumed to be true at encoding but later on turns out to be false” (Ecker et al. 2014, 570). There is an ongoing academic debate about exactly what fake news is, and whether to even call it fake news (Jamieson 2018). I believe Lazer et al. (2017, 4) provides the clearest definition, as “misinformation that has the trappings of traditional news media, with presumed associated editorial processes”. A prominent example of this from the 2016 presidential election was a fake story about an FBI agent investigating Hillary Clinton’s emails who was found dead in a murder-suicide. The story and accompanying news source, The Denver Guardian (complete with the actual local Colorado time and weather), were totally fabricated (Sydell 2016). On the surface it seemed to be a professionally written and edited news story. However modern and sophisticated fake news efforts are in the twenty-first century, the use of misinformation to advance political goals has multiple iterations throughout American history.
2.2 A Brief History of Misinformation

Many accounts suggest that the fabrication of news played an important role in the creation of the United States itself. While serving as the first Ambassador to France, Ben Franklin utilized his knowledge of printing presses to pen false news stories of King George conspiring with Native Americans to scalp American frontiersmen in the rebelling colonies (Parkinson 2016). These stories were likely written to garner pivotal French support for the new country. Back in North America, future president John Adams and his cousin Samuel helped sow the seeds of dissent in New England by planting fake news stories designed to propagate dissent among the colonists (Parkinson 2016).

In the nineteenth century, the forces of tabloid sensationalism and yellow journalism generated fake news that ranged from the bizarre to fanning the flames of war. In 1835, the tabloid New York Sun printed stories that claimed the discovery of life on the moon (Soll 2016). Other stories were less sanguine. In 1844 newspapers in Philadelphia printed fake news about Irish-Americans stealing bibles from schools that led to violent riots, leaving several dead (Soll 2016). One of the more famous fake news stories in American history appeared in William Randolph Hearst’s Morning Journal, claiming that the USS Maine was destroyed by Spanish saboteurs - a dubious claim that many used as justification to declare war on Spain (Soll 2016).
The First World War was rife with propaganda that found its way into the mainstream press. Despite the passing of time, the misinformation from one hundred years ago has many of the sensational trademarks of its digital successors: brutal murders, revolting sexual abuse, and unimaginable abuse of children. In 1917, multiple newspapers in the United Kingdom, Belgium and even the Shanghai-based *North China Herald* reported how the German military was distilling glycerin from the corpses of their dead. Several years later, investigative reporting found the sensational account of “The Corpse Factory” to be manufactured propaganda of the Allies (*Ponsonby 1991*, 102-113). Another grotesque example of an alleged crucifixion of Canadian infantrymen on the Western front was never verified (*Ponsonby 1991*, 91-93).

One notable account that received widespread attention in the press both in and out of Europe was the story of German soldiers who had chopped the hands off a Belgian infant. “No one paused to ask how long a baby would live were its hands cut off unless expert surgical aid were at hand to tie up the arteries (the answer being a very few minutes). Everyone wanted to believe the story, and many went so far as to say they had seen the baby” (*Ponsonby 1991*, 78). Despite the questionable origins of the story, the account was repeated so widely in the press that it was even mentioned in speeches by members of British Parliament in December of 1916 (*Ponsonby 1991*, 79-80).

During the Second World War, the United States Office of Strategic Services,
the institutional predecessor to the Central Intelligence Agency, launched numerous campaigns that used fake news as a weapon against Nazi Germany. One example is “Operation Cornflakes” that involved attacking mail trains in Germany via air. After the attacks, transport planes would then airdrop faux mailbags nearby. These bags contained fake newspapers and pamphlets that appeared to be printed by an organic, homegrown German resistance movement (O’Donnell 2014, 237–238).

In Belgium, the Front de l’Indépendance resistance group published 50,000 faux copies of the collaborator newspaper *Le Soir* in 1943 (Stone 2014, 118-125). These fake newspapers, mixed into batches of real copies of the publication, left such an impression on the Belgian population that the story was retold in the 1955 film *Un Soir de Joie* or “An Evening of Joy” (Schoukens 1955).

The battle for hearts and minds during the Cold War brought new methods and sophistication to fake news creation and dissemination. One of the most effective disinformation campaigns of this era was the KGB operation code-named “Operation Infektion,” that unfolded over several years in the 1980s (United States Department of State 1987, 33-43). In July of 1983, clandestine operatives from communist bloc countries planted articles in the Indian Magazine *Patriot* claiming that the HIV virus was a biological weapon designed by the United States military to kill African Americans and homosexuals (Ellick and Westbrook 2018). From there, the story was reprinted in various forms across Western and Southern African newspapers before eventually
making its way to national news broadcasts in the United States (Ellick and Westbrook 2018). To help amplify the message, the East German Stasi presented forged documents to professors in the GDR who went on to publish academic papers based on the fabricated materials (Jeppsson 2017).

Despite the end of the Cold War, tensions between Russia and their adversaries has brought disinformation warfare to the twenty-first century. New propaganda methods pioneered by the Kremlin and used on Georgia in 2008 and then Ukraine in 2015 were then turned on the United States in 2016 with incredible success (Barnes 2018). Russian operatives, through the dissemination of false information and the leaking of hacked emails, were able to repeatedly alter the attention of both the media and the American public throughout the campaign (Jamieson 2018).

While fake news has found fertile ground in a climate of polarized citizens, new technologies, a bifurcated media ecosystem, and foreign intervention by the Russian government has also played an important role in the making fake news an issue of concern for political elites and the American public. that continues to unfold in the United States (Barnes 2018). In the words of Ronald Takaki, “history has not ended. It is sedimented into our present and our future” (Batstone and Mendieta 2014, 92).
2.3 Foreign Intervention

Foreign intervention appears to be a major factor in the creation and distribution of fake news leading up to, and after the 2016 US election (Barnes 2018). Journalistic accounts (Tornoe 2017) and FBI investigations (Delk 2017) suggest that the Russian government and military intelligence agencies were actively involved in disseminating fake news during the 2016 election. These actions were part of a broader information war waged by the Kremlin to damage Hillary Clinton’s chances of being elected president (Jamieson 2018).

Unlike the focused, methodical attention to a handful of issues used by the Soviets to stir dissent during Cold War (United States Department of State 1987), the contemporary Russian model has been described as a “firehose of falsehood” (Paul and Matthews 2016). These new tactics take advantage of a fragmented media eco-system to disseminate a high volume of fake material over a large number of mediums (Paul and Matthews 2016). The model is “rapid, continuous, and repetitive, and lacks commitment to consistency” (Paul and Matthews 2016, 1). It is designed so that it “entertains, confuses and overwhelms the audience” with a seemingly endless amount of information (Bertolin 2015, 10).

It may be tempting to dismiss the flood of false information on adversarial opponents in distant lands. However, it is worth considering that efforts to sway American
public opinion by hostile actors has been happening for many years (United States Department of State 1987). What makes voters and citizens in this era more vulnerable to this content than previous generations of Americans? Former CIA director Michael Hayden argues that political polarization has created a fissure in the American public that has been exploited by foreign powers like Russia (Hayden 2019). In a sense, the Russian government has spent a considerable amount of time and energy searching for a crack in the glass of the liberal system. Once that crack was identified, it could focus its resources on shattering the system en masse.

2.4 Political Polarization

With the death of Rockefeller Republicans in the north and Dixiecrats in the south, modern Republicans have taken clearer and more consistent conservative positions while modern Democrats have taken clearer and more consistent liberal positions (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2006; Mann and Ornstein 2016). This facilitates tribal thinking that allows extreme ideas to seem less radical than they might otherwise be, and pushes members of these groups to adopt increasingly fanatical attitudes (Sunstein 2009).

Political socialization scholars have identified the highly-stable nature of political identity (Campbell et al. 1960), which has been argued to be analogous to religious
identification (Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2004). Therefore, it can be expected that partisans would exhibit a great deal of psychological arousal if a core component of their social identity appears to be threatened. Other research has found that partisanship is not the only personal characteristic to influence how misinformation is incorporated; Ecker et al. (2014) found that preexisting attitudes on race influence the way retractions to news stories about crime are processed by individuals.

Nyhan (2010) partly attributes the growth of misinformation to elite polarization, recommending that voters should punish dishonest elites to improve democratic discourse. However, many partisans who believe that misinformation strengthens their arguments on policy positions may resist such punishments; Flynn and Krupnikov (2018) have suggested that respondents may be dismissive of corrections to misinformation when it is deemed politically advantageous to do so. This finding is supported by other work detailing the partisan, heuristic processing evident in the consumption of new information (Haidt 2012; Lodge and Taber 2013; Stroud 2011). This effect was observed even after participants acknowledged that corrections to the incorrect piece of information were available.

The surge in American political polarization, at both the elite (Fiorina, Abrams and Pope 2008) and mass level (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008) may be a product of this new and very social information environment. Research suggests that social networks can act as “polarization machines” because they help confirm and exacerbate
established beliefs (Sunstein 2009). The incorporation of new information and corroboration among likeminded others within a social network are critical components of the group polarization process (Sunstein 2009). These three processes will lead group members to move in a predictable, more extreme direction (Sunstein 2009).

Sorting further complicates the issue; Americans are increasingly arranging themselves based on political ideology (Levendusky 2009, 2010). They are also physically moving themselves (intentionally or otherwise) to more politically homogeneous communities (Bishop 2009). We also know that individual thinking and behavior are strongly influenced by peers (Bollinger and Gillingham 2012; Bond et al. 2012; Gerber, Green and Larimer 2008; Gerber and Rogers 2009; Kast, Meier and Pomeranz 2012; Meer 2011; Paluck 2011; Paluck and Shepherd 2012).

Political polarization in the United States has ebbed and flowed over time; periods of extreme, sometimes violent, tension are unfortunate hallmarks of American history. One of the situational factors that makes this era distinct is the rapid adoption of wireless, networked communication coupled with social media platforms. Research by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) finds that Democrats and Republicans are both about 15 percent more likely to believe ideologically aligned headlines, and this effect is substantially stronger for people with ideologically segregated social media networks (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). These homogeneous networks, coinciding with a marked drop in trust in news organizations, has fostered an environment where false
and misleading information can germinate online with few checks.

2.5 The Fall of Gatekeepers and the Rise of Democratized News

Traditionally, the citizenry has relied upon the news media to produce informative content they can use to be informed, make reasoned judgments and corresponding decisions, and deliberate proposed action within their communities (Schudson 1998). However, the Internet, and the corresponding popularity of social networking sites (SNS) has not only changed the dynamic by which candidates and the public communicate with one another, but also how the established media organizations report on political developments. This is partly because a majority of Americans now get their news from social networking sites (Gottfried and Shearer 2016).

Over the last several decades, Americans have placed a dwindling supply of trust in traditional news mediums; a 2016 Gallup poll found that a majority of Americans hold very little or no confidence whatsoever in newspapers, television news, or online news (Gallup 2016). The current media environment also suffers from a lack of gatekeepers that were previously used to guard against the proliferation of inaccuracies (Williams and Delli Carpini 2004). In a sense, the news world has been democratized to an extreme degree - anyone and everyone can start a blog, Twitter account or Facebook group without having taken a single course on journalistic standards or American
Silverman and Alexander (2016) have observed that these fake news sites show no regard for journalistic norms or practices, suggesting that the authors of these faux news stories are not attempting to emulate actual reporting. Journalists investigating fake news have managed to contract some of the authors, who have admitted to creating these sites for revenue generation (Ohlheiser 2016). Some of these website creators even ignore their own political leanings in the quest for profit; an author of anti-Hillary fake news site admitted to being a registered Democrat (Sydell 2016).

Fake news is almost entirely disseminated on social media, most prominently on Facebook and Twitter (Lazer et al. 2017; Fourney et al. 2017; Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2017), where it is incredibly popular. In the three months leading up to the 2016 election, the top 20 fake news stories on Facebook were shared more frequently than the top 20 real news stories from actual news sites like Politico or the online versions of newspapers like The New York Times (Silverman 2016). However, before these stories make their way into the newsfeeds of unsuspecting users, they are originally shared in political groups (NPR 2016). From there, highly active and partisan users (along with automated bots) act as amplifiers that spread these fake articles (Menczer 2016).

Because sites like Facebook and Twitter do not discriminate between high and low-quality information shared between users (Qiu et al. 2017), fabricated news stories
compete with those from reputable news outlets and are displayed in the same fashion. This can give the false impression to users that the news items are of equal quality.

Many fake news articles are posted on external, third-party sites not hosted or owned by social media corporations (Sydell 2016). The technical and knowledge barriers to creating these sites has fallen precipitously in the last several years; many are built using common platforms like WordPress (Sydell 2016) that require little skill to set up and administer. Because these pages are both prolific and decentralized, it makes the fake news detection algorithms on sites like Facebook largely inadequate (Sydell 2016).

These platforms are engaging because they are social and entertaining; users with little technical expertise can easily distribute material (real or fake) to friends and family (Menczer 2016). False information is designed to be easily-shareable; research on negative advertising has found that negative political attacks are more effective than positive messages because they have a stronger hold on an individual’s attention and memory (Newhagen and Reeves 1991; Bradley, Angelini and Lee 2007; Lau, Sigelman and Rovner 2007; Mattes and Redlawsk 2014).

Platforms like Facebook take advantage of social networks that are often dense and highly clustered (Conover et al. 2012). Additionally, these networks often replicate preexisting social networks (boyd and Ellison 2008) and tend to be politically homogeneous (Conover et al. 2011), suggesting that questionable material is rarely
challenged when one’s network is made up of like-minded peers. The “secret-sauce” of these platforms are the algorithms constructed to show users more of the information that they “like” or share, and less of the information they scroll past or ignore (Mims 2017).

While entertaining and engaging, these algorithms have also been optimized for advertisers. Users of these systems will often see their shopping habits reflected in the items they see on their news feeds; spending time on camping websites inevitably leads to seeing products and articles related to camping (Metz 2017). Likewise, if a user is not a fan of outdoor activities, the algorithm will recognize this and automatically find a different topic or product to fill the void until that user’s engagement time increases (Metz 2017). The same logic can be applied to show participants information from a particular political view and to filter out opposing views.

Because these algorithms do not discriminate between the quality of information presented to users (Qiu et al. 2017), they can also insulate users in echo chambers where disagreeable messages are rarely encountered (Conover et al. 2011). I argue that these congenial information streams are an explanatory force in understanding why misinformation spreads so prolifically on these networks.
2.6 The Power of Echo Chambers and Directionally Motivated Reasoning

Past work has found that when individuals are fed a steady diet of unchallenged political information it this can polarize recipients (Levendusky 2013). This creates a “news bubble” where users experience a stream of information that reinforces initial predispositions, an effect that may lower cogitative processing and allow one to accept false information more readily. This is illustrated by the fact that even though the total number of fake news stories was relatively small, they remained some of the most widely circulated links on Facebook and Twitter (Silverman, Lytvynenko and Pham 2017; Lazer et al. 2017).

Individuals are more likely to absorb this false information because human beings are wired to trust familiar sources that confirm their existing worldview (Kunda 1990; Taber and Lodge 2006; Flynn, Nyhan and Reifler 2017). This reflects a process known as directionally motivated reasoning, which has been found to be responsible for political polarization (Levendusky 2013), selective exposure to news (Stroud 2008, 2011), the acceptance and recall of specific chunks of information (Gaines et al. 2007) and the spread of misinformation even after it’s been corrected (Bullock 2007; Thorson 2016). Alternatively, when messages come from unfamiliar places or sources that a person knows conflict with their predispositions, they may be ignored (Sunstein et al. 2016).
Additionally, the repetitious nature of echo chambers interacts with human’s familiarity and fluency biases (Pennycook, Cannon and Rand 2017). These affect the cogitative processes of individuals; the more one hears a story, the more familiar it becomes and the likelihood that it will be accepted increases with the frequency of repetition (Hasher, Goldstein and Toppino 1977; Schwarz et al. 2007) - even if it’s completely fabricated story (Pennycook, Cannon and Rand 2017). While fact checking tools appear to decrease the sharing of questionable material (Schwarz et al. 2007; Pennycook, Cannon and Rand 2017), long-term corrections are unlikely to manifest in the face of repeated exposure and distribution due to the familiarity and fluency biases that manifest in echo chambers, making the interruption of this process difficult (Hasher, Goldstein and Toppino 1977; Schwarz et al. 2007; Pennycook, Cannon and Rand 2017).

Some attitudes have been found to primarily function for the purposes of “social adjustment” (Smith, Bruner and White 1956; Katz 1960). This relates to work on “normative influence” (Deutsch and Gerard 1955; Kelley 1952), which found that individuals often look to others in a social group to find what is acceptable, regardless of what is factually correct. This is done to avoid being castigated by the group (Schachter 1951; Ulbig and Funk 1999) or to join new groups an individual might find socially desirable (Kelley 1952).

Part of the reason that fake news is influential is because individuals tend to
process information using heuristics and social processes. Past work has examined how the social interpretation of messages helps consumers determine whether or not a source is credible (Swire et al. 2017; Metzger, Flanagin and Medders 2010; Berinsky 2009; Baum and Groeling 2008). This type of reasoning leads people to seek out information that reinforces their preferences constructed around several sources of identity, including partisanship (Bolsen, Druckman and Cook 2015) - an identity that scholars have found to be incredibly stable and important among individuals (Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2004; Steele 1988).

Respondents should be more likely to express intentions to share fake news and find it credible if it’s presented along with other stories that reinforce what they already believe. Why is this the case? Even though individuals have a desire to be accurate and correct, they have an even stronger motivation to be seen as accepted members of groups, some of that are political in nature (Katz 1960; Taber and Lodge 2006). This is rooted in biology; humans are, by nature, highly social creatures. They feel a strong need to associate and be accepted by others (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Individuals use directionally-motivated reasoning to seek out information that reinforces their preferences - preferences often constructed around several sources of identity, including partisanship (Bolsen, Druckman and Cook 2015).
2.7 Individual-Level Covariates Associated with Fake News Consumption

Certain populations might be more susceptible to believing fake news than others. Survey responses and the browser activity of online news consumers indicate that older Americans and extreme partisans have a higher likelihood of reading these fake stories (Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2017). Heavy media consumers also appear to be incidentally exposed to fake news at higher rates than the general population (Lazer et al. 2017). This does not comport with theory stipulating that individuals who lack political sophistication are less able to resist information that conflicts with their partisan leanings (Zaller 1992). Because they lack detailed political knowledge, these consumers should also be more likely to be more persuaded by ideologically-slanted news (de Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2016).

During the 2016 election, supporters of Donald Trump were especially likely to consume fake news (Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2017). Data show that these individuals were constantly engaged in selective exposure behavior and were also far less likely to seek fact-checking information compared to Clinton supporters (Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2017). Additionally, the vast majority of misinformation in the 2016 election painted Donald Trump in a favorable light and consistently attacked Hillary Clinton (Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2017).

Seeking a favorable electoral outcome also seems to drive some Americans into
creating and spreading false information. An interview with two prominent fake news authors indicated that while profit was the strongest motivator to their actions, the former Obama voters were also disillusioned with Democratic politics (McCoy 2016). Additionally, conspiracy theorists like Alex Jones strongly backed Donald Trump during the election - support that candidate Trump praised on his path to the White House (Siemaszko 2016). However, other interviews with fake news creators indicate that many of these articles and websites were created for financial incentive and had little to do with personal politics (Ohlheiser 2016; Sydell 2016; McCoy 2016).

