

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

While battling divisive political extremes, facts have become blurred along partisan lines and concepts of truth have been drowned in the muddy waters of misinformation. The development of new technology has provided a platform for diversity of thought; but in turn, it has forced many truth-seekers to sift through a thicket of thorns online to find facts. To best understand truth, we must explore the perceptions of reality through the lens of different publics, whether they are active, aware, latent or a nonpublic.

The advancement of media over the past century has connected cultures worldwide through telegraph, radio, television, computers, internet and now – the communicating ease of smartphones. The concept of publishing false news to sway public opinion is not a new issue. It was prominent with yellow journalism in the 1890s when two competing New York newspapers warped facts, used distorted ostentatious headlines, and wrote blatantly false stories in an effort to drum up more newspaper sales (Briggs & Burke, 2010). Throughout the 1900s, people looked to media - through TV, radio, newspapers and books – to find versions of truth. In the 2000s, computers became a common household accessory, making access to information easier and faster. Through social media online, the world became substantially smaller – allowing people from diverse cultures to connect with others outside the bounds of their physical communities and inner circle of thought.

Current Role of Media in Society

Traditionally, it's the duty of journalists to observe and report. In every sense, a journalist is responsible for verifying information so the public doesn't have to do the extra work to investigate it themselves. A code of ethics and practices set by the Society of Professional

Journalists (SPJ) implores all journalists to seek the truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently and be accountable and transparent.

Despite efforts of fact-checking information and sources, the evolution of online news coupled with a 24-hour competitive news cycle has fragmented the trust people have in media; and with social media, misinformation has the potential to spread to the masses faster than ever before. The introduction of Apple's iPhone in 2007 sparked a smartphone revolution, so that in 2018, over 2.5 billion people will own smartphones in the world (Statista, 2017). These devices permit people to connect and share their thoughts in an instant through social media sites on the Internet like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat.

The current Merriam-Webster definition of a journalist as “a writer who aims at a mass audience.” Now, anyone can proclaim to be a “journalist” by opening their own website, blog or microblog without the restraint of ethical regulations of journalistic standards. This creates a dilemma for publics who have been conditioned to readily believe news at face-value without carefully verifying that the information is authentic. Thus, the Internet is an enigmatic and unfettered podium for manipulation to run rampant for those with corrupt intentions – spreading information that is biased, sensationalized, partly true or completely false. Those who create this content have a target audience that believes them, because according to the theory of cognitive dissonance in social psychology, there is a tendency for people to believe information that already aligns with their current beliefs (Festinger, 1957).

Fake News Post-Trump

Attention to modern-day fake news began with the 2016 presidential election, with the then-candidate for U.S. President, Donald J. Trump. He uses the term “fake news” to show disdain of unfavorable news coverage, like this tweet in 2017: “Any negative polls are fake

news, just like the CNN, ABC, NBC polls in the election (Trump, 2017).” On October 25, 2017, President Trump admitted to FOX Business Network’s Lou Dobbs that he had pride in his ability to influence public perception, saying “If you look at it from the day I started running to now, I’m so proud that I have been able to convince people how fake it is—because it has taken a nosedive (Real Clear Politics).” This rhetoric feeds the idea that facts are negotiable.

There are individuals and organizations who make it a mission to spread false information online, such as Paul Horner, who has made his living by creating viral fake news stories on Facebook. He had 4.8 million people believing he was the elusive graffiti artist, Banksy (Dewey, 2014). He posted outright false stories, such as President Barack Obama invalidating the election results. This story went “viral,” receiving nearly 250,000 Facebook shares. Horner claims his fake news articles helped President Trump become elected, because people believed what he posted was true (Dewey, 2016):

Honestly, people are definitely dumber. They just keep passing stuff around. Nobody fact-checks anything anymore — I mean, that’s how Trump got elected. He just said whatever he wanted, and people believed everything, and when the things he said turned out not to be true, people didn’t care because they’d already accepted it. It’s real scary. I’ve never seen anything like it.

Fake news stories, like the ones created by Horner, were shared more often on Facebook than the “real” articles by credible news sources in the final three months of the U.S. presidential campaign (BUZZFEED, 2017). These fake news articles were also spread by a foreign influence, as so-called “troll farms” in Russia were tasked with swaying the public opinion online by commenting on blog posts or publishing content on social media (Kwong, 2017a). In the days leading up to the election, voters in swing states received more fake news than real news stories

online, and one Oxford study found that this misinformation helped Trump become president (Kwong, 2017b).

The spread with fake news online has become such a prominent issue in online media consumption, that Facebook has taken up the responsibility of creating algorithms to help its users understand what is real and has added features that help give context to news articles (Tran, 2017). This shows why now, more than ever, research is needed to understand how publics interpret news online.

