

## Young Voters and Media Misisnformation

In the midst of a global pandemic, the world was glued to the only source of information they could access, the media. With fear and anger heightened, the American people wanted to know what was going to happen. What was sold as a two-week quarantine turned into over a year of isolation. People lost their jobs, family members passed, and people were calling for change. With nothing else to do during the pandemic the American people turned to media. The Nielsen company, a market research company, found that the United States consumed 215% more media than they did in 2019 (COVID-19). This increase in media did not make everyone feel safer. It did however make everyone feel more knowledgeable, but with that so-called knowledge came a lot of misinformation. And with an election coming up, the media would play a big role in how people would vote.

How media affects young voters is a complicated question. Truthfully it depends on each and every person. Their personal experiences, community, and other factors can affect their interest in voting. However, we cannot deny that the media played a major role in the 2020 Presidential election. A head-to-head competition between Donald Trump and Joe Biden brought separation and anger between political parties. The media did not help the divisiveness this election caused. This is not the first or the last time misinformation will have an effect on a political election, and voters will continue to be influenced, especially young voters.

According to Dictionary.com misinformation is defined as, “false information that is spread, regardless of intent to mislead” (Kelly). This false information is all around us and can be spread accidentally. With the evolution of technology, spreading this misinformation has become easier. Young voters are in the age of this new technology and experience misinformation every day. As a new election campaign starts to develop, the media begins to release numerous stories

about the candidates. Due to the rise of different media sources, there is a constant competition for the readers or viewers' interest. These bold headlines and dramatic stories often lead to misinformation. The process of spreading misinformation is similar to a game of telephone. Telephone is a game often played by children where they stand in a line and the last person whispers a sentence to the person in front of them. By the time it reaches the person in the front of the line it is a completely different sentence. This is what can happen when misinformation is spread. One person may tell their friend about an article they read or a headline they saw, and then that information will spread to someone else. Eventually a story can become something entirely different. This process of spreading misinformation can also be seen in campaign mudslinging. A candidate will try to release information to exploit their opponent, or a news source will make known a small piece of information in an effort to dramatize those facts and the story becomes blown out of proportion. A recent example of misinformation spreading through campaign mudslinging was news coverage of Joe Biden's son and the accusations that he has committed federal tax evasion (Managan). This led to headlines like, "The Biden Crime Family," stating Joe Biden was involved in his son's wrong doings (Nolan). This is an example of a big change the media made but even changing simple words can affect how someone perceives information, it's called the misinformation effect.

Renowned psychologist Elizabeth Loftus conducted a study on the "misinformation effect" during the 1970s. To gain a better understanding of how misinformation was spread, she set out to find out how questions asked after a traumatic event could change the witness' story of the event. Though this study is quite different than the media it has the same basic principle. Her study found that when presented with certain words, the stories and facts were different. For instance, when the subjects were presented with the question, "How fast were the cars going

when they smashed into each other?” The answers were quite different than when “hit” was used instead of “smashed.” These kinds of questions presented to a subject can alter what is presented in the news (Cherry). Loftus concluded that there are few explanations for this phenomenon. In some cases, it could be that the false information has altered facts or blurred the lines between truth and fiction, or that the misleading information is more recent, so it is what people remember easier (Cherry). As a result, people may begin to only remember the false information and then they will continue to spread those “facts” to other people. Young voters tend to be more prone to this misinformation effect because they are just beginning to develop their political opinions. They are new to the voting system and are free to make their own choices when playing a part in democracy. Their new political opinions could be heavily influenced by their peers. If their peers read an article, and then change a few critical words while telling their friend, that voter is going to view it differently than the original message of the article. It goes back to the game of telephone, and the misinformation effect takes hold. This effect is important to understand during a critical election like the 2020 presidential race. Young voters make up 17% of registered voters this percentage could really make or break an already divided election (Election).