2.8 Social Cues and Heuristics

Pioneering studies in social psychology have established that information presented in brief interpersonal interactions can exert tremendous influence on an individual’s perception - even months after the fleeting event occurred (Sherif 1936). This finding has been replicated in subsequent work, building concurrent evidence that social environments can alter both political and non-political attitudes (Huddy 2004; Smith, Bruner and White 1956; Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague 2004; Sinclair 2012; Klar 2014). Even in antiquity, observers like Aristotle observed that human beings are social creatures who use speech and reason to make political decisions (Saunders 1995).
Alternatively, individuals express an acute discomfort when their views are inconsistent with those of peers whom they admire and want to be admired by (Priester and Petty 2001). They are highly motivated to avoid this discomfort - even by changing their attitudes to match the group (Heider 1946). This occurs because individuals have been found to process and accept information in a manner consistent with their pre-established beliefs (Gaines et al. 2007). This is such a powerful force that even something as minuscule as a postcard that highlights the group norm of voting can motivate individuals to vote (Gerber, Green and Larimer 2008; Panagopoulos 2010; Cialdini, Reno and Kallgren 1990).

To avoid this discomfort, individuals often use directionally-motivated reasoning to seek out information that reinforces their preferences - preferences often constructed around several sources of identity, including partisanship (Bolsen, Druckman and Cook 2015). Modern human beings operate in increasingly complex information environments, often depending on communal heuristics to make sense of current events and even help with decision making (Sloman and Fernbach 2018).

Scholars have pointed out the difficulty in isolating the underlying mechanisms of directionally-motivated reasoning (Bullock, Green and Ha 2010; Flynn, Nyhan and Reifler 2017). One of the goals of this project is to better understand this phenomenon by identifying some of the social factors involved when accuracy goals become less of a priority (Taber and Lodge 2006). Research indicates that that the sheer abundance of
online information may lead news consumers to rely heavily on increased shortcuts and social cues when determining a story’s credibility (Lazer et al. 2017). This suggests that individuals who find themselves in echo chambers are more likely to gravitate towards information that confirms an established worldview and resist information that contradicts that view. Being surrounded by individuals who share similar beliefs has been found to strengthen bias and make people more resistant to change (Kahan et al. 2017; Sinclair 2012).

Aside from Pennycook, Cannon and Rand (2017), little experimental research has been done to determine if these individuals are actually accepting and passing on these false narratives. This is where the need for additional scholarship comes in; a deeper understanding the casual mechanisms at work is needed to understand what happens when individuals come into contact with fake news. While Pennycook, Cannon and Rand (2017) are primarily interested in testing whether the familiarity bias plays a role in sharing and finding fake news credible, parts of their design can be modified to test whether echo chambers contribute to this phenomenon. The authors exposed participants to ten actual news headlines intermixed with five fake news headlines taken from real stories that were displayed in a random order. Participants were asked to rate each for familiarity and accuracy. Results showed that familiar headlines were far more likely to be viewed as accurate than unfamiliar headlines (Pennycook, Cannon and Rand 2017).
A component of the design employed by Pennycook, Cannon and Rand (2017) exposed participants to headlines that were politically balanced (i.e. half being Pro-Democratic and half being Pro-Republican). While they found no interaction between familiarity and fake news headlines that were politically concordant on perceptions of accuracy, this may be byproduct of a research design that presents an inaccurate portrayal of how individuals actually come into contract with fake news. In reality, social media users do not view news headlines in a balanced, even-handed manner, but rather in a series of news stories that are congenial to their established worldview (i.e. echo chambers).
CHAPTER 3. WHY DO INDIVIDUALS BELIEVE FAKE NEWS? EXPLORING THE ROLES OF POLITICAL HOMOGENEITY AND SOCIAL HEURISTICS

This chapter tests whether homogeneous discussion group participants will rate fake news as more believable compared to heterogeneous group participants. Participants were given a series of real and fake news stories, then asked to discuss them before deciding on whether or not to share the articles or find them believable. Ultimately, I find that being in a politically homogeneous discussion group does make participants more likely to rate fake news as believable relative to their peers in the heterogeneous groups. However, the relationship between group homogeneity and sharing fake news is weaker. Participants were largely skeptical about sharing questionable news material.

3.1 Recruitment

The participants for these lab sessions (n=79) were undergraduate students from a large research university in the Pacific Northwest. They were recruited using a variety of methods that included paper fliers attached to bulletin boards across campus, guest speaking engagements in political science classes, and emails distributed to students.
in the colleges of Communication and Arts & Sciences.

The fliers and emails contained a web URL or a QR code (which could be scanned using their smartphones) that automatically directed students to a pre-test hosted on Qualtrics. The pre-test introduction page informed participants that they would be paid $10 for lab sessions that were approximately forty-five minutes in duration. It also explained the conditions in which potential participants would be excluded from the study; if they were under eighteen years of age, did not reside in the United States, if English was not their primary language, or if they did not (broadly speaking) associate with either the Democratic or Republican parties. The full text of the recruitment materials can be found in the appendix.

The pre-test asked potential participants Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, an independent, or what?. If the potential participant selected Democrat or Republican they were then asked to provide their university email address so they could be scheduled for a group session.

If students selected No preference, Independent or Other party, a follow-up question was displayed. The follow-up asked potential participants Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican Party or to the Democratic Party. Students who selected Neither, were told that they were not eligible for the study, as their political views were not associated with either of the two major parties. Additionally, these rejected participants’ Internet Protocol (IP) address was recorded and blocked from
re-taking the pre-test. Because the first lab experiment measured the effects of group heuristics on believing and sharing political fake news, it was important to filter out individuals whose views did not conform to the two most popular political parties in the United States.

3.2 Procedure

Once enough individuals had completed the pre-test, they were contacted about their schedules via email and assigned to a discussion group. Democrats and Republicans were placed into one of three groups: Homogeneous Democrats (Group 1), Homogeneous Republicans (Group 2) or Heterogeneous Partisans (Group 3). Democrats and Republicans were identified by self-report. Similar groupings were used by Mutz (2006) and Druckman, Levendusky and McLain (2018) in their studies of polarization and media effects.

These laboratory experiments were informed by Druckman, Levendusky and McLain (2018), who examined the polarizing effects of interpersonal discussion. In the Druckman, Levendusky and McLain (2018) experiments, groups were made up of four participants who discussed each issue for approximately five minutes each. To replicate this design, I instructed four participants to read two real news articles and two fake articles, then discuss each article for a similar length of time. As in the Druckman,
Levendusky and McLain (2018) experiments, the ratio of the groups is modified to range from politically homogeneous groups of Democrats and Republicans to politically heterogeneous groups of mixed participants.

Discussion sessions were typically held in the late afternoon and always took place in either a small library study room or a conference room. Because it was important that ideas could be exchanged freely and without distraction, these rooms were always climate-controlled, well lit and had a door that would be closed when all participants had arrived. Participants used their personal smartphones’ web browsers to access the survey. Because all the participants were undergraduate students, they all had access to the university’s Wi-Fi network.

Approximately twenty minutes before the start of each experiment, the moderator would arrive with the same set of materials: pens, consent forms, gift cards, payment receipts, bottles of water, an audio recorder, rechargeable USB battery packs, charging cables for a variety of smartphones, and a sheet of paper with the group designation (e.g., *Discussion Group 1, Discussion Group 2*, etc.) that also included a QR code. These QR codes were linked to Qualtrics surveys that were unique to each group.

Most smartphones contain a built-in feature that allows QR codes to be scanned. Once scanned, the phone’s operating system typically auto-directs participants to the Qualtrics survey via the device’s default web browser. For those with older phones that did not have this feature, a shortened web URL was printed below the QR
code. Because lab sessions were typically held in the late afternoon, a battery pack and charging cable were provided for each individual. This was done to ensure that participants’ phones would function throughout the experiment, and to ensure that participants did not rush through the survey in order to conserve their devices’ power.

Participants were asked to refrain from using other applications on their phone during the session (e.g., texting a friend, browsing Facebook), as this would delay the completion of the study. Almost all participants complied with this instruction. Additionally, with the exception of a few instances where someone had to make an emergency trip to the restroom, participants rarely asked to be excused from the room.

A researcher was present in each lab session to moderate discussion. Pilot testing showed the importance of having a moderator in the room. During the pilot, some participants would rush through the survey as quickly as possible. In some instances, a handful of participants would dominate the discussion or talk over their peers to make a point. Other participants were shy and did not express any thoughts at all. Because incorporating group dynamics was an important component of this research design, a researcher guided the discussion through light moderation.

At the start of each session, the researcher read a small script outlining the procedure for the experiment. It instructed participants that they were free to leave the session at any time should they felt uncomfortable, that no personally identifiable
information would be collected, etc. (full script available in Appendix). After this, an audio recorder was started and short introductions were made.

The introductions always consisted of four icebreaker questions: 1) Where are you from?, 2) What is your academic major?, 3) What was the last movie or television series you watched? and 4) What did you do last weekend?. While not explicitly political in nature, these questions were selected purposefully to reveal context about the group's identity before the discussion had begun. For example, students’ from Eastern Washington tend to be more politically conservative than their Western Washington counterparts, tipping off others in the room. Students television viewing habits also implicitly revealed cultural divides that are often correlated with politics (Katz 2016). On several occasions, students who hadn’t shared their party identification seemed aware of this and would ask if there were similar groups made up of opposing partisans meeting later in the week.

After the icebreaker activity, participants answered a standard battery of survey questions, such as their political identification, political efficacy, whether or not they voted, etc. (full list of survey questions used in analysis found in Appendix). After these questions were completed on their phones, participants received a notification to wait for others to complete their questions before proceeding. Once everyone was ready, the moderator instructed participants to move onto the next page and read the first news story. All participants read a total of four news stories - two real and two
fake (the criterion for selecting these stories is explained in the methodology section of this chapter). The order of news items was randomized for each group, but all participants read the same items.

After each story was read, participants were instructed to go around the room and discuss their feelings and attitudes about the item. Almost every participant had something to say; it was rare that participants did not want to share their opinion on an article. The moderator would first ask the participants to share their initial thoughts one-by-one. Participants who interrupted were asked to wait until it was their turn. After participants finished their initial thoughts, the moderator asked the group to engage in free-form discussion for four to five minutes. This typically involved participants going back to the news article to quote a specific line or ask another participant to clarify his or her initial statement. Occasionally topics would diverge from the news item. When this happened, the moderator would remind participants to stay focused on the task at hand.

After each discussion ended, participants were presented with the same questions about how believable they found the news item to be. Additionally, they were asked whether or not they would share, comment on or “like” the item (details about how each question was worded and measured are described in the methodology section of this chapter). This was repeated for each of the four news items used in each lab session. Participants answered each of these questions individually. At the conclusion
of the lab session, participants were informed that they were exposed to two fake news articles and received their payment.

### 3.3 Methodology

Since 2016, Buzzfeed News has published annual lists of fake news stories that have generated the most attention online (Silverman, Lytvynenko and Pham 2017). I used an influence metric developed by Buzzsumo (not affiliated with Buzzfeed, Inc.) derived from a combination of reads, shares, likes and comments. Out of the top 50 fake news stories listed in 2017, most are not political. The political fake news stories often reflect well-known conspiracy theories; for example, that the United States federal government was the real culprit of the 2001 terrorist attacks. However, a fair number of stories were about President Trump.

Both of the real news stories comes from *The New York Times*, which was also used by Van Duyn and Collier (2019). These stories were identified using the same method that Buzzfeed used via Buzzsumo. The two New York Times stories from 2017 with the highest level of “engagement” about President Trump were chosen. One real story was about the Mueller Investigation and the other was about the change in policy over transgender policy in the US military (see appendix for full text of news stories). The first fake news story was about Hillary Clinton bribing
prominent Republicans to abandon Trump during the campaign and the second fake news item was about Hollywood liberals threatening to go on strike until President Trump resigned from office.

Because the two fake news stories were roughly 300 words long, the New York Times stories were cut to a similar length.

Studying fake news in the era of Donald Trump is challenging for a number of reasons. First, the president consistently uses the term “fake news” to describe negative press coverage about himself (Trump 2018). Second, the nature of Trump’s relationship with the news media is unique. Since he began his campaign for the presidency, Trump has found a way to embed himself in just about every news cycle over the past several years. It’s difficult to talk about any political news, fake or otherwise, without it connecting in some way to the 45th president. Van Duyn and Collier (2019) work around this issue by including President Trump in each story - real or fake. Like Van Duyn and Collier (2019), my stories all involved President Trump in some capacity.

After exposure to each article (real or fake), participants answered two questions. The first question asked participants about sharing a news item: Would you consider sharing this story online (for example, on Facebook or Twitter), with 0 being “I would not share this story” and 100 being “I would definitely share this story”? The second question asked participants about how true they consider the story to be: Would
your best guess have been that this story was true, with 0 being “This story is not true” and 100 being “This story is true”? The two dependent variables used in the analysis of this chapter are derived from each participant’s averaged response to these two questions.

Other work on fake news has used similar questions but has had fewer response choices, such as yes, no and maybe (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Pennycook, Cannon and Rand 2017). During the pilot testing of this chapter’s experiment, participants would express frustration that they couldn’t express a more nuanced response to whether or not a story was true or not. To better reflect these attitudes, I opted for a 0-100 scale to better capture participants’ attitudes.

Participants’ responses to these questions asked after reading fake news items were taken to construct two averaged scales used as dependent variables in the analysis: Share and Fake.

Previous work has found that supporters of President Trump tend to consume fake news at a much higher rate than other groups (Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2017). This may be related to prominent voices in conservative circles that tend to attack the mainstream media (Benkler et al. 2017). Additionally, evidence shows that Republicans are more suspicious of fact-checking websites compared to other groups (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). Therefore, it should be expected that individuals who identify as Republicans will be more likely to rate fake news items as true. To measure this,
the dichotomous Republican indicator variable was included.

Theory suggests that individuals who lack political sophistication are less able to resist information that conflicts with their partisan leanings (Zaller 1992). Because they have lower levels of political knowledge, these consumers should also be more likely to be persuaded by ideologically-slanted news (de Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2016). Additionally, other empirical work has shown that individuals with higher political knowledge tend to consume more fake news (Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2017) and are better able to identify fake news compared to individuals with less political knowledge (Van Duyn and Collier 2019).

Homogeneous Group indicates whether the laboratory participants were in a group of politically-heterogeneous company of half Democrats and half Republicans (0), or politically-homogeneous company made up entirely of like-minded Democrats or Republicans (1).

The Republican variable indicates all self-identifying Republicans and Republican-leaning participants (1) along with all self-identifying Democrats and Democratic-leaning participants (0). This variable was constructed from two questions: Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, an independent, or what? If participants responded with any other answer other than Democrat or Republican, they were asked Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican Party or to the Democratic Party?. An interaction term was also constructed from
the Republican and Homogeneous Group variables to identify if any differences existed between the groups made up of Democrats and Republicans.

It should be expected the less political knowledge participants have, the more likely they will be to finding fake news items to be true. To test this, the Political Knowledge variable was included in this analysis.

Political Knowledge is an additive scale constructed from five political knowledge questions taken from Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996). Participants scored from 0 to 5 depending on their answers to the following questions: Do you happen to know what job or political office is now held by Mike Pence?, Whose responsibility is it to determine if a law is constitutional or not?, How much of a majority is required for the U.S. Senate and House to override a presidential veto?, Do you happen to know which party currently has the most members in the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington, D.C.?, and Would you say one of the parties is more conservative than the other at the national level? Which party is more conservative?.

Because social media has been identified as the gateway that directs news consumers to websites that host fake articles (Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2017; Silverman 2016), it should be expected that the more individuals use social media, the more likely they are to find fake articles to be true. To do this, social media use was measured and included in the analysis. The Social variable is an averaged scale constructed from the question During a typical week, how many days do you use the
following social media platforms? A list of social media platforms was then displayed to participants. Participants were asked to check a box, ranging from 0 to 7 days, for each of the following websites or apps: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, Snapchat and Reddit.

3.4 Analysis

3.4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Of the 79 lab participants, 53.16% identified as Democrats or Democratic-leaning and 46.84% identified as Republicans or Republican-leaning. The median age of the participants was twenty. 50.63% identified as female and 49.37% identified as male. Among those who identified with a major racial group, participants who consider themselves white made up 72.15% of the sample. Those who identified as Hispanic or Latino made up 12.66%, followed by Asian or Pacific Islander (7.59%), then Black or African American/Native American or American Indian (tied at 1.27%).

Only 26.58% of the sample claimed to have voted in the 2016 election, mostly likely due to their low age. Of that number, 33.33% claimed to have cast ballots for President Trump. The first discussion group met on October 29, 2018, and the final group met on January 25, 2019. Table 3.1 shows the number of participants in each of three groups, whether or not they were homogeneous, and the political make-up
of each group.

**Table 3.1:** Group Descriptions for Chapter 3 Lab Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Homogeneous</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 ((n = 33))</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Democrats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 ((n = 26))</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Republicans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 ((n = 23))</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Mix</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On average, participants were able to correctly answer most of the political knowledge questions, with an average rating of 4.42 out of 5. There was little difference between partisans in terms of political knowledge. Democrats average rating was 4.5 while Republicans’ average was 4.32.

Participants reported spending an average of 3.44 days of the week on one or more social media platforms. As with political knowledge, Democratic and Republican participants were fairly similar in this regard. Republicans reported using social media an average of 3.57 days while Democrats reported an average of 3.32 days.

When asked how true they considered the fake news articles to be, the average for all participants was 33.37 out of 100. Democrats were more skeptical of the fake articles, with an average of 30.58 compared to Republicans’ average of 36.53.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the fake news believability average ratings in homogeneous and heterogeneous groups. There were no
significant differences in the fake news believability average for homogeneous \((m = 35.47, sd = 22.19)\) and heterogeneous conditions \((m = 27.15, sd = 18.94)\); \(t(77) = -1.5, p = 0.137\).

While the overall likelihood of sharing fake news was low \((10.3)\), Republican participants were almost twice as likely to share the fabricated news items \((14.3)\) compared to Democrats \((6.77)\).

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the fake news sharing average ratings in homogeneous and heterogeneous conditions. There were no significant differences in the fake news sharing average for homogeneous \((m = 10.31, sd = 19.64)\) and heterogeneous groups \((m = 10.25, sd = 19.64)\); \(t(77) = -0.01, p = 0.99\).

Participants’ average rating of real articles’ perceived veracity was 73.85. Democratic participants’ average rating for the real articles was higher \((78.63)\) than Republican participants’ average \((68.42)\).

The average likelihood of participants sharing real news articles was 21.54. Democratic participants’ likelihood of sharing real news articles was substantially higher \((26.85)\) compared to Republican participants \((15.53)\).
3.4.2 Effect of Homogeneity on Perceptions of Fake News Accuracy

Table 3.2 displays the averaged fake news believability ratings for each group in the analysis. Participants assigned to homogeneous discussion groups were more likely to rate false news items as true compared to those placed to the heterogeneous discussion groups. The average truth rating that homogeneous group participates (n = 59) rated fake news items was 35.47 while those placed in heterogeneous discussion groups had an average rating of 27.15.

Democrats in both homogeneous and heterogeneous discussion groups were less likely to find fake news believable compared to their Republican peers. In both homogeneous and heterogeneous groups Democratic/Democratic-leaning participants’ average rating was 30.58 while Republican/Republican-leaning participants’ average rating was 36.53. While some Democratic participants rated both fake news articles as totally untrue (0), this was not the case for Republican participants. However, none of the participants expressed certainty that the fake news articles were true, with the highest Democratic rating at 85 and the highest Republican rating at 81.

Among Republicans, there were few differences in those placed in homogeneous or heterogeneous groups. The average fake news rating for Republicans in homogeneous groups was significantly higher (36.67) compared to the average rating of Republicans placed in the heterogeneous groups (36.18). However, Democrats rated
fake news items in substantially different ways depending on which condition they were placed in. The average rating for Democratic participants assigned to a heterogeneous groups was substantially lower (16.11) compared to Democrats in homogeneous groups (34.53).