Implications of Study

This study aims to understand how younger eligible voters within Generations Y & Z identify fake news. It draws upon the Situational Theory of Publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) and Situational Theory of Problem Solving (Kim & Grunig, 2011) to investigate (a) how likely young eligible voters are to seek news information and (b) what characteristics these young eligible voters employ to spot fake news and distinguish it from reality. This study also takes the conversation a step further, drawing upon media literacy theory, by discovering what the younger demographic perceives should be done to combat fake news in the future. The findings of this study have potential to be used by news producers and journalists to create more effective and credible messages that will better guide publics toward factual news information.

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

This study primarily focuses research within the Situational Theory of Publics (STP) and the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) to determine which publics are more likely to distinguish fake news from factual information and which publics are more likely to act upon it. It also draws upon new media literacy to better explain how publics interpret the media messages from news sources. Finally, it taps into the recent research being conducted on the topic of fake news, including new societal definitions.

The information provided through focus groups will help media, businesses, organizations, community leaders and elected officials better assist in presenting more factual information so eligible voters have the tools to make more informed decisions – particularly with hot-issue events, such as elections.

Identification of Publics Based on Situational Theories

The Situational Theory of Publics (STP), originally proposed by James Grunig, is a well-tested model in public relations scholarship that explains why publics¹ communicate and when they are mostly likely to do so (Aldoory & Sha, 2007). By distinguishing specific publics, it can help predict how groups will behave (Grunig, 1997). Studies have found that people “selectively invest their communicative and cognitive resources” on a certain situation only when they “perceive the effort to be necessary and relevant” (Kim & Grunig, 2011, p. 122). So instead of aiming a message at a “general” public, which has proven to fail, this theory assists the

¹ “Publics” refer to recipients of messages, audiences that are segmented into more homogenous subsets that make strategic communication more efficient. According to Blumer (1946), a public is a “group of people who are confronted by an issue, divided in their ideas of how to meet the issue and engage in discussion over the issue”; while, Dewey (1927) defines a public as a “group of people who face a similar determinant situation, recognize what is indeterminate in that situation, and organize to do something about the problem” (Grunig, 1979, p. 740). Grunig developed a more scientific understanding to narrow the general population into specific groups through situational theory of publics, which provides multiple options for identifying specific publics for both academic research and practice (Kim & Ni, 2010).

researcher to distinguish and categorize how publics are different from each other and tailor a message to effectively hit its target audience. It does this by focusing on the classification of publics based on their level of participation in information-seeking into these four categories: non-publics, latent publics, aware publics, and active publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 2005). *Non-publics* is categorized as publics who do not face a problem. *Latent publics* are faced with a problem, but do not perceive it to be problematic. *Aware publics* know about a problem, but unlike *active publics*, do nothing about it (Grunig, 1983; Grunig, 2005). Through these classifications, the theory helps “communicators predict which publics may become active publics and which publics require education and persuasion to induce (or reduce) information seeking” (Vardeman-Winter, Tindall & Jiang, 2013, p. 391).

One way of measuring the levels of perceptions is by using the variables of the situational theories (Kim, 2011; Kim & Grunig, 2011). Those four independent variables include problem recognition, constraint recognition, level of involvement and referent criterion (Grunig, 1997; Kim & Grunig, 2011; Sha, Tindall, & Sha, 2012; Vardeman-Winter et al., 2013). *Problem recognition* is the degree an individual is familiar with a problem and how much they realize how the problem may impact them. *Involvement recognition* is the extent individuals are considered to be involved in a problem. *Constraint recognition* refers to the barriers physically or psychologically that prevent them from solving a problem. *Referent criterion*, as an added variable through STOPS, pertains to the individual’s past and how it shapes what they consider to be a problem. Through these factors, STP/STOPS explains how and why publics become active in communication behaviors, such as information-seeking (Grunig, 2003) and information-attending (Kim & Grunig, 2011).

As such, STP provides the theoretical framework that can help explain the behavior of information-seeking and information-attending² publics in trusting extreme ideas in unverified media sources. Studies of STP have determined that if a problem has high personal relevance to a public, then that public will be more likely to be interested in the issue (Aldoory, 2001; Grunig, 1997; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). In regard to campaign messages, Slater et al. (2002) studied active publics while seeking to explain how publics respond to passive and active messages. They found that “the lack of association to problem recognition, involvement, and constraint recognition with the total number of responses underscores the importance of considering the target and valence of audience attention to campaign messages” (p. 200).