Though misinformation in the media was extremely prevalent in 2020 this is not the first time we have seen misinformation affect a political election. Take the election of 1800 for example. This election had a similar theme to the presidential election of 2020. The country was discontent under their current president John Adams, and many were ready for change. In order for Thomas Jefferson to succeed against John Adams he would have to take New York. This rivalry in New York brought many horrendous headlines to the people. The University of Virginia’s Miller Center published an article on this topic, saying they attacked Jefferson as a

godless man. Newspapers at this time said that with Jefferson as president, "Murder, robbery, rape, adultery, and incest will be openly taught and practiced, the air will be rent with the cries of the distressed, the soil will be soaked with blood, and the nation black with crimes" (Onuf). But the media attacks didn't end with Jefferson. Adams was also attacked in the press calling him a fool. The Miller Center also gives us examples of this saying,

“His opponents also spread the story that Adams had planned to create an American dynasty by the marriage of one of his sons to a daughter of King George III. According to this unsubstantiated story, only the intervention of George Washington, dressed in his Revolutionary military uniform, and the threat by Washington to use his sword against his former vice president had stopped Adams's scheme” (Onuf)

These headlines had a direct influence on voters' choices, bringing Jefferson and another candidate Arron Burr to a tie with 73 votes each. (Onuf)

The election of 1828 between Andrew Jackson and John Quincy Adams is another example of how mudslinging led to misinformation that affected the outcome of the election. The press personally attacked each candidates, calling Andrew Jackson a murderer and violent, and calling out Adams for his foreign-born wife and claimed he procured women for the Czar of Russia (Hogan). Misinformation can be seen in nearly all of these elections. It is not a new phenomenon and is still prevalent in 21<sup>st</sup> century politics.

During the 2016 election between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump misinformation was running rampant. Hillary Clinton was facing attacks for her email scandal, and Donald Trump was facing attacks for his behavior with women. Throughout the campaign people were seeing many stories about these two candidates and each time the parties did not like it they claimed it

was “fake news.” The constant misinformation during this election and the followed fake news claims made it very difficult for voters to determine what was factual and what wasn’t. With the “fake news” headline during 2016 everyone knew media was going to play a major role during the 2020 election. As technology has evolved many new ways of consuming media are being seen. More and more young people are getting out to vote and it is important for us to understand how this new media and the misinformation that comes with it is influencing their decisions.

To find out how young voters were impacted in the 2020 election, you need a wide variety of qualitative data such as interviews and surveys. This information paired with quantitative data regarding the percentage of young voter turnout compared to previous elections would allow for a better understanding of how media affected the young voter turnout in the 2020 election.

My research started with a thorough review of background information on voter turnout and misinformation. I studied previous elections and their history with media, as well as misinformation and how it affects us. Many of the articles I found referenced other studies that had been conducted on similar topics. This allowed me to see how best to gain data. I also reviewed several articles and news stories concerning misinformation in the 2020 election.

In order to fully understand how media’s portrayal of hot button topics affects the turnout of young voters, you have to talk to young voters. As a result of the ongoing pandemic, I thought the best way to gather data from voters would be an online survey. Since the typical age range for young voters is 18-29, I had to find a group that allowed me to survey a wide range of young voters from different backgrounds and beliefs. The best place for this is a college campus.

Using my resources, I was able to email broadcast my survey to the Mellon Fellows Students which gave me a diverse range of opinions and viewpoints. The Mellon Fellows is an organization for John Tyler Community College and J. Sergeant Reynolds Community College students who are interested in transferring to Virginia Commonwealth University. The program allows participants the opportunity to gain early knowledge of the college process and gives them a chance to conduct research. The questions that I presented to the group allowed me to see how young voters felt they were impacted by the media during the 2020 elections.

The first few questions were general to see if they qualified for the research survey. I asked participants if they voted in the 2020 presidential election, what was their age and what their preferred form of media was. The next question that I asked was, “Do you feel you gain factual information from your choice of media?” This question allowed me to see how that particular surveyed person views misinformation. Do they notice that misinformation is everywhere, or do they feel they are getting only facts from the media they choose?

Then the questions went on to ask how they feel they were impacted by media during this election and did it influence their voting decision. As well as how they feel their peers were effected.