**Table 3.2:** Average Rating of Fake News Articles by Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Heterogeneous Group</th>
<th>Homogeneous Group</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Democrats</strong></td>
<td>16.11</td>
<td>34.53</td>
<td>30.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Republicans</strong></td>
<td>36.18</td>
<td>36.67</td>
<td>36.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All Participants</strong></td>
<td>27.15</td>
<td>35.47</td>
<td>33.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.3: OLS Estimation: Effect of Homogeneity on Perceptions of Fake News Accuracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Std. Err.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge</td>
<td>-0.113</td>
<td>3.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Use</td>
<td>-0.313</td>
<td>2.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homogeneous Discussion Group Member</td>
<td>18.403*</td>
<td>8.172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>20.152*</td>
<td>9.636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Republican &amp; Homogeneous Discussion</td>
<td>-17.960</td>
<td>11.234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>17.673</td>
<td>16.485</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N                                      79
R²                                      0.085
F (5,73)                                 1.363

Significance levels: †: 10% *: 5% **: 1%

While the coefficients are small, regression estimates in Table 3.3 show that the political knowledge coefficient moves in the expected direction; those with higher political knowledge rate fake news as less believable compared to less-informed participants. However, this is not the case for average social media media use; participants
who use more social media found the fake articles less believable.

The Republican variable is positive and significant, indicating that participants who identified as Republicans were more likely to find fake news articles believable compared to Democratic participants.

The homogeneous discussion variable is significant and has a positive coefficient, meaning members of the homogeneous discussion groups were more likely to find fake news items believable compared to their peers in the heterogeneous groups. This supports the hypothesis derived from the theory that politically homogeneous social settings facilitate implicit, affect-driven thinking over more deliberate, self-aware processing.
3.4.3 Effect of Homogeneity on Likelihood of Sharing Fake News

Participants showed little interest in sharing any article - real or fake. When asked, participants’ average reported likelihood of sharing a fake story was 10.3, with the majority of lab participants (62.03%) saying that they had no intention whatsoever to share the stories. Republican participants, with an average of 14.3, were more than
twice as likely to share an article compared to Democrats; who averaged 6.77.

The average likelihood of participants sharing the real news articles was 21.54. While twice as high as the likelihood of sharing the fake articles, it speaks to participants’ hesitations about posting this material online. It is possible that participants were aware that some of the material they were reading was questionable, and they had little interest in sharing anything if they thought something was fabricated.

A second OLS regression was estimated using the same covariates from the fake news accuracy estimation: Political Knowledge, Social Media Use, Homogeneous Discussion, Republican, and an interaction of Homogeneous Discussion and Republican.
Table 3.4: OLS Estimation: Effect of Homogeneity on Likelihood of Sharing Fake News

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Std. Err.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge</td>
<td>2.885</td>
<td>2.975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Use</td>
<td>2.334</td>
<td>1.996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homogeneous Discussion</td>
<td>4.342</td>
<td>8.076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>12.670</td>
<td>9.524</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Republican &amp; Homogeneous Discussion</td>
<td>-6.936</td>
<td>11.102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-17.364</td>
<td>16.293</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F(5,73)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.039</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significance levels: † : 10%  * : 5%  ** : 1%
Results from OLS regression show a weak relationship between the predictor variables and the likelihood of sharing fake news items. While not significant, Figure 3.2 shows that Democrats in homogeneous discussion groups are more likely to share than Democrats in heterogeneous groups. However, the opposite is true of Republicans. Taken together, these results show that there is no clear relationship between the likelihood of sharing an a piece of fake news and whether or not a participant considers that item believable.
3.5 Discussion

The results support the hypothesis that being a member of a politically homogeneous group increases the likelihood of rating a piece of fake news to be true compared to participants in heterogeneous groups. This may be because individuals in more comfortable social environments engage in less cognitive modes of thought, relying instead on social heuristics to help guide their attitudes. When it’s clear that an individual is sitting at a table with others who have a different political outlook, it may cause them to read material more carefully.

This dynamic became especially apparent when participants in heterogeneous groups read the real news item *Trump Says Transgender People Will Not Be Allowed in the Military*. The story reported that President Trump announced this decision via tweet, and that military officials had caught by surprise when they learned about it. Democratic participants would not hesitate to share their anger over this announcement. While many Republican participants would express dismay at the confusion President Trump caused by announcing the decision on Twitter instead of a more formal channel, they told the group they ultimately agreed with this type of military policy change. This story created more tension in the heterogeneous groups than any of the other news items discussed.

Although the relationship between political knowledge and perceptions of fake
news accuracy was not statistically significant, it did move in the expected direction; those with higher knowledge of politics were less likely to rate fake news items to be true. This corresponds with other empirical work that shows high-knowledge respondents as more able to spot fake news items compared to low-knowledge respondents Van Duyn and Collier (2019).

Supporting work by other scholars studying fake news, partisanship also appears to play an important role in this relationship (Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2017; Lazer et al. 2017).

This chapter’s results are limited by the fact that lab participants used in this chapter share many similar qualities; they are almost all from the West Coast of the United States, are overwhelmingly white, college educated, less politically active and young. This is largely due to the fact that these young students are still in school and haven’t had many opportunities to vote or engage in other political activities. While the sample was convenient, it revealed the need to determine if these effects are limited to a specific population in a particular region of the country. Chapters 5 and 6 use participants gathered via Amazon Mechanical Turk which are older and more educated than the sample used here and in Chapter 4.
CHAPTER 4. HOW MEDIA LITERACY CAN STEM THE EFFECTS OF FAKE NEWS: EXPLORING TWO-STEP FLOW EFFECTS

Chapter 4 explores whether priming participants with warnings about fake news can make them less susceptible to believing fake articles to be true. During these sessions, half of the participants were primed with a short video from PBS NewsHour about media literacy legislation and how to spot fake news. I hypothesize that discussion groups primed with information about how to spot fake news should rate fake articles as less believable compared to groups who are not primed.

The two-step flow of communication, the idea that media can influence non-watchers via interpersonal discussion, has been a cornerstone of mass communication and political theory literature for nearly a century (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1948; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Katz 1957; Downs 1957; Katz 1960). Katz (1960, 45) theorized that interpersonal communication may reinforce messages received via mass media. These forces can be powerful; recent work has found that two-step effects can be larger than the direct effects of exposure itself (Druckman, Levendusky and McLain 2018).
4.1 Recruitment

The data used in this chapter are made up of all participants used in the Chapter 3 analysis \( n = 79 \), in addition to new discussion groups where half of the participants were primed \( n = 55 \). The first unprimed discussion group met on October 29, 2018 and the final group met on January 25, 2019. The first primed discussion group met on January 29, 2019 and the final group met on February 27, 2019.

Laboratory data collection for the primed discussion groups differed in two notable ways compared to the unprimed groups. First, participants for this study were recruited from a large introductory political science course and received extra credit for their time, while the first experiment primarily recruited participants using campus advertisements and received gift cards as payment. As in Chapter 3, all participants were undergraduate students from a large research institution in the Pacific Northwest.

Second, the homogeneous groups in the primed set were made up entirely of participants who identified as Democrats or Democratic-leaning. Heterogeneous groups were made up of two Democratic or Democratic-leaning participants and two Republican or Republican-leaning participants. This was done mostly out of convenience, as recruitment of politically conservative participants in Chapter 3 was more difficult than originally anticipated. Finding Republican university students in a region of the
United States that typically elects Democrats to office was challenging.

4.2 Procedure

The procedure used for the primed groups was identical to the unprimed groups in Chapter 3 with one exception. After introductions were made, the group was separated in half for approximately seven minutes. Two participants followed the moderator to an adjacent office or study room to watch a YouTube video from PBS NewsHour titled *How media literacy can help students discern fake news*, which was originally broadcast on June 6, 2018\(^1\). The video explains how some Washington State public schools are teaching media literacy to elementary school students. The video details steps for spotting fake news articles (i.e. checking the URL of online articles for suspect links, looking for grammatical errors that are common in fake news stories, etc.). The video also discusses public policy recommendations that other interested states can follow to facilitate healthier media diet practices for their citizens.

The remaining two group members stayed in the original meeting room to watch a control video from PBS NewsHour about the 2018 US federal budget titled *The budget deal will add billions to the deficit. What are the benefits and risks?*, originally broadcast on February 9, 2018\(^2\).

\(^1\)Treatment video: [https://youtu.be/z4fwJHhv6ZY](https://youtu.be/z4fwJHhv6ZY)
\(^2\)Control video: [https://youtu.be/qsIJIgalFPo](https://youtu.be/qsIJIgalFPo)
In heterogeneous groups, participants were always divided along party lines. In other words, one Republican/Republican-leaning participant always watched the treatment video while the other always stayed back to watch the control video. The same was true of Democratic participants; one was exposed to the treatment video while the other watched the control video.

After the videos had ended, participants were reunited in the original meeting room. They were asked to begin working on the survey, and the remaining time was used in the same fashion as the first experiment (i.e., answering demographic questions, reading and discussing fake news articles, etc).

When reading news items, participants would occasionally bring up the topic of fake news (e.g. “this seems like it could be fake news”), but never mentioned that they had just watched a video on the topic. It is possible that they felt like they shouldn’t have discussed what they watched because they were separated into two groups. It’s also possible that participants were largely disinterested in the topic and were eager to finish as quickly as possible so they could receive their extra credit.
4.3 Analysis

4.3.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 4.1 displays the descriptive statistics of the participants used in this chapter. Of the 79 participants who were not primed \((n = 79)\), 53.16% identified as Democrats/Democratic-leaning and 46.84% identified as Republicans or Republican-leaning. The primed sample \((n = 55)\) was made up of 70.91% Democratic/Democratic-leaning participants and 29.09% Republican/Republican-leaning participants.

A high number of participants in the primed group initially identified as Independents or indicated that they had an unlisted party preferences before being forced to select if they were closer to the Democratic or Republican parties. In the unprimed groups, Independents made up 11.39% of the sample and “other party” comprised of 7.6%. In the primed groups, Independents were 14.55% of sample while “other party” made up 16.36%. I believe there are two primary reasons why these disparities exist.

First, it’s possible that there was a strong self-selection effect. The unprimed participants were recruited via campus advertisements and paid with a gift card while the primed participants were recruited via an introductory political science course and earned extra credit for their time. Unprimed participants were also much less ambiguous when discussing their attitudes or political preferences. There were numerous instances in unprimed sessions where individuals would accept the gift card
but remark that they were motivated to participate because they were interested in politics, not the money. Research has shown that politically-interested individuals tend to be more partisan in nature (Campbell et al. 1960, 145).

This self-selection effect also appears to be reflected in differences of political knowledge and political interest. On averaged, unprimed participants were able to correctly answer 4.42 out of the 5 political knowledge questions, while primed participants’ average was 3.2 out of 5. When asked *In general, how interested are you in politics and public affairs?*, unprimed participants average response was *Somewhat interested* while the averaged response for primed participants was *Slightly interested*.

In other respects, the demographic characteristics of the primed and unprimed participants were similar; the median age of all participants was twenty, the percentage of white participants was 71.64%, and the number of participants who voted in the 2016 Election was 25.37%.

The average rating of the overall sample’s perceptions of the fake news articles being true was 36.36 out of 100. The primed participants’ ratings were higher than the overall sample, with an average rating of 40.67. This may be further evidence of a self-selection bias in the unprimed sample, as primed Democratic (41.31) and primed Republican participants (39.13) had a higher average than the overall unprimed sample (33.37). Similarly, unprimed Democrats had an average fake news believability rating of 30.68 compared to the Republican rating of 36.53.
An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the fake news believability average of the unprimed and primed conditions. The results show differences approaching significance between the unprimed \( (m = 33.37, sd = 21.6) \) and primed conditions \( (m = 30.67, sd = 24.7) \); \( t(132)= -1.82, p = 0.072 \).

The overall average of participants’ willingness to share fake material was 11.2 out of 100. Again, even when warned about fake news, primed participants were more likely to share this material (12.5) than the unprimed sample (10.3). Among primed Democratic participants, the average for sharing fake material was 12.03 compared to primed Republicans’ 13.66. The sharing average was lower for unprimed Democratic participants (6.77), but higher for unprimed Republican participants (14.3).

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the fake news sharing average ratings in unprimed and primed conditions. There were no significant differences in the fake news sharing average for unprimed \( (m = 10.29, sd = 21.13) \) and primed participants \( (m = 12.5, sd = 19.45) \); \( t(132)= -0.61, p = 0.541 \).

The unprimed participants’ average rating of the two real news articles was higher (73.85) compared to the primed participants (68.87). Primed Democrats’ average rating was substantially higher (68.99) than the primed Republican average (52.4). A similar relationship was evident in the unprimed portion of the sample, with the average Democratic rating of real news articles higher (73.63) than the average Republican rating (68.41).
While most participants did not have a high inclination to share the real news items (18.87), it was still nearly double the likelihood of sharing fake news. Among the primed participants, Republicans’ reported likelihood of sharing real material (8.53) was half of Democrats’ reported likelihood (19.5).
Table 4.1: Descriptive Statistics of Chapter 4 Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Total Participants</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Age (All Participants)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of White Participants (All Participants)</td>
<td>71.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of 2016 Election Voters (All Participants)</td>
<td>25.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fake News Believability Average (All Participants)</td>
<td>36.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fake News Sharing Average (All Participants)</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real News Believability Average (All Participants)</td>
<td>69.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Unprimed Participants</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unprimed Political Knowledge Average</td>
<td>4.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Unprimed Democrats</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Unprimed Republicans</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fake News Believability Average (Unprimed Participants)</td>
<td>33.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fake News Believability Average (Unprimed Democrats)</td>
<td>30.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fake News Believability Average (Unprimed Republicans)</td>
<td>36.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fake News Sharing Average (All Unprimed Participants)</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fake News Sharing Average (All Unprimed Democrats)</td>
<td>6.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fake News Sharing Average (All Unprimed Republicans)</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real News Believability Average (Unprimed Participants)</td>
<td>73.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real News Believability Average (Unprimed Democrats)</td>
<td>73.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real News Believability Average (Unprimed Republicans)</td>
<td>68.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Primed Participants</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Primed Democrats</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Primed Republicans</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge Average (Primed Participants)</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fake News Believability Average (All Primed Participants)</td>
<td>40.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fake News Believability Average (All Primed Democrats)</td>
<td>41.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fake News Believability Average (All Primed Republicans)</td>
<td>39.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fake News Sharing Average (All Primed Participants)</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fake News Sharing Average (All Primed Democrats)</td>
<td>12.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fake News Sharing Average (All Primed Republicans)</td>
<td>13.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real News Believability Average (Primed Participants)</td>
<td>69.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real News Believability Average (Primed Democrats)</td>
<td>68.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real News Believability Average (Primed Republicans)</td>
<td>52.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.3.2 Effect of Prime on Perceived Accuracy of Fake News

The OLS regression estimated for perceived accuracy of the fake news articles includes a dichotomous \textit{Prime} variable to indicate if the participant was a member of group that received information on how to spot fake material. It also includes an interaction of the \textit{Prime} and \textit{Political Knowledge} variables. Aside from prime variable addition, the estimation includes the same covariates used in the Chapter 3 model: \textit{Republican}, \textit{Social Media Use}, \textit{Homogeneous Discussion Group Member}, and \textit{Political Knowledge}. Higher scores indicate a greater perception of fake news accuracy.
Table 4.2: OLS Estimation: Effect of Prime on Perceptions of Fake News Accuracy (No Interactive Effects)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Std. Err.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>3.809</td>
<td>4.266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Use</td>
<td>-0.919</td>
<td>1.720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homogeneous Discussion</td>
<td>5.668</td>
<td>4.411</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prime</td>
<td>5.780</td>
<td>4.957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge</td>
<td>-3.287</td>
<td>1.995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>45.031**</td>
<td>12.060</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>134</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F_{(5,128)}$</td>
<td>1.636</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significance levels: †: 10%, *: 5%, **: 1%

Table 4.2 shows the effect of the prime on perceptions of fake news accuracy without interactive effects. While none of the covariates are significant, the prime appears to make participants more willing to believe fake news articles to be true, and higher political knowledge appears to depress the perceived veracity of fake news. To
better understand this relationship, the prime variable was interacted with political
knowledge in a separate OLS estimate shown in Table 4.3.
Table 4.3: OLS Estimation: Effect of Prime on Perceptions of Fake News Accuracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Std. Err.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>4.541</td>
<td>4.237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Use</td>
<td>-1.413</td>
<td>1.706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homogeneous Discussion</td>
<td>6.316</td>
<td>4.376</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect of Prime</td>
<td>41.968†</td>
<td>24.434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge 1 (No Prime) (Omitted Reference Group)</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge 2 (No Prime)</td>
<td>21.635</td>
<td>27.665</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge 3 (No Prime)</td>
<td>24.839</td>
<td>24.780</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge 4 (No Prime)</td>
<td>38.683†</td>
<td>22.978</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge 5 (No Prime)</td>
<td>27.570</td>
<td>22.822</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; Political Knowledge 1 (Omitted Reference Group)</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; Political Knowledge 2</td>
<td>-10.121</td>
<td>29.906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; Political Knowledge 3</td>
<td>-20.270</td>
<td>26.977</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; Political Knowledge 4</td>
<td>-45.691†</td>
<td>25.265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; Political Knowledge 5</td>
<td>-42.941†</td>
<td>25.742</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.822</td>
<td>24.125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N                                           | 134         |
R²                                          | 0.146       |
F (12,121)                                   | 1.722       |

Significance levels: †: 10%  *: 5%  **: 1%
Table 4.3 shows that Republicans and Homogeneous Discussion both have positive coefficients, which supports the results from Chapter 3. While not significant, these variables move in the expected direction; Republican participants and those who were placed in homogeneous discussion groups are more likely to find fake news articles believable.

Results in Table 4.3 support the hypothesis that the primed discussion group members rated fake news as less believable compared to groups that were not primed. While not significant, the interaction of the *Prime* and *Political Knowledge* variables show a trend that the primes were most effective for participants with higher levels of political knowledge. In other words, participants who know more about politics appear best-suited to internalize warnings about fabricated material.
4.3.3 Effect of Prime on Likelihood of Sharing Fake News

Table 4.4 shows that as political knowledge increases among primed participants, they become increasingly unlikely to share fake news. This relationship is best illustrated by the higher levels of political knowledge that are approaching significance. Figure 4.2 helps illustrate this relationship.
Table 4.4: OLS Estimation: Effect of Prime on Likelihood of Sharing Fake News

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Std. Err.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>4.916</td>
<td>3.746</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Use</td>
<td>0.072</td>
<td>1.561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect of Prime</td>
<td>33.789</td>
<td>22.226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge 1 (No Prime) (Omitted Reference Group)</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge 2</td>
<td>14.672</td>
<td>25.198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge 3</td>
<td>6.481</td>
<td>22.578</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge 4</td>
<td>11.615</td>
<td>20.966</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge 5</td>
<td>14.612</td>
<td>20.847</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; Political Knowledge 1 (Omitted Reference Group)</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; Political Knowledge 2</td>
<td>-30.945</td>
<td>27.278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; Political Knowledge 3</td>
<td>-24.328</td>
<td>24.642</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; Political Knowledge 4</td>
<td>-34.049</td>
<td>23.072</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; Political Knowledge 5</td>
<td>-37.838</td>
<td>23.538</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-5.179</td>
<td>21.542</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 134

R² 0.074

F (11,122) .892

Significance levels: †: 10% *, 5% **: 1%
4.4 Discussion

The results in both models estimated in this chapter suggest the limits of educating the public about the effects of fake news. While information about how to spot fake news lowered the likelihood of believing and sharing misinformation, this effect was most beneficial for participants who already followed politics, although this
relationship was marginally significant at best. While the prime did have an effect on participants with lower political education, the effect was small and not statistically significant.