In the past, information-seeking publics were often dependent upon agenda-setting in media to provide the most important information and explain the issues to assist them in problem recognition; which in turn, can create an “issue” in society. The problem does not exist until it is recognized (Kim & Grunig, 2011, p. 128). In the past, journalist gatekeepers in traditional media could select causes and act like a megaphone to amplify the voices of activists. But now, social media has provided an outlet to get around the gatekeeper and blast individual ideas to the world. As mentioned in the introduction, anyone can be a “journalist.”

Both scholars and public relations practitioners are navigating this new realm of online communication and strategically applying STP and STOPS to continue to explain and predict the attitudes and behaviors of publics on the Internet. A survey conducted by Lim, Greenwood and Jiang (2015) found that problem recognition was the key to predicting information-seeking and information sharing online; and in social media, there is much more passive information

² Information-seeking and information-attending are two variables in information acquisition in STP/STOPS. Information-seeking publics actively scan the environment for information about a specific topic; while, information attending refers to publics are passive, processing information that is discovered without effort (Grunig, 1997; Kim & Grunig, 2011).

processing than active information searching and sharing. Now, public relations practitioners are tasked with crafting messages that reach the intended target without unintentionally alienating, activating, or enraging other publics. For example, when Pepsi created an ad featuring Kendall Jenner with the Black Lives Matter activist movement in March 2017, the intention was to sell its product by promoting a global message of unity. The message was poorly-received, and Pepsi was forced to pull its ad. The company released a statement reading: “We did not intend to make light of any serious issue” (Gajanan, 2017).

In order for public relations practitioners to effectively disperse factual information, the publics have to first be receptive to absorbing it. Since individuals have their own perceived realities of the truth, this task is essentially like maneuvering a mine field of buzz words to not alienate or offend a public. Research has found that those who already have polarized views of an issue (high problem recognition and high level of involvement) experience cognitive dissonance when seeking information. Those presented with ideas either will modify their existing belief or reject ideas that conflict with their beliefs (Aldoory, 2009). A person’s desire to find information that aligns with personal opinions has been found to drive a person to seek fake news information (either intentionally and unintentionally) that align closer to his/her beliefs (Feldman et al., 2015). This study found that hostile media perceptions (HMP)³ have behavioral consequences in climate activism. It promoted liberals to be more active while decreased activism in conservatives. Another study found that an individual’s perceptions of the media may also lead to showing which publics become active online, such as commenting on posts from media sites that they believe have biased news coverage (Chunga et al., 2015).

³ Hostile Media Perceptions (HMP) is the “partisan tendency to perceive neutral news coverage as one-sided and unfair” (Christen et al., 2002). It is often documented in active publics who have a stake in a controversial issue (Vallone et al., 1985; Perloff, 1989; Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994).

The evolution of the Internet has led to the segmenting of publics more than ever before as it drastically changes the way people receive information (Aldoory & Sha, 2007). This is largely caused by the advancement of technology and more Internet accessibility. Researchers have found that news media can increase problem recognition, risk judgements, information processing, and sometimes information seeking (Slater, 2007). However, there is clearly a gap in research, with very few studies conducted to explain how that information-seeking behavior applies to the sharing of “fake news” online. Further research with STP should better explain how active publics (as compared to non-active) contribute to spreading fake news content online and what they perceive should be done to stop misinformation from pervading the web. As many scholars predict, stopping misinformation within the segmented publics begins with media literacy.

Media Literacy Impact on Public Perceptions

Media literacy “involves gaining the skills and knowledge to read, interpret, and produce certain types of texts and artifacts and to gain the intellectual tools and capacities to fully participate in one’s culture and society (Kellner & Share, 2005, p. 369).” The majority of media scholarship conducted on the topic of fake news focuses on the audience’s knowledge and need for orientation when forming their beliefs on what is factual. The way in which the news media present stories (such as the way in which information is structured or framed) is perhaps one of the most influential causes of distorted views (Baran, 2001). Therefore; trust is a strong determinant of how news is perceived. However, many researchers believe that it is nearly impossible to have a wholly undistorted view of news events, as Oh et al. (2011) affirmed that “when there are contrasting views over issues... it is hard to expect journalists to cover the issues in a completely balanced way” (p. 1).

The Center for Media Literacy has developed five core concepts that it recommends into media literacy studies programs. First, all media messages are “constructed.” This notes how media is not a presentation of reality; rather, it’s a representation of society as it shapes and creates the window in which its audience views information. Second, media is constructed using its own codes and convention. Essentially, the audience sees class, gender, and race through the codes and stereotypes represented in media. The third core concept is audience decoding. It expresses how “different people experience the same media message differently (Kellner & Share, 2005, p. 375).” The fourth concept involves deconstructing the explicit and implicit representations of society within the media content and messages. Finally, to become media literate, an individual must understand the motivation behind the media. While some believe the role of all new media is to inform, not all news content is created equal and presented without a slant or bias.