The main purpose of this survey was to see how people felt they were influenced by media and what issues they felt influenced their decision to vote. This survey not only gave me insight as to how young voters were personally feeling but allowed me to explore other topics that people felt influenced their voting decision.

Another important aspect of my research was interviewing a young voter as well as educators in the media field. The first interview I conducted was with a young voter Kameron

Sullivan. Ms. Sullivan is a 23 year old college graduate that received her bachelors of science from William and Mary University. She is currently enrolled in Louisiana State University's Physics PhD program.

Ms. Sullivan not only gave me insight into how she felt throughout this election and her opinions on misinformation, but she also discussed the science behind COVID-19. This helped when evaluating the misinformation surrounding the pandemic.

The next interview was with Professor Janell Marshall. Professor Marshall is a dedicated communications professor at John Tyler Community College, as well as a trusted advisor to Mass Communications students. She was able to provide her expertise on the history of media and how misinformation affected so many events during 2020.

The last interview was with Dr. Kimberly Matthews. Dr. Matthews is currently an educator at Virginia Commonwealth University in the VCU LEAD department. Her interview helped me gain a better understanding of the field of communications and how her students were affected during 2020.

I was able to gather most of my information regarding young voters during the 2020 presidential election from a survey. I emailed the survey to 116 college students and 39 people responded which is a 33% response rate. This is a good response rate for my survey, because according to surveymonkey.com, the program that was used to create the survey, the average response rate is between 20% to 30%.

The average age of the participants in the survey was 23 years old. This was much younger than the national median age of all registered voters, which is 50 years old (Gramlich). However, according to the PEW Research Center young voters are classified as ages 18-29, the

average age of respondents being 23 was right in the middle of the young voter demographic (Gramlich). When asked, what political party they associated with, 33% of people chose not to answer. Of the 67% remaining, 48.4% stated they were Democrats/ Left Leaning. The PEW center for Research found that 49% of all registered voters are Democrats or Left Leaning, so my sample for the democratic party is comparable to the national level (Gramlich). Only 10.3% stated that they were Republican/Right leaning, this is not comparable to the national level of 44% of all registered voters but The PEW Research Center states that Generation Z and Millennials, the two generations of the young voter demographic, are more left leaning than the older generations (Amy). The remaining 8.3% of people surveyed listed political leanings like socialist, anarchist, etc.

There are millions of news sources available to voters, so one of the questions from the survey focused on news sources. 20% of the respondents stated that they prefer news channels or television to gain their information. This number included news channels like *CNN*, *MSNBC*, etc. 7.69% of respondents prefer newspapers like the *New York Times*, *The Wallstreet Journal*, or the *Richmond Digest*. 53.85% of people surveyed used social media as their source of political information. This could be websites like Facebook, or Twitter which was a common social media source during the 2020 presidential election. 17.95% stated other. Only one person (out of all of the respondents) stated that they use a mix of sources in order to avoid media bias. After learning which news sources respondents were using, it is important to know how they feel about the information their source provides. 76.92% felt that they gain factual information from their preferred source of news, but 26.08% felt that their news source is not factual.

One of the most interesting findings from the survey were the varied responses from two very similar questions. The first question was “Did you feel the media influenced you during the

2020 presidential election?” For this question, 35.90% of young voters felt they were influenced, but 64.10% do not feel they were influenced. The next question was, “Do you feel that other people in your age group were influenced by the media during this presidential election?” 97.43% of people said yes, their peers were influenced by media, and only one person said no.

The reason for this large difference in how people felt they were affected versus their peers is a mass communications theory called the third-person Effect. The founder of this theory was W. Phillips Davison. He explains it as,

In its broadest formulation, this hypothesis predicts that people will tend to overestimate the influence that mass communications have on the attitudes and behavior of others.