While the participants in the primed and unprimed discussion groups shared similarities of age, location and race, their differences in terms of political interest and knowledge were substantial and should be considered a limitation of this analysis.

Chapters 3 and 4 are limited by their small sample size and similar demographic characteristics. Chapters 5 and 6 use larger samples collected from Amazon Mechanical Turk that are more representative of the US population.
CHAPTER 5. HOW INCREASED SOCIAL MEDIA USE CONDITIONS INDIVIDUALS TO BE LESS CRITICAL OF FAKE NEWS

Social media has grown to become one of the most popular news sources for Americans. 2016 marked the first election where Americans learned more about current events from social media than from traditional sources like newspapers or television (Gottfried and Shearer 2016). This popularity might stem from algorithms that are designed to learn which content viewers prefer. After discerning the interests of users, these algorithms display similar information to ensure individuals spend as much time as possible on the platform (Mims 2017; Metz 2017).

Facebook is the primary gateway by which individuals are exposed to fake news (Lazer et al. 2017; Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2017; Fourney et al. 2017). I believe part of the reason this occurs is because heavy users are fed a constant media diet of agreeable information and rarely encounter challenging opinions. In other words, heavy social media users tend to use implicit, affect-driven thinking (System I) when encoding new information while others use more deliberate, critical thinking during fake news exposure (Taber and Lodge 2006; Lodge and Taber 2013). Therefore, I hypothesize that even when controlling for political knowledge, heavy social media users are more likely to believe and share fake information.
5.1 Procedure

Participants in this chapter ($n = 772$) were exposed to the same treatments and in the same order as participants in Chapter 4, but took the survey experiment online and in isolation between March 4 and March 9, 2019.

5.2 Data

Guess, Nyhan and Reifler (2017) found that older Americans tend to read more fake news than other age groups. Therefore, it should be expected that the older a participant is, the more likely they are to share fake news and find these fake items to be true. To test this, the Age variable was calculated from the question *In what year were you born?*. This variable was not included in the analysis for chapters 3 and 4 because the median age for the lab participants was twenty and range of the item was small ($SD = 2.13$), as these participants were all recruited from a large research university. However, the range of ages in the MTurk data was 19 to 74, with a standard deviation of 11.61.

Political Efficacy was also measured with an averaged scale made up of seven standard efficacy questions. These questions were all measured using a Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” (0) to “strongly agree” (6): *Most of our leaders are devoted to the service of our country, Politicians never tell us what they really think, I*
don’t think public officials care much about what people like me think, I feel I could do as good of a job in public office as most other people, I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics, I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people and I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country.

A dichotomous Prime indicator variable was also included in the analysis for the 227 participants (29.29%) who were primed with the same PBS NewsHour clip used in Chapter 4, How media literacy can help students discern fake news.\(^3\)

Aside from the Age and Political Efficacy variables, other control variables that were used in Chapters 3 and 4 were used here as well: Political Knowledge, Social Media Use and the dichotomous Republican indicator variable. Like before, Independents and third party participants were categorized depending on whether they felt closer to the Democratic or Republican party. As in Chapters 3 and 4, the outcome variables for the two models in this chapter were an average of participants’ ratings of the perceived veracity of two fake news stories, and the average of participants likelihood to share the two fake news stories.

\(^3\)Treatment video: https://youtu.be/z4fwJHhv6ZY
5.3 Analysis

5.3.1 Descriptive Statistics: Unprimed Participants

57.43% of participants identified as Democratic or Democratic-leaning, while 42.57% of participants identified as Republican or Republican-leaning. The median age was thirty-five, made up of 45.42% female and 54.58% male participants. Participants identifying as white made up 73.42% of the sample, followed by Black or African-American (9.03%), Hispanic or Latino (8%), Asian or Pacific Islander (5.81%), Native American or American Indian (2.06%), and Other (1.68%). 79.1% of the sample claimed to have voted in the 2016 election. Of that number, 47.63% cast ballots for President Trump.

Participants in this chapter’s sample were able to answer an average of 3.95 out of 5 political knowledge questions. Democrats scored slightly higher (4.02) than Republicans (3.85).

Of the 775 participants, 227 (29.29%) were primed using the same video from PBS NewsHour that participants in Chapter 4 watched. To verify that they watched the video, participants were asked three questions about the video afterwards. Participants who were not able to correctly answer these questions were removed from the survey. These included what state was featured in the video (Washington State),

---

4Warning video: https://youtu.be/z4fwJHhv6ZY
what the main topic of the video was (fake news) and what definition one of the educators in the video used when describing fake news (fabricated news).

Among participants who were not primed, their average rating for the fake stories was 45.37. Similar to the participants in Chapters 3 and 4, the Democratic/Democratic-leaning participants were more skeptical of the fake articles’ veracity; their average rating of the veracity of the two fake stories was 39.57. This was lower than Republican/Republican-leaning participants, whose average rating for the fake articles was 52.42.

When asked about the likelihood of sharing the fake stories, the unprimed average was 36.95. There was little difference between Democratic and Republican participants; Democrats’ average likelihood of sharing the fake material was 35.47 and Republicans’ 38.76 average.

On average, unprimed participants’ average rating of real news stories’ veracity was 71.8. Democrats’ average rating was 76.47, while the average rating among Republicans was 66.14.

While the overall average for sharing real news items was higher than sharing fake material (43.52), Democrats were more likely to share real material (43.51) than Republicans (38.84).
5.3.2 Descriptive Statistics: Primed Participants

The prime video describing policies and practices for healthy media habits made a substantial difference in the average perception of fake news stories’ veracity. Those who saw the video averaged 25.81 while those who did not see the video averaged 45.37. Despite few differences in the two groups’ levels of political knowledge, the average among primed Democrats was much lower (20.83) than primed Republicans (33.98). This is summarized in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1: Effect of Prime on Perceived Fake News Veracity in Chapter 5 Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Primed Participants</th>
<th>Unprimed Participants</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democrats</td>
<td>20.83</td>
<td>39.57</td>
<td>33.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>33.98</td>
<td>52.42</td>
<td>47.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Participants</td>
<td>25.81</td>
<td>45.37</td>
<td>39.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked about the perceived accuracy of the real news articles, the average among primed respondents was 67.24 out of 100. Democrats were much less skeptical of the real items (72.91) than Republicans (72.91).

Overall, primed participants were much less likely to share the fake news articles, with an average of 15.78 out of 100 compared to unprimed participants, who averaged 36.95 out of 100. Primed Democratic participants’ average (13.91) was also lower than
primed Republicans’ average (18.84). This is summarized in Table 5.2.

**Table 5.2: Effect of Prime on Likelihood of Sharing Fake News in Chapter 5 Groups**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Primed Participants</th>
<th>Unprimed Participants</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democrats</td>
<td>13.91</td>
<td>35.47</td>
<td>28.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>18.84</td>
<td>38.76</td>
<td>33.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Participants</td>
<td>15.78</td>
<td>36.93</td>
<td>30.73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Primed participants’ average likelihood of sharing the real articles was 23.01 out of 100. Similar the unprimed portion of the sample, primed Democrats were more likely to share real articles (24.36) compared to primed Republicans (20.79).

### 5.3.3 Effect of Prime on Perceptions of Fake News Accuracy

Table 5.3 displays the effect of the prime without interactive effects. The *Social Media Use* coefficient is positive and significant, indicating that increased social media use leads to participants believing fake news articles to be true. Additionally, the *Prime* variable is significant and negative, indicating that participants who are educated about how to spot fake news are rate subsequent fake news articles as less believable.
Table 5.3: OLS Estimation: Effect of Prime on Perceptions of Fake News Accuracy (No Interactive Effects)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Std. Err.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge</td>
<td>-9.170**</td>
<td>0.746</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.237**</td>
<td>0.082</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Efficacy</td>
<td>2.740*</td>
<td>1.095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>11.905**</td>
<td>1.734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Use</td>
<td>2.997**</td>
<td>0.532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prime</td>
<td>-9.303**</td>
<td>1.951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>65.122**</td>
<td>5.374</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 772

R^2 0.397

F (6,765) 84.111

Significance levels: † : 10%  * : 5%  ** : 1%

To better understand the relationship between the educational prime and social media use, Table 5.4 displays an OLS regression estimate with an interaction of the Prime and Social Media Use variables.
Table 5.4: OLS Estimation: Effect of Prime on Perceptions of Fake News Accuracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Std. Err.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge</td>
<td>-9.035**</td>
<td>0.761</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.236**</td>
<td>0.083</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Efficacy</td>
<td>2.720*</td>
<td>1.113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>12.146**</td>
<td>1.763</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 Days of Social Media Use (No Prime) (Omitted Reference Group)</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Day of Social Media Use (No Prime)</td>
<td>1.380</td>
<td>4.917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Days of Social Media Use (No Prime)</td>
<td>4.042</td>
<td>4.806</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Days of Social Media Use (No Prime)</td>
<td>6.846</td>
<td>4.914</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Days of Social Media Use (No Prime)</td>
<td>6.692</td>
<td>4.964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Days of Social Media Use (No Prime)</td>
<td>18.154**</td>
<td>5.093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Days of Social Media Use (No Prime)</td>
<td>17.902**</td>
<td>5.484</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Days of Social Media Use (No Prime)</td>
<td>19.376**</td>
<td>7.238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prime</td>
<td>-7.036</td>
<td>6.676</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; 0 Days of Social Media Use (Omitted Reference Group)</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; 1 Day of Social Media Use</td>
<td>-0.143</td>
<td>7.727</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; 2 Days of Social Media Use</td>
<td>-1.361</td>
<td>7.845</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; 3 Days of Social Media Use</td>
<td>-5.844</td>
<td>8.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; 4 Days of Social Media Use</td>
<td>-1.298</td>
<td>8.859</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; 5 Days of Social Media Use</td>
<td>-12.466</td>
<td>9.627</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; 6 Days of Social Media Use</td>
<td>8.250</td>
<td>14.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; 7 Days of Social Media Use</td>
<td>2.594</td>
<td>12.599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>65.951**</td>
<td>6.419</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N: 772  
R²: 0.406  
F (19,752): 27.021

Significance levels: †: 10%  *: 5%  **: 1%
The first model in this chapter uses the average of the two fake news items as the outcome variable. Political knowledge, age, political efficacy, party identification, average social media use (for one week), prime and the interaction of social media use and prime were used as controls.

Table 5.4 shows that participants with higher political knowledge are less likely to believe fake news articles to be true. This supports theoretical work suggesting that individuals with higher political knowledge have more stable opinions and are less resistant to change based on new information (Zaller 1992).

Supporting the findings of other chapters in this dissertation and other empirical work, Republican participants are more likely to find fake news items believable (Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2017; Lazer et al. 2017).

Guess, Nyhan and Reifler (2017) found that older Americans were a demographic frequently exposed to fake news. However the results here show that older participants are less likely to find fake news believable. Aside from party identification, age had one of the strongest relationships with perceptions of fake news veracity in the estimation.

Another unexpected finding was the relationship between political efficacy and fake news. Because high political efficacy has been found to be positively correlated with political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993), it was theorized that a similar relationship would be found in the data examined here. However, a correlation of political efficacy and political knowledge found a negative, weak (-0.0039) relation-
ship between the two variables. While both are statistically significant in the OLS estimation, the items’ coefficients move in different directions. Those with higher political efficacy are more likely to believe fake news.

For unprimed participants, there is a clear relationship between social media use and how believable participants find the two fake news items to be. There is a positive, statistically significant relationship between using social media five or more days a week and believing fake news items to be true. This shows that not only is social media a gateway by which people encounter fake news, but heavy use appears to make individuals more susceptible to misinformation. Figure 5.1 illustrates this relationship; after four days of use, there is a marked increase in believing fake news for both primed and unprimed participants.

While not significant for every combination of the interaction, the prime appeared to have an effect on how true participants viewed the fake material. Regardless of how many days a week participants viewed fake information, all unprimed participants found the fake news to be more believable than their primed counterparts. This suggests that reforms such as educating the public about fake news and healthy media consumption habits can have an impact.
5.3.4 Effect of Prime on Likelihood of Sharing Fake News

The sharing model is similar to the perceived truth model; all of the covariates move in the same direction and many of the same interactive effects are significant. Again, unprimed participants with high social media use were more likely to share fake news. Like Figure 5.1, Figure 5.2 shows those higher social media users, especially
unprimed participants, are more likely to share fake material. This indicates that a steady stream of homogeneous information may lead to impulsive, affect-driven behavior that increases the likelihood of participants sharing questionable material.

\[\text{Figure 5.2: Effect of Prime on Perceptions of Fake News Accuracy}\]

A correlation of the average fake news veracity and fake news sharing variable shows a strong positive relationship of 0.75 among the MTurk participants. This relationship is much stronger compared to the lab participants in Chapters 3 and 4 \((r = 0.23)\). It's possible that this effect is due to age. Most participants analyzed
in this chapter are much older than the undergraduate students who were the lab participants. There were numerous times during the lab sessions where participants remarked that they never shared any political item or news story on social media. The data shows that the average likelihood of lab participants sharing fake material (11.2) is nearly one-third of the likelihood of MTurk participants sharing fake news (40.73).
Table 5.5: OLS Estimation: Effect of Prime on Likelihood of Sharing Fake News

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Std. Err.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge</td>
<td>-10.384***</td>
<td>0.772</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.210*</td>
<td>0.084</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Efficacy</td>
<td>6.706**</td>
<td>1.129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>2.425</td>
<td>1.790</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 Days of Social Media Use (No Prime) (Omitted Reference Group)</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Day of Social Media Use (No Prime)</td>
<td>-0.725</td>
<td>4.991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Days of Social Media Use (No Prime)</td>
<td>3.433</td>
<td>4.879</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Days of Social Media Use (No Prime)</td>
<td>12.071*</td>
<td>4.989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Days of Social Media Use (No Prime)</td>
<td>11.450*</td>
<td>5.040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Days of Social Media Use (No Prime)</td>
<td>21.784**</td>
<td>5.170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Days of Social Media Use (No Prime)</td>
<td>25.033**</td>
<td>5.567</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Days of Social Media Use (No Prime)</td>
<td>34.429**</td>
<td>7.348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prime</td>
<td>-10.154</td>
<td>6.778</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; 0 Days of Social Media Use (Omitted Reference Group)</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; 1 Day of Social Media Use</td>
<td>4.507</td>
<td>7.845</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; 2 Days of Social Media Use</td>
<td>2.515</td>
<td>7.964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; 3 Days of Social Media Use</td>
<td>-5.272</td>
<td>8.148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; 4 Days of Social Media Use</td>
<td>8.814</td>
<td>8.995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; 5 Days of Social Media Use</td>
<td>-6.790</td>
<td>9.774</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; 6 Days of Social Media Use</td>
<td>13.278</td>
<td>14.225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Prime &amp; 7 Days of Social Media Use</td>
<td>-12.371</td>
<td>12.790</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>50.650**</td>
<td>6.516</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N: 772  
R^2: 0.474  
F (19,752): 35.608

Significance levels: †: 10%  *: 5%  **: 1%
5.4 Discussion

The relationship between social media use and political knowledge is strong relative to many of the other covariates used in this analysis. Table 5.6 shows the effect of political knowledge on social media use when controlling for age. For each increase in political knowledge, there is a .37 drop in social media use. I believe this helps explain why heavy users of social media are more susceptible to believing and sharing fake news. This politically homogeneous information stream may be conditioning high-frequency users to be less critical of fabricated material.

Table 5.6: OLS Estimation: Effect of Political Knowledge on Social Media Use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Std. Err.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge</td>
<td>-0.365**</td>
<td>0.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.044**</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>6.017**</td>
<td>0.201</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>909</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F_{(2,906)}$</td>
<td>122.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significance levels: †: 10%  *: 5%  **: 1%
I believe this finding is the first empirical work using experimental methods to show how heavy social media use can condition individuals to believe fake news. This relationship persists even when controlling for party identification and political knowledge. This suggests that constantly reading agreeable information can alter the way individuals encode and process new information. I believe this lack of challenging information may cause individuals to use less deliberate, conscious (System II) processing. Instead, participants with heavy social media diets engage in quicker, affect-driven processing.

All data in this research are limited by self-reported items such like social media use. However, I believe the self-reports in Chapters 5 and 6 are more reliable than those collected in Chapters 3 and 4. The lab participants in Chapter 4, whose median age was 20, reported by using social media an average of 3.6 days of the week. While this is higher than the 2.9 days reported by MTurk participants, it’s difficult to accept considering that other research has found most college students spend an average of 38.6 minutes per day on Facebook (Roberts, Yaya and Manolis 2014). It is possible that lab participants’ self-reported numbers are depressed because because those sessions were administered in person with an authority figure moderating the discussion. It is also possible that respondents felt that passively browsing social media without posting or commenting does not count as use.

Finally, Chapters 3, 4 and 5 are limited by the small number of news stories used.
The number of items were limited to allow for discussion among lab participants.

Chapter 6 uses ten shorter news items to test how believable participants find fake news to be when it is presented with charged, partisan stories.
CHAPTER 6. HOW ECHO CHAMBERS INCREASE SUSCEPTIBILITY TO BELIEVING AND SHARING FAKE NEWS

So far, each chapter in this analysis has been limited by the fact that it only exposes participants to a small number of fake news stories. It doesn’t address the type of news environment that consumers of online information are exposed to via social media networks: successive news items displayed by an algorithm that match a users’ political outlook.

It has been suggested that fake news contributes to echo chambers (Lazer et al. 2017), but it’s also possible that echo chambers are part of the reason why fake news spreads online. Previous studies have simulated fake news exposure (Polage 2012; Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Pennycook, Cannon and Rand 2017), but have not accounted for the conditions under which most Americans come into contact with erroneous material on social networks such as Facebook and Twitter (Lazer et al. 2017; Fourney et al. 2017). In other words, scholars have not tested whether being a member of an echo chamber makes one more susceptible to sharing fake news articles or finding them more believing compared to individuals receiving a politically balanced news diet. This chapter aims to investigate that by simulating echo chambers via a survey experiment.
Specifically, I hypothesize that participants exposed to a series of politically agreeable news items (i.e., an echo chamber), will rate fake news items as more believable compared to participants in heterogeneous news streams.

6.1 Methodology

This chapter uses an updated list of fake news articles published by Buzzfeed News in 2018. Buzzfeed used the same web-scraping technology provided by Buzzsumo to identify which articles had received the most engagement online and was constructed by determining which news items had received the most likes, shares and comments across various social media networks (Silverman and Pham 2018). The 2018 list was much longer than the 2017 list and provided more options for fake news exposure. In order to determine which stories to use for fake news exposure, the list was read and political fake news stories were coded as being more agreeable to Republicans (e.g., California Governor Jerry Brown Releases 10,000 Pedophiles, Rapists From Prison) or Democrats (e.g., Robertson Blames School Shootings On Obama, Lesbians, Witches).

For the real news items used in this chapter, the same Buzzsumo service was used to find articles agreeable to the viewpoints of both Republicans and Democrats. In order to simulate the highly partisan nature of echo chambers, real items used in this
chapter were published on two political news sites; MSNBC.com and FoxNews.com. Replicating the methodology used by Buzzfeed, the articles used here were flagged by Buzzsumo for receiving the most likes, comments and shares over a similar period of time (2018-19) (see appendix for full text of news stories).

As in Chapters 4 and 5, participants were required to reside in an American state or territory, and had not taken a previous survey related to this project. Participants were randomly placed into one of eight conditions.