Researchers have found that fact-checking matters in public perception. Gottfried, Hardy, Winneg and Jamieson (2013) studied fact-checking and how it impacted perceptions in the 2012 presidential campaign. It found that individuals who go to a fact-checking website “knew more about the candidates’ stands on issues and about background facts” in the election (p. 57) and “going to a fact-checking website correlated with an increase in the percentage of questions accurately answered (Gottfried et al., 2013, p. 57).” In another study by Fridkin, Kenney and Wintersieck (2015), the researchers explored how the development of fact-checking could influence the minds of voters during an election. The results of their experiment determined that “fact-checks influence people’s assessment of the accuracy, usefulness, and tone of negative campaign ads... and sophisticated citizens and citizens with low tolerance for negative campaigning are most responsive to fact-checks” (p. 127).

Research has also found a direct connection between media consumption online and political action. A research analysis by Ksiazek, Malthouse and Webster (2010) studied civic participation (action) and how it is influenced by media use and consumption (information processing), and it found that the two are positively correlated. Furthermore, it found that “the growth of new technologies and delivery systems enables dramatic changes in patterns of news consumption” (p. 552). So, while people have more places to find information than ever before, they also have more false news or non-news media competing for their attention. This directly can impact public attitudes toward a political campaign, as found by Kenski & Stroud (2006). Their study found that online access and exposure to information about the presidential campaign are significantly associated with political efficacy, knowledge, and participation.

Media literacy theory urges individuals to become more knowledgeable about the nature of consuming media in any form (Kellner & Share, 2005); and furthermore, studies have shown that those exposed to media literacy information were less likely to perceive a news story as biased (Vraga et al., 2009). Research from this study may strengthen former studies showing how lack of media literacy is a factor in the perceptions of fake news.

New Frontier of Fake News Research

As more discredited online sources create fake content, studies show that citizens in the U.S. are becoming more confused over what is true or false (Barthel, Mitchell and Holcomb, 2016). Studies from the Pew Research Center found that although people “sense these stories are spreading confusion, Americans express a fair amount of confidence in their own ability to detect fake news, with about four-in-ten (39%) feeling very confident that they can recognize news that is fabricated and another 45% feeling somewhat confident” (Barthel et al., 2016).

The term “fake news” has taken on new life since the 2016 U.S. presidential election; and hence, the definition has become abstract and broad – changing from person-to-person. A focus group study conducted by Nielsen and Graves (2017) resulted in the discovery of a spectrum of fake news. They found that the participants categorized fake news in one of five categories: *satire* (such as a parody or amusing non-news program), *poor journalism* (superficial, inaccurate or sensationalized news), *propaganda* (hyper-partisan content, lying politicians, extreme spin), *some advertising* (ads/pop-ups and sponsored content), and *false news* (without truth, complete fabrication or malicious hoaxes). The researchers found that people “see the difference between fake news and real news as one of degree” (p. 3).

Often, the difference between an individual believing a news source is the level of trust that individual places on the source. News consumers trust sources if they perceive that the source “has the ability and intention to deliver quality information (Fletcher & Park, 2017, p. 1283).” Trust is a product of behaviors that produce behaviors in publics – based on a “psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another (Rousseau et al. 1998, p. 395).” Often, it’s trust that makes a bigger difference than hard facts when audiences make decisions.

The confusion over fake and real news seems to affect adults and youth alike. A Stanford study in 2016 researched thousands of middle, junior high and high school students across several states (Stanford, 2016). It found that most students don’t know when news is fake. More than 30% of high school students thought a fake Fox News account was more trustworthy than the real one. Only 25% of high school students surveyed recognized and explained the significance of the blue checkmark on Twitter (showing the significance of a source being

authentic). For these reasons, it would be beneficial to conduct more research to better understand the factors at the core of this modern fake news phenomena.

Fake news appears to be merely metaphysical or abstract upon first acknowledgement, but it has been proven to have a real-life impact in current events. At the time of this paper being written, a federal investigation was underway into ties with Russia meddling in the 2016 presidential election. Federal prosecutors confirmed that there was a propaganda-generating group from Russia whose mission was to support Donald Trump and disparage Hillary Clinton by trolling social media (Strobel, Volz & Landay, 2018).