More specifically, individuals who are members of an audience that is exposed to a persuasive communication (whether or not this communication is intended to be persuasive) will expect the communication to have a greater effect on others than on themselves. (Calvert)

The University of Florida’s College of Journalism and Communications wrote a detailed article on fake news and the Third Person Effect. They surveyed a group of people and asked them how they felt they were able to spot fake news. “Yet despite the fact that some 84% of those surveyed were either very or somewhat confident in their own ability to spot fake news, 64% of the same people say fabricated news stories cause a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events. This sense is shared widely across incomes, education levels, partisan affiliations and most other demographic characteristics” (Calvert) Voters either do not realize or do not want to admit how influenced they are by media. Yet in reality they are surrounded by misinformation that masks itself as real facts. Professor Marshall explained that people should

not feel bad about falling for misinformation, because the goal of fake news is to make everyone believe it (Marshall).

I presented this data to Professor Marshall, and she reinforced my thoughts on the third person effect and media influences by saying,

I think that we often underestimate how much the media influences us and that may be why your number was so high. We have a tendency to think that the ideas we hold are truly our own, but if each of us were honest, we would recognize that we are influenced by multiple sources. The 3rd person effect can have a profound influence on us as you stated. I think I mentioned in our meeting that we are more likely to believe information if it is shared by a friend rather than a credible source. This applies to misinformation as well. (Marshall)

This trust factor is evident from the survey results, personal experience, and interviews. Social media is a good example of how media misinformation exploits the trust factor. Everyone has friends that are sharing articles and information. They do not know if their friends have evaluated the credibility of those sources.

2020 was a year of much divisiveness, this discord is evident in events like The BLM movement, LGBTQ+ Rights, Storming of the Capitol, etc. I asked Professor Marshall how she felt the Third Person Effect related to these events and she reminded me of a point regarding personal experiences, “I also think it’s important to note that people who hold strong truths in regards to these very specific events, are often inspired by personal experience and whether it’s positive or negative or true or not, it’s difficult for us to look past our own personal experiences,” (Marshall). People often underestimate how much of an effect their personal lives can have on

their political opinion. Everyone lives in their own Echo chambers, or an environment where someone only encounters opinions or beliefs similar to their own (Digital). These Ecosystems make it hard for people to look past their own personal biases when making political decisions. This is especially true with young voters. For many young voters they are still learning their own political opinions without their familial influence. Young voters must acknowledge that they are also impacted by their upbringing, community, and media choices.

Young voters wanted to be involved in the 2020 election. This is evident in the numbers. Young voters' participation increased from 43% in the 2016 election to 55% in the 2020 election (Doorman). As young voters become more involved in the political process they become more susceptible to misinformation.

The survey also addressed the question of what topics influenced respondents' decisions to vote. The respondents listed many different subjects; the most common topic was Donald Trump's presidential term. Trump's greatest tool and greatest enemy was the media, specifically his Twitter account. He used it to gain many conservative followers who held opinions similar to his own. One example is when he tweeted, "Stock Market hits RECORD HIGH. Spend your money well -@realDonaldTrump." This gained him followers, because some people felt he was doing good for the country. But his social media communication also alienated many others, like when he tweeted negative things about immigration and the Black Liver Matters movement. He often attacked media throughout the 2016 and 2020 elections. During his first election "Fake News" was a common headline. I asked young voter Ms. Sullivan, how she viewed the fake news phenomenon, "It's an easy escape, there was so much false information during the 2020 election instead of explaining they would just say its fake news," (Sullivan). There are now more media outlets than ever before, and media misinformation has the opportunity to spread much

faster. With this influx of news and media, it is a lot harder to explain or vet every piece of misinformation that comes about. Politicians exploit those bold feelings and use misinformation against their opponents to gain supporters. If they do not like what is being said, then they will refer to it as fake news. This leads to a lot of mistrust from voters, and this was prevalent during Trump's time as president.

Overall, Donald Trump became a great motivator for young voters to get to the polls to vote against him. When Ms. Sullivan was asked how Trump motivated her to get out and vote she said, "As a trend young people tend to be more liberal minded and Trump was a great rallying device to get people to vote. I think years of having a celebrity president that did outrageous things on a daily basis excited young voters and fired them up for change." As a result of Trump's actions, he was often in the news. There was a new headline about him almost every day. This made it easy for young voters to rally against him and vote for the democratic party instead.