Participants recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk Service read ten stories that were either all real, all fake or a mix of half real and half fake. Some treatment conditions were made up of stories agreeable to the perspective of Democrats, some agreeable to Republicans, and some a mix of both. This is summarized in table 6.1.
**Table 6.1**: Chapter 6 Treatment Conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>News Agreeable To</th>
<th>Fake/Real</th>
<th>Prime</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>Real</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>Fake</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Democrats</td>
<td>Real</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Democrats</td>
<td>Fake</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>Mix</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Democrats</td>
<td>Mix</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Mix</td>
<td>Real</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Mix</td>
<td>Fake</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>Real</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>Fake</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Democrats</td>
<td>Real</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Democrats</td>
<td>Fake</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>Mix</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Democrats</td>
<td>Mix</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Mix</td>
<td>Real</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Mix</td>
<td>Fake</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants in conditions 1-4 and 9-11 were exposed to the ten real or fake articles selected to be agreeable to a Republican or Democratic perspective. However, in conditions 5 & 13 and 6 & 14 a method was needed to determine which real and fake articles were to be selected. Additionally, there needed to be a way to determine which Democratic and Republican news items to use for the mixed treatments of conditions 7 and 8.

To do this, a short pre-test was administered on Amazon MTurk from June 12, 2019 to June 13, 2019. 301 participants were paid $0.10 for a task that was approximately five minutes in length. After being asked about their party identification, Democratic/Democratic-leaning participants were assigned to one condition and Republican/Republican-leaning participants were assigned to another treatment condition. Once assigned, the 10 fake and 10 real news headlines used for both sets of news items used this chapter were displayed in a random order. The participants received the following prompt: *Out of the following news items, which do you find most important or interesting? Please spend at least two minutes reading and ranking the headlines from 1 to 20, with 1 being “extremely important or interesting” and 20 being “not important or interesting at all”. You can rearrange the order by dragging and dropping the headlines.*

Once all participants had completed the pre-test, the real and fake headlines were ranked from 1 to 10. Conditions 5 & 13 contained the top five most impor-
tant/interesting headlines for Republicans and Conditions 6 & 14 contained the five most important/interesting headlines for Democrats. Conditions 7 & 15 contained the top five most important/interesting real news items from both the Democratic and Republican set. Finally, Conditions 8 & 16 contained the five most important/interesting fake news items from both the Democratic and Republican set.

Half of the participants were still primed using a short video about fake news. This video was considerably shorter (approximately one minute) than the prime used in previous chapters’ (approximately seven minutes). The previous video’s primary focus was on state policy designed to add media literacy courses to public schools. That video featured parts of the shorter treatment video used here.

The shorter treatment video was produced by Common Sense Media, an independent nonprofit group founded in 2003 that is focused on educating parents about healthy media habits for children (Common Sense Media 2019). However, the shorter treatment video used in this chapter is not explicitly for children. It features tips for spotting fake material such as looking for grammatical errors or spotting bold claims with no sourcing.5

5Chapter 6 Treatment Video: https://youtu.be/g2AdkNH-kWA
6.2 Analysis

For this chapter, two dichotomous indicator variables were created; *Fake News Echo Chamber* and *Real News Echo Chamber*. All participants analyzed in this chapter were assigned a 0 or 1 depending on whether or not they were in a condition that exposed them to news items that were agreeable to their partisan beliefs.

For example, all Republican participants who were in Conditions 2 & 10 (all fake Republican news) or Conditions 5 & 13 (a mix of both real and fake Republican news) were assigned a 1 for *Fake News Echo Chamber*. Democratic participants in the same conditions were assigned a 0 for *Fake News Echo Chamber*. While not all items in Conditions 5 & 13 were fake, they were all agreeable to a Republican viewpoint, and still making up an echo chamber. Additionally, only the averages for the fake items were used when constructing the fake news believability average.

For *Real News Echo Chamber* indicator, Democratic participants in Condition 3 (all real Democratic news) or Condition 6 (a mix of both real and fake Democratic news) were assigned a 1. Republican participants in the same conditions were assigned a 0.

All participants in Condition 7 (mix of real Democratic and Republican news) and Condition 8 (mix of fake Democratic and Republican news) were assigned a 0 for both *Echo Chamber: Fake News* and *Echo Chamber: Real News* variables.
Two of the dependent variables used here are constructed from an average of participants’ responses to a question about the perceived veracity of a news item: 

*Would your best guess have been that this story was true, with 0 being “This story is not true” and 100 being “This story is true”?* The first dependent variable, *Total Fake Average*, is an average of all participants’ ratings of fake news items. The second, *Total Real Average*, is an average of all participants’ ratings of real news items.

Another two dependent variables, use a similar averaged scale constructed from responses to the question *Would your best guess have been that this story was true, with 0 being “This story is not true” and 100 being “This story is true”*? *Total Fake Share Average* is an average of all participants’ reported likelihood of sharing a fake news item. *Total Real Share Average* is an average of all participants’ reported likelihoods of sharing a real news item.

Other than the Echo Chamber variables, the independent variables used are similar to those used in previous chapters: average social media use, political knowledge, political efficacy, and a prime indicator variable. All models also included the dichotomous *Republican* party indicator and an interaction of the *Republican* and *Echo* variables.
6.2.1 Descriptive Statistics

2,791 Participants took the survey experiment on Amazon MTurk from June 16th to June 20th, 2019. The median length of time participants’ spent on the task was 12 minutes.

The median participant age was 34 and had a median yearly income between $40,000 and $50,000. 53.92% of the sample was female. 70.44% of participants identified as white, 12.04% were Black or African-American, 7.24% identified as Hispanic or Latino, 7.17% were Asian or Pacific Islander, and 1.04% were Native American.

Participants reported spending an average of 2.59 days per week on social media. Democratic participants spent a slightly higher amount of average time on social media (2.82 days) than Republican participants (2.63).

Participants were able to correctly answer an average of 3.97 out of 5 political knowledge questions. Democratic participants had a higher average of 4.05 compared to Republican participants’ 3.84.

When asked about their primary political affiliation, 41.31% of the sample identified as Democratic and 25.9% identified as Republican. 26.37% were political independents, followed by 4.91% which had no preference, and 1.5% who identified with an unspecified third party. Independents, those with no preference, and those who affiliated with a third party were asked a follow up question about whether their views
were closer to the Republican Party or Democratic Party. Of these, 73.88% said they felt closer to the Democratic Party and 26.12% felt closer to the Republican Party.

73.88% of the sample claimed to have voted in the 2016 Election. Among these participants, 37.54% cast a ballot for President Trump.

6.2.2 Effect of Echo Chambers on Perceived Accuracy of Fake News

Table 6.1 shows the OLS regression estimate of participants’ rating of all fake news items. Many of the results here are similar to the results found in previous chapters: participants who frequently use social media, those with high political efficacy and Republicans were more likely to rate fake news as true. Also similar to previous findings were that older participants and those with high political knowledge were less likely to find the fake news articles believable.

Participants who saw fake news articles in echo chambers supporting their partisan beliefs (i.e., all articles favored one party) were more likely to rate the misinformation as believable compared to opposing partisans reading the same material, or those reading a heterogeneous information stream of Democratic and Republican material (real or fake). This supports the hypothesis that individuals exposed to a series of politically agreeable news items (i.e., an echo chamber) will rate fake news items as more believable compared to participants in heterogeneous news streams.
Similar to the model in Table 6.1, the prime variable coefficient in 6.2 is also significant and negative. The prime video features tips for spotting fake material (looking for grammatical errors or spotting bold claims with no sourcing). This suggests that participants seeing the prime may believe that they were reading fake news and were more cautious of the material than unprimed portion of the sample.

Likewise, the coefficient on the political knowledge variable is negative and significant. This is somewhat surprising; those with higher political knowledge were less likely to believe the real news items used in this chapter. While all of the mastheads were removed, it’s important to note that unlike the items from previous chapters, the real news items used in the echo chambers were a series of articles taken from either MSNBC.com or FoxNews.com. The real news items from the previous chapters were copied from the New York Times. The Appendix has the full text of these stories, which show that the Times’ articles appear less partisan than the two cable networks’ items. Participants reported on in previous chapters may have felt more confident in the veracity of the real news items that they were exposed to because they read as more straightforward accounts of political events. It’s difficult to miss the partisan tinge in each of the real news items used in this chapter.

---

6Chapter 6 Treatment Video: https://youtu.be/g2AdkNH-kWA
Table 6.2: OLS Estimation: Effect of Echo Chamber on Perceptions of Fake News Accuracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Std. Err.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.139**</td>
<td>0.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Use</td>
<td>2.081**</td>
<td>0.333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prime</td>
<td>-1.901*</td>
<td>0.962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge</td>
<td>-4.317**</td>
<td>0.417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Efficacy</td>
<td>1.317*</td>
<td>0.574</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>10.751**</td>
<td>1.585</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Echo Chamber: Fake News</td>
<td>9.938**</td>
<td>1.264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Republican &amp; Fake News Echo Chamber</td>
<td>-8.943**</td>
<td>2.018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>50.532**</td>
<td>2.882</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 1756

R² 0.165

F (8,1747) 43.273

Significance levels: † : 10%  * : 5%  ** : 1%

Additionally, the interaction of the party identification variable and the fake news
echo chamber indicator is significant. Figure 6.1 illustrates this relationship. Republican participants who read a series of politically agreeable fake items were slightly more likely to rate fake news as believable compared to Republicans reading fake material in heterogeneous news streams. However, Democratic participants in echo chambers are substantially more likely to rate fake news as believable compared to Democrats in heterogeneous information streams. This suggests that “breaking up” homogeneous information streams on social networks may dampen individual’s susceptibility to fake material, but only for more progressive users.
6.2.3 Effect of Echo Chambers on Perceived Accuracy of Real News

Table 6.2 shows participants’ perceived accuracy of real news items. The party identification variable, along with the interaction of the party identification variable and the real news echo chamber indicator variable, are not statistically significant. However, the party coefficient move in the expected direction. Similar to results from
previous chapters, Republican participants appear less likely to believe real news compared to their Democratic peers.

The main effects of the echo chamber indicator variable were also significant and positive. This indicates that seeing a series of partisan real news items leads participants to believe they are more believable compared to participants placed in heterogeneous news streams.
Table 6.3: OLS Estimation: Effect of Echo Chamber on Perceived Accuracy of Real News

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Std. Err.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.039</td>
<td>0.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Use</td>
<td>1.515**</td>
<td>0.333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prime</td>
<td>-2.822**</td>
<td>0.969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge</td>
<td>-1.338**</td>
<td>0.421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Efficacy</td>
<td>2.427**</td>
<td>0.595</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>-1.785</td>
<td>1.606</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Echo Chamber: Real News</td>
<td>5.828**</td>
<td>1.263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Republican &amp; Real News Echo Chamber</td>
<td>1.286</td>
<td>2.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>50.582**</td>
<td>2.975</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|              |             |           |
| N             | 1730        |
| R²            | 0.061       |
| F (8,1721)    | 14.043      |

Significance levels: †: 10%   *: 5%   **: 1%
6.2.4 Effect of Echo Chambers on Likelihood of Sharing Fake News

Table 6.3 shows the relationship between echo chamber placement and sharing fake news. Older participants, those with higher political knowledge, and those who were primed were all less likely to share fabricated material.

Similar to the results from Chapter 5, Republicans, participants with higher average social media use and higher political efficacy were more likely to share fake material. The fake news echo chamber indicator variable is positive and approaches significance, signaling that being placed in a homogeneous information stream makes participants slightly more likely to share fake news.
Table 6.4: OLS Estimation: Effect of Echo Chamber on Likelihood of Sharing Fake News

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Std. Err.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.172**</td>
<td>0.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Use</td>
<td>4.071**</td>
<td>0.377</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prime</td>
<td>-0.268</td>
<td>1.090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge</td>
<td>-6.651**</td>
<td>0.473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Efficacy</td>
<td>5.643**</td>
<td>0.651</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>5.129**</td>
<td>1.796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fake News Echo Chamber</td>
<td>3.639*</td>
<td>1.432</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Republican &amp; Fake News Echo Chamber</td>
<td>-0.748</td>
<td>2.286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>26.517**</td>
<td>3.265</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 1756

R² 0.26

F (8,1747) 76.869

Significance levels: †: 10% *: 5% **: 1%
6.2.5 Effect of Echo Chambers on Likelihood of Sharing Real News

Those placed in echo chambers receiving a homogeneous information stream of real news were more likely to share the material they read. However, there were no statistical differences between Democratic and Republican participants. Unlike the fake news sharing model displayed in Table 6.3, age appears to have no statistically significant relationship to sharing real news.

In other regards, the model displayed in Table 6.4 is similar to results found in the fake news sharing model; participants with higher social media use, higher political efficacy and higher political knowledge were all less likely to share real news. Again, the relationship between sharing news and political knowledge may be a reflection of the partisan material used in this chapter.
Table 6.5: OLS Estimation: Effect of Echo Chamber on Likelihood of Sharing Real News

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Std. Err.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.023</td>
<td>0.051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Use</td>
<td>4.631**</td>
<td>0.398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prime</td>
<td>-4.476**</td>
<td>1.159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge</td>
<td>-5.505**</td>
<td>0.503</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Efficacy</td>
<td>7.126**</td>
<td>0.712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>2.436</td>
<td>1.922</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real News Echo Chamber</td>
<td>2.963*</td>
<td>1.510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction of Republican &amp; Real News Echo Chamber</td>
<td>0.209</td>
<td>2.441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>18.020**</td>
<td>3.559</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- N = 1730
- R² = 0.219
- F (8,1721) = 60.485

Significance levels: † : 10%  * : 5%  ** : 1%
6.3 Discussion

The findings in this chapter support the hypothesis that individuals placed in homogeneous information will rate fake news as more believable compared to those who read news from opposing political viewpoints. Scholars have suggested that one of the ways to combat misinformation is to break-up online echo chambers that feed users a personalized stream of political content (Lazer et al. 2018, 1096). While the results in this chapter suggest that this is possible, the effects appear among Democratic participants much more than Republicans.

This is not good news for reformers. Empirical research has shown that the vast majority of fake news tends to have a politically-conservative perspective (Silverman, Lytvynenko and Pham 2017; Silverman and Pham 2018; Lazer et al. 2017; Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2017). Lazer et al. (2017, 8) summarizes the issue: “...while any group can come to believe false information, misinformation is currently predominately a pathology of the right.”

When selecting the fake news articles to use for this chapter’s experiment, it was easy to find many articles with high social media engagement scores (made up of likes, comments and shares). However, I spent substantially more time searching the list for fake articles that appeared agreeable to a Democrat’s perspective. Additionally, all Democratic articles had much lower engagement scores compared to Republican
fake news (Silverman and Pham 2018).

This might help explain why it appears so difficult to reduce Republican participants’ beliefs in fake material compared to their Democratic peers. Other results in this and previous chapters show that Democratic participants are more likely to believe and share real news at higher rates than Republican participants. This may be due to the fact that conservative outlets continuously attack mainstream news (Benkler et al. 2017).
CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION

This research found that group dynamics, media education, social media use and echo chambers all play important roles in how individuals come to believe fake news. What do these results mean for future social science research? What are the implications for American democracy and other liberal systems? What, if any, reforms could be undertaken to reduce the impact of political misinformation? The results from this research suggest that “breaking up” echo chambers may help depress the prominence of fake news on social networking sites. By presenting a more heterogeneous information stream, social media platforms can promote more deliberate, critical (System II) thinking over more impulsive, affect-driven (System I) processing. Not only does this depress the effectiveness of fake news, but will likely facilitate less polarizing attitudes among readers. However, such reforms may be unrealistic in the face of intense financial incentives and a lack of government interest.

At the end of the day, untangling the web of confusion created by fake news may require some more familiar remedies: better civics education, more laws promoting media literacy, and a less polarized citizenry. Even with the hard work that this requires, the problems associated with fake news will not disappear overnight. It will require a multi-generational change in attitudes, education and political culture.
7.1 Key Findings

7.1.1 Group Homogeneity

Chapter 3 found that participants assigned to homogeneous discussion groups were more likely to rate false news items as true compared to those placed in the heterogeneous discussion groups. This supports the hypothesis that politically homogeneous social settings facilitate implicit, affect-driven thinking over more deliberate, self-aware processing. However, there were few differences for Republicans placed in homogeneous or heterogeneous groups.

7.1.2 The Limits of Education

Chapter 4 examined the effectiveness of priming discussion group members with video material about media literacy and how to spot fake news. The results suggest that education about fake news does make participants less likely to believe misinformation. This is confirmed by results from Chapters 5 and 6. However, this relationship appears most beneficial for individuals who already possess high levels of political knowledge. Their reactions to subsequent fake news exposure suggests that they are more capable of internalizing media literacy information and acting upon it.
7.1.3 Social Media Use

All data in this research show a similar relationship between believing fake news and social media use. Daily social media users appear the most likely to rate fake news as true compared to other participants who only check their accounts a few days a week. This is an important finding, considering that most fake news exposure occurs via social media (Lazer et al. 2017; Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2017; Fourney et al. 2017).

Chapter 5 found that even when controlling for party identification and political knowledge, this relationship is persistent and strong. It suggests that individuals who are fed a constant media diet of agreeable information tend to analyze information using quicker, affect-driven processing (System I) over more deliberate, cognitive thinking (System II). However, it’s important to note that no direct measures of processing style were collected in this research. Future research designs could implement these measures.

7.1.4 Echo Chambers

Results from Chapter 6 support the hypothesis that removing individuals from echo chambers does make them less susceptible to believing fake material. However, the effects of this removal are much larger for Democratic participants. While Repub-
licans removed from echo chambers were less likely to believe fake news, the practical implications of the smaller effect are substantial. Other empirical work has found that the vast majority of fake news tends to be consumed by conservative readers (Lazer et al. 2017). The original list of fake news articles from Buzzfeed showed that every Republican news item used in this research had substantially higher numbers of social media engagement (likes, shares and comments) than any of the Democratic news items.

In every chapter of this research, Republican participants were found to be more likely to believe fake news and more likely to share fake news compared to Democratic participants. For example, Chapter 3 found several Democratic participants that rated fake news items 0 out of 100, suggesting they felt very confident that the information was fabricated. This wasn’t the case for any of the Republican participants in the same sample. This may be due to the fact that mainstream news is continuously in the cross-hairs of conservative media (Benkler et al. 2017).

Taken together, these results suggest that modifying the algorithms used on social media platforms to “break-up” echo chambers will make a substantial difference, but may not be the panacea that reformers might hope it to be considering that Republican participants appear less influenced by the “break-up” than Democratic participants.
7.2 Limitations & Future Research

This study is limited by the fact that the news items participants were exposed to were plain text. Aside from the use of Georgia typeface (a font typically used by news websites), all news items did not have a masthead, advertisements, a comments section, share buttons, etc. This was done on purpose, as I feared that editing stories to make it look like they were from a particular platform might bias the results (see the Appendix for a screenshot of a news item as it appeared on Qualtrics).

Further work can be done to manipulate treatments so they appear to be from a specific platform like Facebook or Twitter. For example, one might have the prominent light-blue Facebook masthead at the top of a screenshot that participants would see along with comments, likes, and a share button. Future research may also consider interactive experiments instead of static text or manipulated images. Like a functioning social network, participants could receive more or less fake information as they scrolled though a program, similar to the “dynamic information board” pioneered by Redlawsk (2002). This could also be done in social settings where politically homogeneous or heterogeneous participants are free to like, comment or share among each another as they go.
7.3 Theoretical Implications

Some have made the argument that the intersection of fake news and social media has ushered society into a “post-truth” era (Martínez 2019). This highlights an ongoing challenge to democratic states that require accessible, factual information in order to function properly. Citizens cannot be expected to make rational decisions (e.g., voting, petitioning their representatives in government) if they are acting upon fabricated material.