Recognizing the implications of fake news in politics since the 2016 presidential election, this study concentrates on fake news through the eyes of publics who are of eligible voting age; furthermore, the study highlights the younger generation of eligible voters because they are likely to have an increasing involvement in future elections. Political experts call this the “Millennial Effect” as young voters continue to have a more significant impact in shaping the identity of the country (Soergel, 2016). The research in this study is conducted similarly to the Nielson & Graves (2017) study as it explores how publics perceive fake news; however, it limits the sample to a younger demographic of students within the U.S., which is similar to the Stanford (2017) study. This study expands the results of these studies to focus on the ramifications of fake news on young eligible voters as they experience a more polarizing political climate.

Research Questions

This paper derives three research questions to study the perceptions of fake news in younger eligible voters within Generation Y and Generation Z by finding how they perceive fake news and what they perceive should be done about the issue. Also, through STP and STOPS,

these research questions seek better understand the factors that make publics behave differently when encountering fake news.

RQ1: How do eligible voters define and identify fake news?

RQ2: What do eligible voters perceive should be done to combat fake news?

RQ3: What are the characteristics (e.g., problem recognition, level of involvement, constraint recognition, referent criterion) of publics that seem to discern fake news well?

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

Overview of Method

The study employs a qualitative method in order to explore perspectives from targeted publics. It is used to tackle social phenomena, emphasizing the everyday behaviors from participants. The data obtained from this method is often descriptive in nature (Jankowski & Wester, 2001). It is effective in providing a pathway that allows for the variety of human thought. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research takes a more interpretive approach, providing stories rather than statistics. This gives the researcher a richer understanding of the meaning behind behavior as participants react to the new fake news phenomenon.

Generation Y (Millennials) and Generation Z (iGen) use social media more than any other age group, according to recent a Pew Research study (Greenwood et al., 2016). This research paper defines a millennial as an individual born between 1981 and 1999, based upon a study by Brosdahl & Carpenter (2011).

This research attempts to better understand audience perspectives on fake news, why certain millennial voters may trust information they receive and how they act upon it. To explain this, this research focuses on information-seeking publics as they make sense of this new phenomenon of fake news online by conducting three qualitative focus groups. This study asks participants to define the concept of fake news as they understand it. As such, it cannot represent the population as a whole, as each answer is a reflection of the individual respondent.

Focus groups are ideal to use to gather unique exploratory data on the topic of fake news because of the “group effect” it creates. This method can help the researcher “inductively figure out what the key issues, ideas and concerns of multiple participants at once (Hess-Biber, 2010, p. 149-150).” The participants bring in their own views and opinions and bounce ideas off each

other during the process. Because of this, the dynamic of the group changes (Carey, 1994; Hesse-Biber, 2010; Morgan, 1996; Morgan & Krueger, 1993). As Morgan (1996, p. 139) explains:

What makes the discussion in focus groups more than the sum of individual interviews is the fact that the participants both query each other and explain themselves to each other... Such interaction offers valuable data on the extent of consensus and diversity among participants.

Focus groups can provide rich qualitative data that can deduct *why* publics believe and behave as they do. Researchers recommend the ideal number of focus groups is three, and the ideal number of those inside each group should be 8-12 (Israel, 1992). While this is a strong method for this research, the drawback with conducting focus groups is that it may elevate some voices over others and create a spiral of silence among the unspoken opinions. Hence, the challenge is to “try to manage a group dynamic and later make sense of it, including the extent to which group members may have influenced each other and the resulting data (Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2010, p. 178).”

To prevent a spiral of silence from occurring within the group, it is the researcher’s responsibility to not contribute personal perspectives, to be sure all participants have an opportunity to join the conversation, and repeatedly ask for other points of view or opinions on the question being asked while reaffirming there are no correct or incorrect answers.

Sample

Saturation point. After receiving approval by the institutional review board (IRB), the researcher conducted three focus groups. After analyzing each group’s answers, it was discovered that many of the same themes were aligned. As such, the researcher concluded that

saturation had been reached and no further focus groups were necessary for clarification of the themes.

Demographics. The first and second focus groups each had seven participants. The third focus group had 13 participants. Table I provides a breakdown of the demographics for the collective focus groups of all 27 participants. This study confines the parameters of the study to participants to the younger millennial generation (24 – 28) and the older Generation Z (18 – 24), in accordance with Pew Research Studies (Fry, 2016). This selection will assist in media literacy evaluation during the study and create homogeneity within a group of diverse opinions.

To best reach this pool of participants, the study was conducted at the University of Houston with students of various cultural and ethnic backgrounds, news knowledge and political leanings. The university is not only located within one of the most diverse cities in America (Bernardo, 2017), it is also one of the top ten most-diverse universities in the U.S. (according to the National Center for Education Statistics and Diverse Issues in Higher Education, 2018).