Dr. Matthews described how inclusionary politics is important for young voters "Young people really grew with Obama and his inclusionary spirit. And when 2016 came and someone polar opposite of Obama became president, a lot of the youth felt it was more exclusionary," (Matthews). During Obama's presidential term Americans witnessed his choice to expand the equal pay rights for women, the legalization of gay marriage, and more expansion of civil rights. This ignited many young voters' opinions on inclusion and equality. The opposite was true during Donald Trump's time as president. Young voters witnessed his choices against Trans students' rights and his negative stance on immigration. Trump's exclusionary politics encouraged many young voters to vote for someone who would bring back that inclusionary spirit.

The second most common topic that motivated young voters was the Black Lives Matter Civil Rights Movement. The horrific video of George Floyd's death grabbed the world's attention and heightened the debate over police brutality and inequality. In that moment it became evident to most people that action needed to be taken. Across the world protest for change was taking place, and some media outlets tended to cover these events as more disruptive than productive. The introduction section above talked about the misinformation effect and how one word can alter our depiction of an event. This was very common during the Black Lives Matter movement, a movement, "whose mission is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes" (About). The term riots, meaning an often-violent disturbance of the peace, was often used interchangeably for the word protest, which usually means an organized public demonstration against a particular topic (How). These words have very different connotations and can ignite very different feeling from the viewer. I asked Kimberly Matthews what misinformation she remembers from the protest, she said she saw "a lot about the protesters being inherently violent, but as we dug deeper we noticed it wasn't the protesters at all," (Matthews). These retractions were not broadcasted as dramatically as the initial reports of the protest/riots. An event that should have brought everyone together in support of human rights, instead brought divisiveness among the American people. And thus, created hate where there should've been respect. The misinformation that came from this event is a major cause of that hate, and really motivated young voters to take action against that misinformation.

The third reason that motivated young voters to go to the polls was the coronavirus pandemic. The world was impacted by a disease no one understood, and over time facts have changed and new information has been released which has led to a lot of discourse. I asked a

physics student how she felt about the release of information during the early days of COVID, she said, “It’s how science works, as new information comes to light the model changes.” A good example of this is Dr. Fauci and the masks. He originally did not believe that masks were necessary, but as the science evolved, he changed his mind. Unfortunately, this was viewed as “fake news” at first, before we understood the science behind it.

COVID-19 ignited fear and uncertainty and people hung onto every answer they could. As new evidence was discovered about the virus and its transmission, politicians used this fear and uncertainty to their advantage. Joe Biden used American’s frustration to fuel his campaign and motivate voters to get out and vote for change. During his Thanksgiving speech he said things like, "It's divided us, angered us, set us against one another. I know the country's grown weary of the fight, but we need to remember - we're at war with the virus, not one another." “We have to steel our spines, redouble our efforts and recommit ourselves to the fight” (Biden). This was broadcasted all over the country for a few days after the speech, in all forms of media. He gave young voters hope, a light at the end of the tunnel, that encouraged them to go vote for him. Coronavirus created the perfect opportunity for new political leaders to emerge and motivate voters to take action. The early media on Coronavirus really instilled that fear into everyone’s hearts, and as everyone grew weary of quarantine, the media coverage on it began to frustrate us, and as the election drew closer new leaders used that fear and frustration to encourage America.

These were not the only topics that brought voters out to the polls, but these were three very impactful events. I asked in my survey how the students feel the media has evolved over recent years. One respondent said,

In recent years, I think that access to stories has really changed the media landscape. I think that every network wants to be the first to push a story out via the airwaves, but

social media tends to beat them to it. I believe that this is a significant evolution in the media and has completely changed how reporters do their jobs, people get the information, and the amount of the story that people receive. If you are only seeing a headline run across your Facebook or Twitter feed and you are not actually clicking on it, how well versed on the topic are you?