The results of this research suggest that fake news does indeed proliferate in online echo chambers. It serves as additional evidence of how misinformation spread via social media present a substantial challenge to democratic systems of government. Habermas (2018) argues that a deliberation can foster a “decentered” society, where the political public sphere serves as a forum for the detection, identification and interpretation of problems affecting society as a whole. This democratic opinion can organize government around principles of discursive rationalization, where responses to community pressure address societal problems (Habermas 2018).

Fishkin (1991) argues that social networks have a substantial impact on how individuals come to develop a worldview and political outlook. He believes that the ideal social settings facilitate thoughtful, carefully deliberated views that could be exchanged. Like Habermas (2018), these exchanges lead to the constructed of reasoned
attitudes that individuals (and in turn society at large) could build upon. Many of these ideas are as old as the republic itself; in Federalist no. 71, Alexander Hamilton argues that “the deliberative sense of the community should govern” (Hamilton, Madison and Jay 2005). At its core, the democratic model is based on individuals making decisions based upon the information gathered from their peers. However, what is a democratic society to do if and when a substantial portion of the community is operating with views based on false information?

Habermas (2015) has also articulated that communication among people does not entail individuals independently asserting their own truth. The democratization of news via social media, and the spread of fake news by these platforms, suggests that this sort of communication promotes a citizenry basing decisions on misinformed, rather than reasoned deliberation. If policy makers, educators and corporate citizens desire to reassert the power of reasoned debate over misinformed homogeneous chatter, steps need to be taken to strengthen these communication systems of deliberation and democracy.

7.4 Implications for American Democracy

If fake news alters the policy preferences of voters, this creates the possibility that their elected representatives will misappropriate resources to issues that might not be
necessary. For example, one of the most influential fake news stories of 2017 was *NPR: 25 Million Votes for Clinton ‘Completely Fake’* (Silverman, Lytvynenko and Pham 2017). This can give citizens the impression that there is a serious problem with voter fraud in the United States, which is far from reality (Brennan Center for Justice 2017). President Trump, capitalizing on these sentiments, created and eventually shut down an investigative White House commission on the issue (Udani and Kimball 2017). However, the issue still resonates with Republicans, who are more likely to believe that there is voter fraud than Democrats or Independents (Wilson and Brewer 2013; Udani and Kimball 2017). At worst, fake news can alter the behavior of elites in crisis situations; impeding the response to a national emergency or even leading to armed conflict with another country (Benjamin and Simon 2019).

In the United States, fake news has been used to influence political outcomes, mostly among those with very conservative news diets (Nyhan 2019). There have been rare instances of fake political news leading to violence. Most famously, this involved a North Carolina man believing that prominent Democrats were involved in a sex trafficking operation involving children. After storming a Washington, D.C., pizza restaurant with an assault rifle in 2016, the man surrendered to police (Kang and Goldman 2016). In an interview from jail, the man admitted that he had taken action due to material he read in a fake news article (Goldman 2016).

This research found that Republicans are more likely to believe and share fake
news compared to their Democratic peers and are much less trusting of the news media. Republicans also believe the corporate social media landscape to be inexorably biased against their views. Whether or not these suspicions are justified, the news media should invest resources to help assuage conservatives (Benkler et al. 2017). News and social media organizations should consider adding former governors to their corporate boards. Instead of trying to mold themselves as non-partisan arbiters of current events, these media organizations may want to consider adding partisan voices to more diverse media ecosystem. News Media and social media companies could offer specific internships to politically-active members of College Democrats and Young Republicans. With more voices in the room, especially conservative voices, Republicans may be less tempted to view the media as a foreign threat, but rather just another part of civil society.

The private sector has had mixed results with self-regulation. Facebook, combined with its subsidiaries, Instagram and WhatsApp, continues to be the dominant force in the US social media landscape (Perrin and Anderson 2019). In the days after the 2016 election, Facebook’s initial attitude was to downplay reports that fake news shared on their platform had a meaningful influence on the election’s outcome (Larson 2016). However, approximately one year after the election, Facebook revised this conclusion and estimated that Russian-produced fake content reached 150 million Americans (Ackerman 2017), more than the entire 138 million US voting population
in 2016 (Penn State University Libraries 2018). US government intelligence reports have found Russian interference on social media involving fake accounts spreading propaganda continued during the 2018 midterm elections (Barnes 2018).

Recently, Facebook has attempted to police their network by forcing political organizations to verify their identity before uploading material (Isaac 2019). However, the algorithms used to enforce these new rules have proved less than ideal. Some legitimate news coverage of political events has been flagged and barred from posting (Brandom 2018). Facebook seems aware that this task may be too difficult to complete on their own, as CEO Mark Zuckerberg has invited Congressional regulation of political content: “deciding whether an ad is political isn’t always straightforward. Our systems would be more effective if regulation created common standards for verifying political actors.” (Zuckerberg 2019) As of this writing, Congress does not appear to have legislation ready to meet this task.

Recent Supreme Court rulings have made clear that it regards first amendment speech protections as sacrosanct (Liptak 2019). The Court has even ruled that there are no hate speech exceptions to the first amendment (Volokh 2017). Therefore, regulation of online information from the bench seems unlikely in the United States.

YouTube has also taken steps to ensure that viewers know more about news sources when their users watch news on their platform. For example, watching a clip uploaded by RT generates a small window below the video informing viewers
that the channel is “funded in whole or in part by the Russian government” (RT 2019), while watching a clip from PBS NewsHour displays a similar box under the video which reads “PBS is an American public broadcast service” (PBS NewsHour 2019). This is a small, but important step to strengthening media literacy; online media consumers should have some idea where their news is coming from.

In the end, corporations like Facebook and Twitter have no legal obligation to promote more robust, sincere discussion. Rather, these organizations are publicly traded companies with responsibilities to stockholders, not citizens. The algorithms designed to show users more agreeable material are the primary source of income for these corporations. Breaking up the online echo chambers that these companies have carefully designed would likely cause a major financial loss, so they are unlikely to do so willingly. Breaking up echo chambers may simply be an unrealistic goal for reformers.

However, there are ways for the government to take action on fake news that do not interfere with an individual’s first amendment right to share information (fake or otherwise). For example, police in the German town of Traunstein were recently concerned about a piece of fake news involving Muslim immigrants. Their solution was novel; going door-to-door in the community, informing residents that this news was fabricated, and asking individuals stop sharing it (Fisher and Taub 2019). The fact that this was done in person, by an authority figure, may be a way to cut
through the noise and remind citizens that their online actions have tangible, real-world consequences. With the proper allocation of resources and personnel, a similar model could be used in the United States when fake news spreads throughout a community.

Long-term investments in media literacy and civic education can ensure that future generations are more adept at sorting fake news from reliable material. While many states have resources dedicated to encouraging media literacy in public schools, some have pushed much further. Ohio, Florida, Massachusetts, Minnesota and Utah require that media literacy be integrated into public school education in some form (Media Literacy Now 2019). Others, such as California and Washington State, have laws that allow educators to use websites with examples of fake news to use in lesson plans and attend state-sponsored professional development sessions on media literacy (Media Literacy Now 2019). A number of other states, such as New Jersey, New York, and Texas, have introduced required media literacy courses in their legislatures (Media Literacy Now 2019). National policy makers should consider augmenting these state laws with additional resource. For example, Congress could allocate federal funds for university grants to evaluate the effectiveness of different state programs. The results could be used to develop national guidelines on the best ways to combat fake news in the classroom. On a personal level, individuals could determine to simply spend less time on social media networks, as this research has shown that heavy users are more
likely to believe fake news.

It is noteworthy that in an age of hyper-partisanship and polarization, so many red and blue states consider media literacy to be an important addition to public education. They may be responding to public pressure, as recent polling shows that half of Americans consider fake news to be a major problem (Mitchell et al. 2019). However, Chapter 4 revealed that there are limits to educating the public; the payoffs appear strongest for those who already possess a high degree of political knowledge. These results suggest that if states truly want to ensure that their youngest citizens are equipped with media literacy skills, they will need to couple those skills with civics education.

Multiple measures of civics knowledge paint a bleak picture. A 2016 survey from the Annenberg Public Policy Center found that only 26 percent of Americans can name all three branches of government, a substantial decline from previous years (Annenberg Public Policy Center 2016). Only 23 percent of US eighth-graders performed at or above the proficient level on the National Assessment of Educational Process (NAEP) civics exam (The Nation’s Report Card 2015). Additionally, the national AP US government exam score is 2.64 out of 5, which is fourth-lowest among the 45 AP exams offered (Shapiro and Brown 2018).
7.5 Implications for Other Liberal Democracies

Outside of the United States, the presence of robust public broadcasters in other liberal democracies suggests that the partisan echo chambers of social media can be penetrated by the less partisan, more objective BBC in the United Kingdom or CBC in Canada. In the US, partisan news consumers can put down their phones, turn on the television and continue to be exposed to a 24/7 stream of homogeneous material. While public broadcasters in this model due exist in the United States (e.g., PBS), their popularity is far behind the partisan cable heavyweights of MSNBC or Fox News (Flood 2018). The only broadcast news program that draws similar ratings is 60 Minutes on CBS (de Moraes 2019). However, the combined viewership of Fox News programs overshadows the viewership of 60 Minutes (Nielsen 2019).

The European Union have gone further than the US, implementing a system to alert authorities when Russian propaganda was spreading on social media networks. However, this system appear to be floundering (Apuzzo 2019). This may be due to two possibilities: first, the fact that the system is so new may mean that the Europeans need time to garner additional resources and knowledge in order to strengthen its effectiveness. Second, a system designed to regulate the flow online information may simply be to tall an order for a decentralized confederal union. Individual European member states may be the best suited for such tasks.
7.6 Final Thoughts

This research has three important implications. First, it adds to the literature showing that group dynamics should be a key consideration among media effects scholars. Being a member of a homogeneous discussion group makes participants more likely to rate fake news as believable relative to others placed in heterogeneous groups.

Second, this research shows that even when controlling for political knowledge, heavy social media use conditions individuals to believe fake news. While these communication tools have been heralded as applications of convenience and entertainment, they also cause side effects that should be investigated further.

Finally, individuals who are exposed to a constant stream of agreeable political information are more likely to believe fake news. This implies that when critical ideas do not pierce the echo chamber bubble, individuals are less likely to suspect misinformation when they see it.

It may be tempting to externalize the generation and dissemination of fake news to a foreign or state entity. To be sure, the Russian government actively participated in a disinformation campaign in 2016 designed to help President Trump and other Republicans get elected Jamieson (2018), and these efforts continued during the 2018 election (Barnes 2018). However, the affective partisan polarization be-
tween Democrats and Republicans makes Americans easy targets for this sort of exploitation. With less polarization and more trust in institutions, especially media organizations, Americans may be less willing to believe sensational, fake material. Americans’ reliance on social media as a source of political information also places some the onus on individuals. If more Americans were willing to pay for news, or learn about current events from another source, they wouldn’t be exposed to fake news in the first place.

There are no easy answers or quick fixes here. Combating misinformation, and the damaging effects fake news has on the politics of democracies will not be done overnight. While pressuring social media companies to be more transparent is a good start, making serious progress on the issue will likely require substantive, meaningful investments in education and rebuilding trust between citizens and the democratic institutions designed to serve them.
APPENDIX

A. Internal Review Board Exemption

The Washington State University Office of Research Assurances has found that this research (IRB # 17082) is exempt from the need for IRB review.

B. Researcher Script Recited Before Each Lab Session

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this experiment. I want to highlight a few things before we begin. First, I will be in the room to help guide the conversation and assist if you run into a technical problem. I will also be using an audio recorder to document the discussion. Any personally identifiable information (like your place of employment or address) will be removed from the transcription. Your name will be replaced with an alias when the audio is transcribed, so feel free to talk candidly.

You will be using your own personal electronic device to answer the questions on the survey. The survey is administered via Qualtrics and you can access it via your device’s web browser. You are more than welcome to use one of the battery packs I’ve supplied to charge your device; I’ve left a number of Apple and Android cables on the table.

You are free to leave the experiment at any time for any reason.
You should be able to use campus Wi-Fi to access the Internet. If you can’t access the Wi-Fi network or would rather use your own data, that is fine. You will only be reading text, so it shouldn’t use much data and will not take long to load each page.

After you answer some basic survey questions on your own, we will read four stories together. In a random order, I will ask each you to talk about the story for up to two minutes. You can share whatever attitude or opinion that comes to mind. You can also pass on discussion if you don’t have anything to say. After each person talks, we will have up to six minutes of unstructured discussion where you can share any additional thoughts or opinions. When the discussion has ended, you will answer a few questions about each story individually. We will repeat this process with different stories four times in total.

In order to make sure that we can finish the experiment in a reasonable amount of time, I ask that you disable or ignore pop-ups from other apps.

In a moment I will distribute a sheet of paper with a QR code and URL web address. If you have an iPhone or iPad, you can use your device’s Camera app to hover over the QR code and you will see a pop-up asking you to open the survey (you don’t have to actually take a photo of the code). If you are using an Android device or laptop, you can enter the tiny URL web address that is also on the paper. If you accidentally close your web browser, re-entering the web address or re-scanning the QR code should allow you to pick up where you left off.
The experiment should take one hour to complete, after which I will distribute your gift card as payment.

Are there any questions before we begin?

C. Chapter 3 Lab Recruitment Survey

We are conducting an on-campus experiment with politically interested students regarding their attitudes about the news and social media. Students will be paid with a $10 Amazon gift card for participating.

If you are interested in participating, please take a moment to answer some basic questions and enter your contact information. After this, someone will get in touch with you about a meeting time and date for the experiment. Payment for participation will be distributed in-person upon completion of the experiment.

The experiment will take approximately 45 minutes to complete. We will ask students to read a few short news stories, discuss the stories with a small group of other students and answer questions relating to personal characteristics such as age and gender. We will not collect any personally identifiable information such as address, place of employment, etc. Data will remain private and confidential.

There are a few reasons why you may not be eligible to participate in the experiment and receive compensation:
1. You do not agree to participate.

2. Your political beliefs are not (broadly speaking) associated with either the Democratic or Republican parties.

3. You are under 18 years old.


5. English may not be your first language.

6. You failed to answer a question that checked to see if you read and understood the instructions (an attention check).

Are you interested in participating?

Yes

No

Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, an independent, or what?

Democrat

Republican

Independent
Other party

(If participant selects “Independent” or “Other party”) Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican Party or to the Democratic Party?

Closer to Republican

Neither

Closer to Democratic

Are you at least 18 years old?

Yes

No

Do you reside in the United States (or a US territory)?

Yes

No

Finally, please enter your school email address below. Someone will contact you to set up a time and location for the experiment.

student@university.edu
Thank you! We will be in touch regarding the time and location of the experiment. You will receive your payment in person after completing the experiment.

D. Chapter 4 Lab Recruitment Survey

We are conducting an on-campus experiment with politically interested students regarding their attitudes about the news and social media.

If you are interested in participating, please take a moment to answer some basic questions and enter your contact information. After this, someone will get in touch with you about a meeting time and date for the experiment.

The experiment will take approximately 45 minutes to complete. We will ask students to read a few short news stories, discuss the stories with a small group of other students and answer questions relating to personal characteristics such as age and gender. We will not collect any personally identifiable information such as address, place of employment, etc. Data will remain private and confidential.

There are a few reasons why you may not be eligible to participate in the experiment and receive compensation:

1. You do not agree to participate.

2. You are under 18 years old.

Are you interested in participating?
Yes

No

Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, an independent, or what?

Democrat

Republican

Independent

Other party

(If participant selects “Independent” or “Other party”) Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican Party or to the Democratic Party?

Closer to Republican

Closer to Democratic

Are you at least 18 years old?

Yes

No

Do you reside in the United States (or a US territory)?
Yes

No

Finally, please enter your school email address below. Someone will contact you to set up a time and location for the experiment.

student@university.edu

E. News Items Used for Chapter 3 Laboratory Experiment, Chapter 4 Laboratory Experiment and Chapter 5 Survey Experiment

E.1 Real News Items

Real Story 1

*Former Trump Aides Charged as Prosecutors Reveal New Campaign Ties With Russia*

WASHINGTON — The special counsel, Robert S. Mueller III, announced charges on Monday against three advisers to President Trump’s campaign and laid out the most explicit evidence to date that his campaign was eager to coordinate with the Russian government to damage his rival, Hillary Clinton.

The former campaign chairman, Paul Manafort, surrendered to the F.B.I. and
pleaded not guilty to charges that he laundered millions of dollars through overseas shell companies — using the money to buy luxury cars, real estate, antique rugs and expensive clothes. Rick Gates, Mr. Manafort’s longtime associate as well as a campaign adviser, was also charged and turned himself in.

But information that could prove most politically damaging to Mr. Trump came an hour later, when Mr. Mueller announced that George Papadopoulos, a former foreign policy adviser to the Trump campaign, had pleaded guilty to lying to the F.B.I. and was cooperating with investigators. In court documents released on Monday, federal investigators said they suspected that Russian intelligence services had used intermediaries to contact Mr. Papadopoulos to gain influence with the campaign, offering “dirt” on Mrs. Clinton in April 2016 in the form of “thousands of emails.”

Mr. Papadopoulos secretly pleaded guilty weeks ago to lying to the F.B.I. about those contacts and has been cooperating with Mr. Mueller’s prosecutors for months.

Real Story 2

*Trump Says Transgender People Will Not Be Allowed in the Military*

WASHINGTON — President Trump abruptly announced a ban on transgender people serving in the military on Wednesday, blindsiding his defense secretary and Republican congressional leaders with a snap decision that reversed a year-old policy reviled by social conservatives.
Mr. Trump made the declaration on Twitter, saying that American forces could not afford the “tremendous medical costs and disruption” of transgender service members. He said he had consulted generals and military experts, but Jim Mattis, the defense secretary, was given only a day’s notice about the decision.

Mr. Trump elected to announce the ban in order to resolve a quietly brewing fight on Capitol Hill over whether taxpayer money should pay for gender transition and hormone therapy for transgender service members. The dispute had threatened to kill a $790 billion defense and security spending package scheduled for a vote this week.

But rather than addressing that narrow issue, Mr. Trump opted to upend the entire policy on transgender service members.

His decision was announced with such haste that the White House could not answer basic inquiries about how it would be carried out, including what would happen to openly transgender people on active duty. Of eight defense officials interviewed, none could say.

“That’s something that the Department of Defense and the White House will have to work together as implementation takes place and is done so lawfully,” Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the White House press secretary, said.
E..2 Fake News Items

Fake Story 1

Celebrity Call For ‘Total Hollywood Strike’ Until Trump Resigns

A group of liberal Hollywood celebrities are threatening a “massive, all-round Hollywood strike” unless Donald Trump resigns. Describing Hollywood as “the base of the entire modern American culture”, the group also claims to be speaking on behalf of “all of humanity.”

“It’s about time people understood that we’re the ones with the power and that the president is there to serve us, not the other way around”, a spokesperson for the group told The New York Times.

Spinzon reports: Rosie O’Donnell, Debra Messing, Ed Asner and Michael Shannon are among the dozens of artists, entertainers, and activists who have attached their names to an effort calling for a month-long protest to stop President-elect Donald Trump.

“No! In the Name of Humanity We Refuse to Accept a Fascist America!” reads a full-page ad placed in the New York Times on Wednesday by the group Refuse Racism. “Donald Trump, the President-elect, is assembling a regime of grave danger,” the ad says.