Focus group participants were recruited through convenience sampling with an e-mail recruitment message to professors (Appendix A). Criteria for participation in this study includes (a) ability to read, speak, and understand English; (b) 18-28 years old; (c) attend the University of Houston. Here is the description of participants constructed upon of the demographics survey (Table I):

1. *Gender and Age.* Women outnumbered men with a ratio of 2:1. The majority of participants were among the older Generation Z (18-24), with only five of the 27 participants classified as being between 24 to 28 years of age.
2. *Education and Ethnicity.* All participants were within similar education levels – as undergraduate students between sophomore to senior status. The participants

- represented several ethnicities, including 8 Asian, 6 Hispanic, 5 African American, 4 Caucasian, 3 multi-ethnic, and 1 preferring not to disclose.
3. *Political Inclinations.* Political leanings were mostly liberal within the survey. An overwhelming majority selected that they were either moderately liberal (10), slightly liberal (6) or strongly liberal (5). Four participants marked that they were slightly conservative and two marked that they were moderately conservative. None were strongly conservative.
 4. *News Consumption.* Most participants (11) admitted they consume some sort of news information a few times a week. Nine said they consume news daily, while seven say they only get news occasionally. The most common way these participants received that news was through online (19) or social media sources (19). Friends and family was a close second (17). Nearly half (13) said they receive information through push alerts on their smartphones or computers. All television sources (cable, local and satire) received nine marks each. Seven said they receive news through radio, and only one (in the first focus group) marked that he received news through a newspaper source.
 5. *Measuring Cognitive Dissonance.* As an added measure, the demographic survey also asked the degree to which the participant would be likely to return to a news source in which he/she agreed with the information. On the scale, all of the participants marked that they, at the very least, “may likely” return to a news source that aligned with their opinions, with 5 very likely, 9 likely, 6 somewhat likely and 5 who may likely.

Data Collection Procedures

The focus groups took place in a closed room convenient for the participants within the Valenti School of Communication conference room offices. Participants were recruited through convenience in coordination with professors within the University of Houston. Many students were eligible for extra credit incentives to participation at the discretion of those professors. No monetary compensation was given for participation in this study. Food and soft drinks were provided to make the length of the focus group session endurable.

Before focus groups began, each participant was asked to sign a consent form (Appendix B) and complete a questionnaire to collect demographic data (Appendix C). Each focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes, with a continuous flow of conversation between participants. Participants were informed that the study is focused on media perceptions of voters.

The focus group sessions were recorded using a digital audio recorder clearly displayed in the center of the conference room table. The conversations were then transcribed by the researcher solely by listening to the recorder and omitting individual participant identification within the transcript. For the purposes of this study, the identities of the participants were kept confidential in accordance with the standard procedure rules of the IRB.

The questions asked during the session were open-ended to foster discussion among the participants. This is important in order to “allow the group dynamic to flow more smoothly, creating a unique narrative whose power does not lie in the conventional conceptions of generalizability (Hess-Biber, 2010, p. 169).” Questions addressed voters’ news-seeking behaviors and their attitudes toward news outlets and the information it provides, as listed in Appendix D. Follow-up questions were also naturally included within the period of conversation for clarification. The participants were asked about their experiences when coming across fake

news online and how they were able to flag it as such. This led to a better understanding the fake news phenomenon.

Data Analysis Procedures

After being transcribed and printed, the data were analyzed thematically, using the open coding method to provide answers to the three research questions. The author looked for the amount of problem recognition, level of involvement, constraint recognition and referent criterion that impacts how participants decide what media is “fake”. The researcher also evaluated similarities and differences in how eligible voters identify and define fake news, breaking down their perceptions into designated themes revealed through the open conversations. The author then thematically analyzed what participants perceive should be done in the future to combat the spread of fake news.

Validity

During the research period, the author was employed as a news producer at a local CBS TV news affiliate owned by the communications company Tegna (KHOU 11) in Houston, TX. The researcher also has over a decade of prior broadcast experience working in four other local news stations within Texas and Arkansas. This fact was not disclosed to participants in order to reduce the impact it would have on open discussion. While complete objectivity is relatively nonexistent with qualitative research, the author admits that this experience may have an impact on the perception of focus group answers. Even so, the author strived to keep personal perspectives on media and political matters from being expressed verbally or nonverbally within the context of the focus groups as to not impact the integrity of the findings.