Fast paced media has a big impact on factual information. News stories are likely to rush out a story without having all the facts vetted. One of the biggest downfalls of this process is that news companies are not likely to media blast a retraction. Professor Marshall and I had a great discussion on media credibility and the rise of misinformation. She taught me about how journalists used to be highly respected, “There wasn’t the idea that they could be lying to you.” But then eventually as time went on it turned into mistrust of journalist. In one of Professor Marshall’s classes, there is a discussion on *60 Minutes*. Students have to watch a video on how *60 minutes* was classified as “entertainment news,” and how it was the first news program to really make profits. News companies took a lot of tactics from *60 minutes*, and made their regular news programs more entertaining in order to make more profits. After hearing about this I wanted to find out as one of survey respondents noted, “has media evolved or devolved?” News is too closely tied with profit making, and in turn creates a space for fast paced, nonfactual media (Marshall).

What is the answer to all of the misinformation that surrounds everyone? The biggest is education. Dr. Matthews said, “The only way to combat misinformation is through information” (Matthews.) It is important to start teaching students at a young age how to evaluate different sources and think critically about each source. Critical thinking and media literacy need to be

major parts of the education curriculum. This will help students differentiate from fake news and legitimate news.

I asked young voter, Kameron Sullivan her stance on education reform. She stated critical thinking is something that should be taught more, “we need to teach people from a very young age that there are no simple answers in life and that for every decision you make you have to look at things critically. We tend to focus on fact memorization and not teaching students how to think critically,” (Sullivan). As technology evolves there are more opportunities for false information. If students can learn to critically evaluate sources for accuracy and meaning then there will be less spread of misinformation.

Young voters wanted to be involved in the 2020 election. This is evident in the numbers. Young voters' participation increased from 43% in the 2016 election to 55% in the 2020 election (Doorman). As young voters become more involved in the political process they become more susceptible to misinformation. Teaching students from a young age how to think critically and teaching them about credible sources makes them more prepared to tackle that misinformation.

Continued research is also an important step in the education process. Knowledge is power and the more we understand how misinformation affects us, the more we will be able to combat it. Researchers should look at how misinformation develops and how it influences our political and life decisions. As researchers gather more data they will need to disseminate that information in a way that can be broadcasted to the public. This way everyone has the knowledge to evaluate misinformation.

It is also the job of social media outlets and journalists to combat misinformation. Professor Marshall feels the relationship between the public and journalists will need to be

repaired but it is important that they continue to do their jobs (Marshall). There is no doubt that society needs journalists and news outlets. However, journalism needs to revert back to slow media instead of fast paced media. Gather all the facts and report honest statements to the public. Social media can assist in this by continuing to inform users of misinformation. Facebook users witnessed a sample of this during the 2020 presidential election results. Donald Trump had announced that he had won the election prior to vote counting being completed. Many articles on this were flagged on Facebook as being inaccurate. This is a key tool in the war against misinformation. More social media outlets should begin doing this as it gives people the opportunity to evaluate a source before sharing it.

Dr. Matthews explained another way to combat misinformation is to actively participate in the political system. She told me about how she saw students running for local office. This is such a great tool (Matthews). If the political leaders are not listening, then people must use the democracy to take action. In truth, misinformation is not going anywhere anytime soon. We have seen misinformation throughout the course of history, but it is more pronounced with how accessible it is. Through education, research, and action, society can limit the affect it has on our lives.

In conclusion, due to the pandemic and the increase in the consumption of media everyone is affected by misinformation. Young voters could be more susceptible due to their newfound democratic freedom but how they are affected depends on each and every person. The Third Person Effect makes it difficult for people to realize how their decisions are affected by misinformation in the media.

This is not a new phenomenon, and fake news has been around since the beginning of media and will continue to be a part of our everyday lives. There have been several elections

where misinformation has played a role, and the presidential election of 2020 gave us several research opportunities to see how the misinformation during historical moments can shape the outcome of an election.

But society can take action. People can continue to run for political office or continue to research and study misinformation. Though misinformation will never be nonexistent, we can continue to fight against its effects.

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