“Millions of people in the US and around the world are filled with deep anxiety,
fear and disgust. Our anguish is right and just. Our anger must now become massive resistance – before Donald Trump is inaugurated and has the full reins of power in his hands.”

Other Hollywood celebrities who have also joined the campaign, however, are calling for an all-out strike that would span the entire movie industry in the hopes that such a move would urge the President-elect to resign from his position as the newly elected President of the United States.

Fake Story 2

WikiLeaks: Clinton Bribed 6 Republicans To ‘Destroy Trump’

WikiLeaks has released information that shows Hillary Clinton campaign staffers bribing 6 Republicans to “destroy Trump”.

In an email from John Podesta to Huma Abedin, the pair discuss diverting Clinton campaign funds to various Republicans who were secretly on the Clinton payroll.

Conservativedailypost.com reports:

The email, sent in July of this year, describes how funds were being diverted from Clinton’s campaign to the Super PACS of Jeb Bush, Carly Fiorina, and John Kasich.

According to the email:

“JB, CF, and JK PACS will be noticeably silent for the rest of the campaign. Each will receive a significant allowance from advertising budget. HRC is in the loop
and has talked to all three personally. Eyes only."

Other emails that surfaced but do not refer to anything other than title have also surfaced that raised eyebrows. It seems at a glance that the Clinton Foundation, or as I am calling it, the Pantsuit Mafia, has bought off several key members of the Republican Party to push the Clinton agenda. Such as:

“He is on board, will retract the invitation to speak. Eyes only."

This email was dated days before Speaker of the House Paul Ryan withdrew the invitation to Donald Trump to speak at an event in Wisconsin. Even though we do not have the ‘smoking gun’ to say it was him, no other logical conclusion can be assumed.

F. News Items Used for Chapter 6 Survey Experiment

F.1 Real News Items

Real Democratic Story 1

_McConnell eyes cuts to Medicare, Social Security to address deficit_

Nearly a year ago, as the debate over Republican tax breaks for the wealthy was near its end, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) insisted that the tax cuts didn’t need to be paid for - because they’d pay for themselves.

“I not only don’t think it will increase the deficit, I think it will be beyond revenue
neutral,” McConnell said in December 2017. “In other words, I think it will produce more than enough to fill that gap.”

Whether the GOP leader actually believed his own rhetoric is an open question, but either way, we now know the Kentucky senator’s claim was spectacularly wrong. The Republican tax breaks have, as Democrats and those familiar with arithmetic predicted, sent the nation’s budget deficit soaring.

Take a wild guess what McConnell told Bloomberg News he wants to do about it.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell on Tuesday blamed rising federal deficits and debt on a bipartisan unwillingness to contain spending on Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security, and said he sees little chance of a major deficit reduction deal while Republicans control Congress and the White House.

Real Democratic Story 2

At the U.N., Trump finds the world literally laughing at him

“In less than two years,” Donald Trump said at the United Nations this morning, “my administration has accomplished more than almost any administration in the history of our country.” When I say some in the audience couldn’t contain their laughter, I’m being quite literal.

Other world leaders laughed Tuesday when President Donald Trump began his UN General Assembly address by saying his administration has accomplished more
than perhaps any in U.S. history.

Trump smiled wide and looked around the hall as the laughter continued.

“Didn’t expect that reaction, but that’s OK,” he said.

The underlying claim is, of course, plainly absurd. American history features a great many accomplished presidents, but Donald Trump isn’t one of them, at least not yet. He secured a package of regressive and unpopular tax breaks, but in terms of meaningful successes of historic significance, the Republican amateur is a merely a legend in his own mind.

Real Democratic Story 3

*Latest Trump lie discredited by several former US presidents*

On Friday afternoon, Donald Trump hosted a meandering White House press conference, largely focused on his proposed border wall, in which the president unveiled a new talking point: his presidential predecessors privately agree with him about the medieval vanity project.

“This should have been done by all of the presidents that preceded me and they all know it,” the Republican declared. “Some of them have told me that we should have done it.”

At a certain level, the argument has some appeal: Trump probably recognizes the skepticism surrounding his unpopular idea, but if he can convince people that other
presidents agree with him, it may help broaden the support.

The trouble, of course, was that Trump was brazenly lying, once again describing private conversations that only occurred in his imagination. Politico reported over the weekend:

Asked if Clinton told Trump that he should have built a border wall, Clinton spokesman Angel Urena said, “He did not. In fact, they’ve not talked since the inauguration.”

**Real Democratic Story 4**

*In disastrous press conference, Trump defended Putin, blasted Americans*

It would’ve been pretty easy for Donald Trump to get through today’s summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin without making things worse for himself. Following his behind-closed-doors talks, the American president could’ve kept things vague, made non-committal references to “common interests,” and expressed optimism about the road ahead.

The meeting still would’ve been controversial – there was no reason for Trump to reward Putin like this, especially in exchange for nothing – but the gathering in Helsinki didn’t have to be an abject disaster for the White House. But it was. After watching the post-talks press conference, it’s suddenly vastly easier to believe Donald
Trump has been compromised in some way by the foreign adversary that attacked the United States in order to put Trump in power.

At a press conference with Russian President Vladimir Putin on foreign soil, President Donald Trump attacked fellow Americans – Democrats, Special Counsel Robert Mueller and members of the news media – for damaging U.S.-Russia relations by pursuing questions about Moscow’s efforts to help him win the presidency in 2016.

Real Democratic Story 5

_Grieving mother after meeting Trump: ‘It was like talking to a toddler’_

Donald Trump briefly spoke to reporters before boarding Air Force One yesterday, and the president talked about traveling to Texas, where “we’re going to have a little fun today.”

It was an odd choice of words: Trump was scheduled to meet with family members who lost loved ones at the recent mass shooting in a Houston-area high school. “Fun” wasn’t really the point.

An Associated Press report added that the president’s visit could’ve gone better. Rhonda Hart, whose 14-year-old daughter, Kimberly Vaughan, was killed at the school, told The Associated Press that Trump repeatedly used the word ‘wacky’ to describe the shooter and the trench coat he wore. She said she told Trump, “Maybe
if everyone had access to mental health care, we wouldn’t be in the situation.”

Hart, an Army veteran, said she also suggested employing veterans as sentinels in schools. She said Trump responded, “And arm them?” She replied, “No,” but said Trump “kept mentioning” arming classroom teachers. “It was like talking to a toddler,” Hart said.

Real Democratic Story 6

*Three Kansas lawmakers abandon Republican Party, become Dems*

Elected officials don’t often switch parties, which is why it raised a few eyebrows last week when Kansas state Sen. Barbara Bollier announced she was giving up on the Republican Party and becoming a Democrat.

“Morally, the party is not going where my compass resides,” Bollier explained. “I’m looking forward to being in a party that represents the ideals that I do, including Medicaid expansion and funding our K-12 schools.”

What we didn’t realize at the time was that she’d soon have some company. The Topeka Capital-Journal reported this morning:

Kansas Sen. Dinah Sykes and Rep. Stephanie Clayton served notice Wednesday of a decision to politically re-brand themselves by leaving the Republican Party to represent a Johnson County district as a Democrat.

Sykes, a Lenexa resident elected to the Senate in 2016, said she was motivated
by the GOP’s approach on key issues and concerns about a party led by President Donald Trump.

**Real Democratic Story 7**

*Trump says his ‘gut’ is more reliable than everyone else’s ‘brains’*

The Washington Post yesterday asked Donald Trump why he’s “skeptical” of his own administration’s National Climate Assessment. “One of the problems that a lot of people like myself - we have very high levels of intelligence, but we’re not necessarily such believers,” the president said. “You look at our air and our water, and it’s right now at a record clean.”

This, of course, didn’t make any sense - I’m not at all sure what “a record clean” even means - though Trump couldn’t have cared less. In fact, in the same interview, the Republican offered a peek into his broader perspective. While complaining about the Federal Reserve raising interest rates, Trump added:

“I’m doing deals, and I’m not being accommodated by the Fed. I’m not happy with the Fed. They’re making a mistake because I have a gut, and my gut tells me more sometimes than anybody else’s brain can ever tell me.”

When looking for Trump quotes that help define who he is and how he operates, one could do worse than focusing on this gem.
Real Democratic Story 8

**Conservatives start suggesting that colluding with Russia isn’t so bad**

How do you know when the seriousness of the Russia scandal has intensified? When Donald Trump’s allies discover it’s time to move the goal posts again.

Take, for example, National Review’s Andrew McCarthy arguing on Fox News last week that there’s nothing necessarily wrong with the president’s political operation possibly having turned to a foreign adversary to help win an American election.

“Look, I don’t think that it’s bad if campaigns are turning to foreign governments for dirt. It’s not collusion, it’s not something that’s impeachable, it’s icky. But that’s what this is.”

A day later, The Federalist’s Mollie Hemingway wrote, “I don’t have a problem [with] getting dirt on election opponents from foreigners.” She added that relying on the Steele dossier is effectively the same thing.

Fox News’ Tucker Carlson quickly endorsed the line, telling his viewers, “Nobody is claiming that any information changed hands, though, even if it did, so what?”

Real Democratic Story 9

**Trump reportedly ‘afraid’ to visit troops in combat zone**

It was the Associated Press that first broached the topic with Donald Trump last
month, asking the president why he hadn’t yet visited a military base in a combat zone like in Iraq and Afghanistan. Trump replied that he’d do so eventually, though he didn’t see it as “overly necessary.”

He added in the same interview, “I’ve been very busy with everything that’s taking place here... I’m doing a lot of things. I’m doing a lot of things.”

The New York Times reported soon after on another possible explanation: “One reason he has not visited troops in war zones, according to his aides, is that he does not really want American troops there in the first place. To visit, they said, would validate missions he does not truly believe in.”

When Fox News’ Chris Wallace asked the president about this the other day, Trump replied, “I’ve had an unbelievably busy schedule, on top of which you have these phony witch hunts.”

Putting aside the fact that the president’s schedule really isn’t “unbelievably busy” - he’s had plenty of time for golf and excessive television watching - are we really supposed to believe Trump hasn’t traveled to a military base in a combat zone because of Special Counsel Robert Mueller and the investigation into the Russia scandal?

Real Democratic Story 10

*Asked about allegations against Trump, senator says, ‘I don’t care’*

It’s easy to lose sight of just how remarkable the revelations were on Friday after-
noon. Federal prosecutors explained in court filings that the sitting President of the United States directed his attorney to commit a felony to help him win an election. It’s not the sort of development Americans have traditionally been confronted with.

How would members of Congress respond to the realization that Donald Trump is currently seen by law enforcement as an unindicted co-conspirator? Well, it depends on whom you ask.

Some Republican senators are taking a cautious approach. Sen. Shelley Moore Capito (R-W.Va.), for example, said yesterday, “We’ll just have to wait and see where it lands.” Sen. Rob Portman (R-Ohio) added, “We’ve just got to see where it goes.”

And then there was Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), who spoke with CNN’s Manu Raju yesterday on Capitol Hill.

Asked if he had any concerns that Trump was implicated, Hatch told CNN: “The Democrats will do anything to hurt this president.” Informed it was alleged by federal prosecutors in New York, Hatch said: “OK, but I don’t care, all I can say is he’s doing a good job as president.”

Real Republican Story 1

Most illegal immigrants in US receive government benefits, costing taxpayers billions: experts

This week, the U.S. Supreme Court considers whether to count self-identified ille-
gal immigrants in the 2020 census. Cities worry adding the citizenship question could undercount 6.5 million people. Their argument, however, isn’t just about political power but billions of dollars in federal funds states expect.

The case underscores what experts say is a growing cost to taxpayers from the surge of Central American families and unaccompanied minors.

“We’re talking about billions of dollars in taxpayer benefits over the next few years,” said Dan Stein, director of the right-leaning think tank, Federation for American Immigration Reform. “The payout for the taxpayer is enormous and income to the Treasury is miniscule.”

A FAIR study in 2017 found illegal immigrants are a net consumer of taxpayer benefits worth more than $100 billion a year, not including the cost of enforcing the border.

Real Republican Story 2

*Dems to strike ‘so help you God’ from oath taken in front of key House committee, draft shows*

A key committee in the Democrat-controlled House of Representatives is moving to eliminate the God reference from the oath administered to witnesses testifying before the panel, as part of a new rules package expected to be approved this week, according to a draft obtained exclusively by Fox News.
The draft shows that the House Committee on Natural Resources would ask witnesses to recite only, “Do you solemnly swear or affirm, under penalty of law, that the testimony that you are about to give is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?”

The rules proposal places the words “so help you God” in red brackets, indicating they are slated to be cut. The words “under penalty of law” are in red text, indicating that Democrats propose to add that phrasing to the oath.

The draft rules also remove the phrase “his or her” throughout the document, changing those two pronouns to “their.” The rules additionally modify all references to the committee’s “Chairman” to instead refer only to the committee’s “Chair.”

Real Republican Story 3

_Dems block ‘born alive’ bill to provide medical care to infants who survive failed abortions_

Senate Democrats on Monday blocked a Republican bill that would have threatened prison time for doctors who don’t try saving the life of infants born alive during failed abortions, leading conservatives to wonder openly whether Democrats were embracing “infanticide” to appeal to left-wing voters.

All prominent Democratic 2020 presidential hopefuls in the Senate voted down the measure, including Bernie Sanders of Vermont, Kamala Harris of California, Cory
Booker of New Jersey, Kirsten Gillibrand of New York, Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota and Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts. The final vote was 53-44 to end Democratic delaying tactics – seven votes short of the 60 needed.

Three Democrats joined Republicans to support the bill – Joe Manchin of West Virginia, Bob Casey of Pennsylvania and Doug Jones of Alabama. Three Republicans did not vote, apparently because of scheduling issues and plane flight delays – including Kevin Cramer of North Dakota, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Tim Scott of South Carolina.

Real Republican Story 4

CNN to be sued for more than $250M over ‘vicious’ and ‘direct attacks’ on Covington Catholic student: lawyer

CNN is likely to be hit with a massive lawsuit worth more than $250 million over alleged “vicious” and “direct attacks” on Covington Catholic High School student Nick Sandmann, his lawyer has told Fox News.

Lawyer L. Lin Wood discussed his decision to sue CNN for its reporting and coverage of his client during an interview airing Sunday night on Fox News Channel’s “Life, Liberty & Levin.”

“CNN was probably more vicious in its direct attacks on Nicholas than The Washington Post. And CNN goes into millions of individuals’ homes,” Wood told Fox News
host and best-selling author Mark Levin.

CNN couldn’t resist the idea that here’s a guy with a young boy, that Make America Great Again cap on. So they go after him - Lin Wood, attorney

“They really went after Nicholas with the idea that he was part of a mob that was attacking the Black Hebrew Israelites, yelling racist slurs at the Black Hebrew Israelites. Totally false.”

Real Republican Story 5

_Migrants traveling to US sue Trump, government; claim violation of constitutional rights_

A dozen migrants traveling by foot from Honduras to the U.S. to seek asylum filed a class-action lawsuit Thursday against President Trump, the Department of Homeland Security and others, claiming a violation of their due process under the Fifth Amendment.

The Fifth Amendment states that, “no person... shall be compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself, nor be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law.”

A recent PBS report cited former Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, who ruled in 1993 case that “it is well established that the Fifth Amendment entitles aliens to due process of law in a deportation proceeding.”
Twelve Honduran nationals, including six children, are listed as plaintiffs in the lawsuit. The suit, which was filed Thursday in the U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., said it is widely known that Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador are “undergoing a well-documented human rights crisis.” The lawsuit also claims that the plaintiffs’ right to the Administrative Procedures Act and the Declaratory Judgement Act were being infringed upon.

**Real Republican Story 6**

*Report: US Therapists See Increase in Patients With ‘Trump Anxiety Disorder’*

Therapists say there’s been a rise in anxiety stemming from the country’s politics, and it is being called “Trump Anxiety Disorder.”

A report from CBC News in Canada says that since President Trump was elected, mental health professionals in the United States have seen an increase in patients whose stress has come from politics.

A prevalent “symptom” of the “disorder” is feeling as though the world is going to end.

Elisabeth LaMotte, founder of the D.C. Counseling and Psychotherapy Center in Washington, D.C., said that some of her patients feel “on edge” about Trump’s decisions.
“It’s very disorienting and constantly unsettling,” LaMotte said.

LaMotte told CBC News, too, that even those who support the president feel isolated within social spaces or their families.

According to an essay written by psychologist Jennifer Panning, the symptoms of “Trump Anxiety Disorder” include “feeling a loss of control and helplessness, and fretting about what’s happening in the country and spending excessive time on social media.”

Real Republican Story 7

*House Dems overwhelmingly reject motion to condemn illegal immigrant voting*

Nearly every House Democrat on Friday opposed a measure condemning voting in U.S. elections by illegal immigrants, as part of a sweeping election reform bill.

The GOP-backed measure would have added language to the “H.R. 1” election proposal stating that “allowing illegal immigrants the right to vote devalues the franchise and diminishes the voting power of United States citizens.”

Federal law already prohibits non-citizens from voting in elections for federal office. But the GOP motion referenced how San Francisco is allowing non-citizens, including illegal immigrants, to register to vote in school board elections.

The motion was voted down 228-197. All but six Democrats in the House voted
against it. Just one Republican opposed it.

Lauren Fine, a spokeswoman for House GOP Whip Steve Scalise, pointed out that an identical resolution was adopted by the House last September. But on Friday, 41 Democrats flipped to oppose the latest measure.

Real Republican Story 8

*CNN legal analyst Areva Martin accuses David Webb of ‘white privilege’ before learning he’s black*

It was a rough day for author and CNN legal analyst Areva Martin on Tuesday. Martin accused Sirius XM radio and Fox Nation host David Webb of “white privilege” during a segment on a radio program before he broke the news.

“Areva, I hate to break it to you, but you should’ve been better prepped. I’m black,” Webb said.

The embarrassing moment occurred during a discussion about experience being more important than race when determining whether or not someone is qualified for a particular job.

A dumbfounded Webb asked, “How do I have the privilege of white privilege?”

Martin responded, “David, by virtue of being a white male you have white privilege.”

The Fox Nation host then explained that he was actually black.
“I stand corrected,” Martin said.

Real Republican Story 9

ISIS wife from Alabama will not be admitted to the US, Pompeo says

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Wednesday that an Alabama woman who joined ISIS but now wants to return home with the 18-month-old son she had with her ISIS husband will not be admitted back into the United States, saying she is not a U.S. citizen.

“Ms. Hoda Muthana is not a U.S. citizen and will not be admitted into the United States,” Pompeo said in a statement. “She does not have any legal basis, no valid U.S. passport, no right to a passport, nor any visa to travel to the United States. We continue to strongly advise all U.S. citizens not to travel to Syria.”

Shortly afterward, President Trump said he ordered Pompeo not to admit Muthana.

“I have instructed Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and he fully agrees, not to allow Hoda Muthana back into the Country!” the president tweeted.

Muthana, 24, has pleaded with officials to let her back into the U.S. following her recent escape from ISIS and capture by Kurdish forces. She was born in 1994 in Hackensack, New Jersey.
Real Republican Story 10

Migrant group demands Trump either let them in or pay them each $50G to turn around: report

Two groups of Central American migrants marched to the U.S. Consulate in Tijuana on Tuesday with a list of demands, with one group delivering an ultimatum to the Trump administration: either let them in the U.S. or pay them $50,000 each to go home, a report said.

Among other demands were that deportations be halted and that asylum seekers be processed faster and in greater numbers, the San Diego Union-Tribune reported.

The first group of caravan members, which included about 100 migrants, arrived at the consulate around 11 a.m. Alfonso Guerreo Ulloa, an organizer from Honduras, said the $50,000 figure was chosen as a group.