Table I. Focus Group Demographics

<i>Number of Focus Groups</i>	3	<i>Total Focus Group Participants</i>	27
Gender		Age Range	
Men	9	Older Generation Z (18-24)	22
Women	18	Young Millennials (24-28)	5
Ethnicity		Political Leanings	
Asian	8	Strongly Conservative	0
Hispanic	6	Moderately Conservative	2
Black	5	Slightly Conservative	4
Caucasian	4	Slightly Liberal	6
Multi-Ethnic	3	Moderately Liberal	10
No Answer	1	Strongly Liberal	5
Types of News Consumed		Amount of News Knowledge	
Online	19	Not Knowledgeable	1
Social Media	19	Not Very Knowledgeable	2
Friends/Family	17	Little Knowledgeable	9
Push Alerts	13	Somewhat Knowledgeable	11
Cable TV	9	Knowledgeable	4
Local TV	9	Very Knowledgeable	0
TV Satire	9		
Radio	7		
Newspaper	1		
Amount of News Consumption		How Likely to Return to an Agreeable News Source	
Daily	9	Not at All Likely	0
Few Times a Week	11	Not Very Likely	0
Once or Twice a Month	0	May Likely	7
Occasionally	7	Somewhat Likely	6
Never	0	Likely	9
		Very Likely	5

CHAPTER 4: Findings

In general, this younger generation of voters had similar definitions of fake news and understood it from many perspectives. These were broken down into six distinct themes in this exploratory study. The first five were similar to that found in literature (Nielsen and Graves, 2017): *propaganda* (biased news or news with a political-leaning agenda), *advertising* (click-bait headlines created to generate more advertising dollars), *satire* (late night comedy), *bad journalism* (no credible sources cited, incorrect information), *complete falsehoods* (made-up news stories). The sixth theme was not found within former research of fake news, and it appears to be common particularly with this younger generation. The phrase “fake news” has evolved within their *cultural lexicon* – used as a phrase in daily conversation, a meme.

The participants acknowledged the importance of news and the consequences of fake news within their social circles, particularly online. While the participants in the study had a common understanding of how to identify fake news, they did not provide much insight on how to prevent it from spreading. Some of the students expressed a desire for more education into the dangers of fake news online. Others discussed changes to libel or slander laws. Overall, they appeared perplexed and ultimately pessimistic that the issue would ever be resolved in this new age of social media.

While the participants admitted they don't have a solution to preventing the spread of fake news, the majority admitted to not doing enough personally to stay informed or research information they encounter. The consensus was that this behavior leads to the likelihood of being misinformed and falling for fake news online. Due to this acknowledgement, this paper categorizes the participants based upon the segmentation of publics: active, aware, latent and non-publics. Through thematic analysis of the focus groups, this study found a correlation

between active/aware publics and their level of news-seeking behavior. The more an individual perceived the impact of an issue, the more suspicious they were of fake news on that issue.

Hence, the more suspicious they are of that issue, the more likely they are to correct others who share it. Due to this, it is deduced that the more active a public, the less likely they are to spread fake news.

RQ1: How do young voters define and identify fake news?

News vs. Non-News

Defining Real News. To better understand how the younger population perceives fake news, this research first looked at how they perceive news as a general term. Within the focus groups, participants defined news as information that is relevant, current, proximate, interesting, entertaining and important to the person receiving it. They also explained it as being information that was previously unknown. This aligns closely with definitions in literature, particularly found in Galtung and Ruge (1965, 64-65). They found that news is based on 12 factors: frequency (social trend over time), threshold (the greater impact), unambiguity (how clearly an event can be understood), meaningfulness (relevancy to audience), consonance (pre-image of event), unexpectedness (rare events), continuity (justifying prolonging attention to event), composition (positive initiatives or related features), reference to elite nations (involving high-profile nations), reference to elite people (details about celebrities), reference to persons (cultural personification) and reference to something negative (usually more current and unexpected).

Many participants expanded this view to include information that was important to the individual, like one woman from the third focus group who said “news could be, like something going on in your country, but it also could be like your favorite artists, like tour dates. It’s, like, news can be just anything that’s important for somebody.” This is similar to research from

Frankin (1997) who wrote ‘since the emergence of popular journalism... (there) has been a history of newspapers increasingly shift its editorial emphasis towards entertainment (p. 72).’

Also, a more recent study by Harcup and O’Neill (2001) compiled a more contemporary list of ten news definitions including: the power elite (powerful individuals), celebrity, entertainment, surprise, bad news (negative overtones or tragedy), good news (positive overtones), magnitude (significant impact), relevance (interest to audience), follow-ups (subjects already in the news) and agenda (fit for the news organizations’ own agenda).

Receiving News Nontraditionally. The younger generations prefer to receive their news online or from friends or family. Very few received their news from traditional sources, such as newspaper, radio or TV. The participants in the focus groups agreed many major cable networks were politically subjective, like Fox News leaning conservative and MSNBC leaning liberal. CNN was considered more moderate or liberal-leaning.