“It may seem like a lot of money to you,” Ulloa told the paper. “But it is a small sum compared to everything the United States has stolen from Honduras.”

He said the money would allow the migrants to return home and start a small business.
F.2 Fake News Items

Fake Democratic Story 1

Evidence Emerges That Hawaii Eruptions Caused By Fracking

Scientific data has linked the surge in volcanic activity in Hawaii to increased fracking activity at Puna.

The data shows how the fracking may have been deliberately designed to create a geological process by which lava would drain from Kilauea’s summit into the East Rift Zone so as to create large new vents that would destabilize the geology, and trigger a major collapse in the Hilina Fault System.

Exopolitics.org reports: A video prepared by Pacific Tsunamic Warning Center clearly shows that the epicenter of earthquake activity centered in the lower Puna region is adjacent to the Puna Geothermal Venture.

The following map by the US Geological Service shows where the Puna Geothermal Venture (marked PGV) is in relation to the current volcanic eruption.

The scientific data clearly shows how the Puna Geothermal Venture (PGV) is at the epicenter of the volcanic eruption. Is this merely chance or by design?

Fake Democratic Story 2

Robertson Blames School Shootings On Obama, Lesbians, Witches
The school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High in Parkland, Fla. has
Christians pointing the finger at every other excuse apart from guns. Televangelist
Pat Robertson said that Americans had brought school shootings on themselves.

“The Obama presidency allowed foreign religions, witchcraft and lesbianism into
the White House,” said Robertson on “The 700 Club.”

“We turned our back on God and now we see evil like school shootings.”

Robertson’s views were shared by other Christian fundamentalists.

Far-right pastor Rick Joyner blamed school shootings on the lack of prayer in
school.

“When prayer was removed from our schools, I believe that was the beginning of
the gate of hell, many gates of hell, that are destroying our youth, our families,” said
Joyner. “That had provided a hedge of protection for our students . . . When prayer
was removed from school, we basically said, ‘God, we don’t want you in our schools.’
He said, ‘OK.’”

He also claimed the infamous Columbine school shooting had opened a “gateway
to hell.”

Fake Democratic Story 3

Black People Arrested in Church Van Because ‘They Looked Threat-
ening’
African American churchgoers in Jackson, Miss. are the latest group to suffer from America’s persistent racial profiling problem.

Police pulled over the church van as it was leaving a local restaurant. The officers later reported they had received a tip that a group of black people were laughing and singing and looked like “they were up to something.”

Delores Kane, a member of the group, said the incident was ridiculous.

“So black people can get arrested going to church?” she asked. “That’s probably the least threatening we can ever be. So now we add that to driving while black, sleeping while black and getting coffee while black.”

There have been several high-profile racial profiling incidents in the news recently. Apart from the incident where two black men were arresting for sitting in a Starbucks and for not ordering anything, a black student at Yale was also interrogated by cops for sleeping in the common area of her dorm.

Fake Democratic Story 4

**MAN SUES STATE OF ALABAMA OVER DOCUMENT FROM 1865 GIVING HIM RIGHT TO OWN “BLACK SLAVES”**

Hank Wyatt, 53, is suing the state of Alabama claiming the will of his great-great-grandfather, William Hugh Patton, has been illegally nullified by current state judges.
Hank Wyatt recently came into possession of a document dating from 1865 previously owned by his great-great-grandfather, William Hugh Patton, which claims he legally bought four “negro” prisoners from the state of Alabama.

The 153-year-old document signed by the Governor of Alabama at the time, Thomas H. Watts, boldly states that William Hugh Patton is given ownership over the aforementioned prisoners as well as to all of their descendants.

“I ain’t saying I want those people’s descendants to be my slaves. I just want a financial compensation, because legally, I own them,” Hank Wyatt told reporters.

Hank Wyatt’s attorney, Robert Lindsay, claims his client is entitled to a financial compensation since the document’s authenticity has been proven and complies with current federal laws.

Fake Democratic Story 5

Graham: Trump Befriends Prostitutes, Like Jesus

Even though yet another woman has come forward to say she slept with President Donald Trump, while he was married to his second wife Marla Maples, he still maintains support from so-called Values Voters.

Trump is facing lawsuits from porn star Stormy Daniels and former Playmate Karen McDougal. Now, former Playmate Barbara Moore has come forward to admit she had a sexual relationship with Trump in the 1990s.
“It was a passionate affair, he was a great lover and a gentleman,” said Moore in an interview with the Daily Mail. “But at the time I didn’t know he was with someone else, let alone engaged to Marla Maples and it was only recently I learned she was pregnant at the time.”

However, Trump’s sordid past doesn’t seem to bother his Evangelical Christian supporters.

Evangelist Franklin Graham defended Trump’s liaisons with sex workers. “Trump is like Jesus,” said Graham in Charisma magazine. “The Lord also befriended prostitutes. I think Trump was trying to save them.”

Fake Democratic Story 6

**Graham: California Fires Are Divine Punishment for Defying Trump, Gay Marriage**

As California is being ravaged by one of the worst fire seasons in recent years, preacher Franklin Graham suggested the Golden State may have brought it on itself.

“I prayed over the issue and the message I got is California is being punished by God for its disobedience,” said Graham in a Charisma magazine interview. “California was the first state to legalize gay marriage and it has also been extremely defiant towards President Trump, now look at the situation they’re in.”

Graham’s views were shared by Kevin Swanson, another fundamentalist preacher.
“In 2011, California became the first state to mandate homosexual indoctrination for K-8 students and then, in 2012, California became the first state to sign a ban on therapy that was attempting to convert homosexuals into non-homosexuals. And then, in 2017, the California state schools implemented the homosexual indoctrination program ... and that was the kickoff for the biggest fires that California has ever seen in its history,” said Swanson on “Generations” radio. “So God is burning down California in 2017 and 2018 after about 25 years of leading the pack to legitimize the sin of homosexuality in that state.”

Fake Democratic Story 7

_Palin Joins Trump in Bashing NATO, Asks ‘Where Were They in World War II?’_

President Donald Trump has been in Europe for two days and he’s already enraged America’s NATO allies, British Prime Minister Theresa May and half of the United Kingdom. He also called an interview he gave to the Sun fake news.

Trump has bashed NATO and threatened to walk away from the alliance. The clueless president also told a bold face lie, when he said that the United States pays for about 90 percent of NATO’s costs. (Actually, it’s about 23 percent.)

But Trump has his supporters in the United States including well-known American quarter-wit Sarah Palin.
In an interview with right-wing One America News Network (OANN,) Palin joined Trump in bashing NATO.

“America is spending too much money defending a bunch of elitist Europeans, who look down their noses at us,” said Palin. “What has NATO ever done for us? Where were they in World War II, when America defeated the Nazis.”

Palin fails to understand that NATO was created after World War II to deter potential Russian aggression in Western Europe.

Fake Democratic Story 8

**Harley-Davidson Workers Face Layoffs But Still Back Trump Because of ‘The Apprentice’**

President Donald Trump seems to have a cult-like hold over blue-collar workers in red states who supported him in 2016. Even as Trump’s disastrous trade policies begin to affect them, their support remains unshaken.

According to the Wall Street Journal, Trump’s trade war is affecting jobs at a Volvo plant in South Carolina.

“Volvo Cars also opened a new $1.1 billion plant near Charleston, S.C., last month to produce its S60 midsize sedan for North American markets,” said the WSJ.

“Half of the 4,000 jobs will build cars for export. That could be jeopardized if something were to restrict trade,” said Chief Executive Hakan Samuelsson.
Harley-Davidson, the iconic American motorcycle company, has announced that it plans to move some jobs overseas, in response to European Union tariffs, caused by Trump’s trade war. But Harley-Davidson workers still trust Trump, even though some of them may be losing their jobs.

“I think he’s going to bring jobs back,” said Dwight Meeks, a plant worker, according to the Business Standard News. “I saw him ordering people around on ‘The Apprentice,’ so I trust he knows what he’s doing.”

Fake Democratic Story 9

**National White Alliance Urges Boycott of ‘Black Panther,’ Claims Movie Could Spawn Militancy**

The National White Alliance, an alt-right group, has slammed the smash-hit movie “Black Panther.”

According to National White Alliance President Brian Blanc, the movie needs to be banned because it could spur black militancy and nationalism. Blanc also called for a boycott of “Black Panther,” which has currently grossed more than $900 million.

“The movie was awful it was full of anti-white messages,” said Blanc in a press release, “especially the character Killmonger, who wanted to use high-tech Wakandan weaponry against white people. The movie was so hateful, it could have been written by the Nation of Islam.”
Blanc isn’t the only person to make ridiculous comments about “Black Panther.”

Conservative commentator Ben Shapiro sarcastically proclaimed the movie was the best thing to happen since Civil Rights and the end of slavery.

**Fake Democratic Story 10**

*Carlson: White People Deserve Credit For Rap, Hollywood Suppressing White Artists*

It should clear by now that FOX News commentator Tucker Carlson is an open white nationalist.

In a guest appearance on neo-fascist network CRTV, Carlson claimed that whites should get credit for rap music.

“The blacks try to act like they created rap music. But white people deserve the credit, because it’s performed in English,” said Carlson. “Also, the first rap superstar was Vanilla Ice, a white person. But liberal Hollywood doesn’t want to talk about the contribution whites have made to rap music.”

Hip hop is an artform that grew out of New York, when black DJs, starting “rapping” over songs. It has been popularized by African Americans and spread across the world as the voice of underprivileged people. But don’t tell that to Carlson, who seems to think rap came out of coffee houses in the suburbs.

Carlson has been spouting white supremacist rhetoric on FOX News for quite a
while. Recently he tried to claim that diversity was not an asset to the United States.

Fake Republican Story 1

_California Governor Jerry Brown Releases 10,000 Pedophiles, Rapists From Prison_

Jerry Brown’s new policy has freed thousands of sex offenders from prison. Over 10,000 sex offenders including convicted pedophiles and rapists have been released onto the streets thanks to Governor Jerry Brown and the ruling of a Superior Court Judge in Sacramento who say crimes such as “raping a drugged or unconscious victim” or “intimately touching an unlawfully restrained person” are not violent crimes.

The Los Angeles Times reported that Sacramento Superior Court Judge Allen Sumner issued a preliminary order to California state prison officials which ordered them to rewrite their regulations stemming from Prop. 57.

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In a bid to reduce overcrowding in state prisons, California voters in 2016 approved a ballot measure known as Proposition 57 which allows for the early parole release of supposedly “non-violent offenders”.

The measure passed, in part, based on a statement from Democrat Gov. Jerry
Brown which promised that individuals convicted of non-violent sexual offenses would be excluded from consideration for early release, according to The Daily Caller.

**Fake Republican Story 2**

*Pedophilia Included As ‘Sexual Orientation’ On New LGBT Pride Flag*

Pedophiles are attempting to rebrand themselves as “MAPs” or “Minor Attracted Persons” in an effort to normalize pedophilia and gain acceptance in mainstream America by being included as part of the expanding LGBT+ community umbrella.

According to UrbanDictionary, the blanket term MAP includes infantophiles (infants), pedophiles (prepubescent children), hebephiles (pubescent children), and ephebophiles (post-pubescent children). Some MAPs also refer to themselves as NOMAPs or “Non-Offending Minor Attracted Persons”.

These pedophiles seek to be a part of the LGBT+ community, even going so far as to make a “Pride” flag for Gay Pride Month.

Daily Caller reports: The “MAP/NOMAP community” tries to pull at people’s heartstrings by claiming that pedophiles are misunderstood marginalized people, and that as long as their attraction to children is not acted upon - or in some cases when they get permission from the child - that they should not be villainized.
Fake Republican Story 3

‘Smallville’ star Allison Mack has confessed that she sold children to the Rothschilds and Clintons during her time in the child sex cult.

According to police, Allison Mack worked in a senior management position for the Hollywood pedophile cult NXIVM. As second-in-command, it was her job to lure children into the cult in order to sell them to elite Hollywood pedophiles and powerful politicians.

Thefreethoughtproject.com reports: “As alleged in the indictment, Allison Mack recruited women to join what was purported to be a female mentorship group that was, in fact, created and led by Keith Raniere. The victims were then exploited, both sexually and for their labor, to the defendants’ benefit,” U.S. Attorney Richard P. Donoghue said in a statement.

The majority of the funding, over $150 million, came from the trust funds of Seagram heiresses, Sara and Clare Bronfman.

The Bronfman family has very close ties to the Rothschild banking dynasty, with members of both families belonging to many of the same companies, including their joint financial firm, Bronfman & Rothschild.

Additionally, at least three high-ranking members of the organization, including Nancy Salzman and the Bronfman sisters, are members of Bill Clinton’s foundation, the Clinton Global Initiative, which requires an annual $15,000 membership fee.
Fake Republican Story 4

Puerto Rico Mayor Facing Fraud Charges Over Millions In Gov’t Funds

Miguel G. Ortiz-Vélez, a Democrat-alligned Puerto Rico mayor, is facing fraud charges relating to the conspiracy to steal millions in federal funds, just months after Puerto Rican politicians appeared on CNN and blamed President Trump for mishandling the Puerto Rico hurricane disaster response.

Update: This article, published on July 15 2018, originally alleged that San Juan mayor Carmen Yulin Cruz was the Puerto Rico mayor facing fraud charges over the conspiracy to steal millions in federal funds. This was incorrect.

According to a DOJ press release from July 5 of this year, it was the mayor of the municipality of Sabana Grande, Miguel G. Ortiz-Vélez, who had “been indicted and arrested for his participation in a conspiracy to steal federal funds involving fraudulently obtained contracts from the PR Department of Education.”

Despite the fact that the U.S. government sent emergency workers, supplies and huge amounts of money to the territory, its Democrat-allied politicians still openly criticized the president - and the left-leaning mainstream media happily spread the “blame Trump” narrative.
Fake Republican Story 5

*IG Report Says Bill Clinton Told Bare-Faced Lie To Nation About Tarmac Meeting*

Bill Clinton told a bare-faced lie to the whole nation when he said his tarmac meeting with then-Attorney General Loretta Lynch was an innocent affair during which they spoke about their grandchildren, according to Department of Justice inspector general Michael Horowitz’s report on the FBI’s Hillary Clinton email investigation.

The stunning revelation is buried on page 203 of the inspector general’s report and suggests the controversial June 2016 tarmac meeting between then-Attorney General Loretta Lynch and former President Bill Clinton was not spontaneous and innocent, but actually “coordinated” and illegal.

The inspector general’s revelation blows a hole in the narrative Lynch and Bill Clinton have carefully maintained for two years. Lynch claimed the “social” meeting was spontaneous and the two discussed grandchildren, however according to the report, she was deeply uncomfortable with the meeting and understood the serious consequences if the public ever found out.

Fake Republican Story 6

*Joe Biden Calls on Mexicans to Rise Up Against Donald Trump*
Calls Trump’s treatment of children ‘unconscionable’ and ‘abhorrent’

Former US Vice President Joe Biden has called on Mexicans and other Latino communities to rise up against President Trump.

Biden demanded an uprising whilst attending a fundraiser for Latino “resistance” groups, calling on supporters to reject the elected US President.

The ex-VP, who is currently topping the polls as a 2020 presidential candidate, released a strong-worded statement in response to the discovery of immigrant detention facilities in Texas last week.

Despite the fact that the migrant camps were established under the Obama Administration and only discovered during Trump’s term, Biden described the president’s treatment of children as “unconscionable” and “abhorrent.”

According to Breitbart, The Latino Victory Fund said the group “discussed the Latino resistance to Trump going into 2018... and 2020” at the Miami fundraiser in which reportedly “roughly two dozen Latino power brokers who would be key to a possible presidential bid” were scheduled to attend.

Fake Republican Story 7

**CALIFORNIA: PRO-CHOICE ACTIVIST PROUDLY BREAKS WORLD RECORD BY GETTING HER 27TH ABORTION**

A 34-year-old Pro-Choice activist has officially broken a world record after receiv-
ing her 27th abortion.

The historic operation was performed at the Sacramento Street Health Center and required Elena Travis, 34, to visit the abortion clinic three consecutive times because she was 24 weeks pregnant.

Elena Travis, 34, a medical school student who hopes to one day perform abortions herself, believes abortion is a right and hopes to inspire other women to have it practiced on them by showing others that it is a safe and healthy procedure.

“I feel great. I love the feeling of being pregnant, but I would never want to bring a newborn baby into this miserable world,” she told reporters.

Medical staff at the Sacramento Street Health Center required the abortion be performed in three consecutive operations due to the fact that Ms. Travis was 24 weeks pregnant at the time.

“If abortion is murder, then I’m a mass murderer,” she told reporters jokingly.

Fake Republican Story 8

*Obama Filmed At Bilderberg: ‘US Must Surrender To New World Order’*

Former Fake president Barack Obama has been caught on video at the shadowy Bilderberg Conference saying that “ordinary Americans” must “surrender to the New World Order” because they are “too small-minded to govern their own affairs.”
During his top-secret speech at the Bilderberg Conference held in Turin, Italy this week, Obama described the New World Order as an “international order we have worked for generations to build,” before concluding that “progress can only come when individuals surrender their rights to an all-powerful sovereign [the New World Order].”

This is Obama as most have never seen him before, speaking candidly before his elite globalist peers, completely unaware that his words may one day be disseminated to a wider audience of “ordinary Americans.”

The secretive annual Bilderberg Conference, attended by the world’s liberal elite, is always protected by anti-terror police, military and a no-fly zone. All media is strictly banned and reporting on what goes on inside the tightly controlled venue has proven impossible during the 64-year history of the world’s most elite secret society.

Fake Republican Story 9

**Fire Dept: Room Full Of Servers, Hard Drives Destroyed In Clinton House Fire**

A room full of servers and hard drives was destroyed in the Clinton house fire in Chappaqua, New York, on Wednesday, according to a Chappaqua Fire Department source, raising fears that incriminating evidence against the Clintons has been destroyed just days after a White House insider warned that Trump was preparing to
prosecute their crimes.

“I saw smashed up hard drives, melted memory cards and the charred remains of paper scattered all over the room and immediately knew the fire must have started there,” a Chappaqua Fire Department source told local news reporters, explaining that the house fire was “put out by Secret Service agents” before the Fire Department arrived.

“I immediately called it a code 10-41 and requested a Fire Marshall.”

Code 10-41 is firefighters’ code for a suspicious fire.

According to QAnon, the infamous White House insider, President Trump’s recent announcement that he is going after high profile child traffickers is directly linked to the Clinton house fire.

Fake Republican Story 10

Obama Announces Bid To Become UN Secretary General

Barack Obama has announced plans to become secretary general of the United Nations, allowing him to advance his globalist agenda on the world’s stage.

According to Al-Jarida, Obama has no intention to step away from the spotlight, much to the dismay of other world leaders such as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu:

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reportedly is planning payback for
President Obama’s dismissing Mr. Netanyahu’s objections to the Iran nuclear deal last year. Mr. Netanyahu is said to be rallying moderate Arabs to thwart Mr. Obama’s bid to become the Secretary-General of the United Nations after he leaves the White House next year.

Mr. Obama has already discussed the issue with Republican, Democratic and Jewish officials in the United States, according to Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Jarida.
G. Survey Screenshots

*California Governor Jerry Brown Releases 10,000 Pedophiles, Rapists From Prison*

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*Figure 0.1: Example of Fake News Item*
Next, we’d like you to watch a short video from YouTube (approximately 1 minute long). After the video is over you will be able to progress to the next page.

Please click the “play” icon on the video below to begin.

![Screenshot of Prime Treatment Video](image)

**Figure 0.2:** Screenshot of Prime Treatment Video
Figure 0.3: Screenshot of Scales for Assessing Article Truth and Sharing
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