Many participants voiced that they preferred BuzzFeed for fact-checking as they perceived its news articles to be more unbiased. Among all three focus groups, participants enthusiastically agreed that they prefer to get their news from Apple News, which they believed was more impartial than other platforms. According to the information listed in the Apple News iPhone application, the program works by collecting and compiling all the stories the user is interested in reading, so they “no longer have to move from app to app to stay informed.” It says it uses “top news organizations” as well as lesser known “indie publications” based upon user preferences. It has an option for users to modify which topics they are more interested in reading. Essentially, the user has ultimate control over what they read.

Receiving News with Push Alerts. The smartphone has become a revolutionary platform for receiving information or seeking it out. To make the news gathering process even easier,

some people opt to receive “push alerts,” which are quick messages sent to the phone to update the user about new information in real-time. The alert comes to the user’s phone without any prompting or news-seeking initiative. However, the user must first be proactive to download apps and sign up for the alerts so they can ultimately be less active in seeking out the information. This feature works well for individuals who have high interest in news but low news-seeking behavior. Most news apps have this feature, and it offers a link to the news article when the user clicks on the notification.

More than half of participants admitted to signing up for these alerts during the pre-survey filled out before the focus group, and many addressed it during the focus group discussion. In the third group, one woman explained how she enabled the push notifications for CNN, saying she liked how “all those outlets kind of just pop up on your phone.” She said she will only click on something she views as interesting. A woman in the first group, who is a journalism major, said she likes it because it helps her stay knowledgeable about what is happening in the world around her without having to do much work. She says she received push alerts during the election, but turned it off when it became overwhelming:

I receive push alerts from time to time. I won’t watch every single one, but I do see alerts from CNN sometimes that will, you know, tell me what’s going on politically with what ‘Crazy’ [President Trump] is doing in the White House. But sometimes it’s just too much.

Receiving News on Social Media. For daily news, many participants turn to social media, using sites like Twitter, Facebook, Reddit and Snapchat. Most participants say they use Twitter to find news information first and get it “from the source” as news happens in real-time. Often, they utilize the “search” feature with the magnifying glass to show the “Twitter Moment” and

popular trending hashtags about hot topics. However, they admit they don't read past the headlines of a topic unless it is of particular interest to them, like one participant who said "I personally scroll on Twitter and if I see something, I'll read it. But I won't go really deep into it." Another participant in the second focus group said "I am always on my phone, like specifically Twitter, and so like I'm always seeing news about like Donald Trump or like abortion and LGBTQ."

Facebook was also acknowledged as a news source by many participants; but, throughout the conversation, many admitted to only checking their Facebook accounts a few times a month because, as one woman put it, Facebook "is for old people now." She mentioned she stopped using Facebook when she saw her grandmother had signed up for an account.

Reddit was also repeated as a popular social media site for many of the focus group participants. Reddit is a platform in which users can share social news and information, links, text posts and images. It uses an algorithm that depends on millions of its registered users to rate the web content, voting the posts up or down the discussion forums. One participant says this kind of public scrutiny helps weed out the fake news and verifies truthful sources, since the truthful information is likely to be "upvoted" to the top of the forums.

As a note to the evolving methods for finding news, participants mentioned Snapchat on many occasions as a social media source they used before the recent update, which they said has discouraged them from using the platform for news purposes. The recent update by Snapchat in January 2018 mixes its stories and direct message features, which spurred public outrage from its users. Celebrities dropped accounts, over 1.2 million people signed an online petition to change it back, the app rating fell to below 2% approval and the stock value of Snapchat, Inc. dropped by 7.2%, which meant a loss of \$1.3 billion in market value (Talbot, 2018).

How a person receives news may impact how he/she processes it. This was established by McLuhan (1967), who explained how the “medium is the message.” The paper reveals how perceptions can change based upon the medium in which the individual receives the information – like the difference between radio and newspapers and the influence of the media selection procedure. Research has also shown that social media, in particular, has a major impact on political activism as it keeps the issue prevalent and current. DeLuca, Lawson & Sun (2012) researched the impact of social media on the Occupy Wall Street movement and found it provided “new context for activism that do not exist in old media. Plus, social media foster an ethic of individual participation, thus creating a norm of perpetual participation (DeLuca, Lawson, & Sun, 2012, p. 483).” Since the generations studied in this paper are more likely to use social media than many generations before them, it may influence their perceptions of fake news as well.

Receiving News within Social Circles. The majority of focus group participants admitted to receiving their news from friends or family, especially as it is discussed naturally in conversation. Seventeen of the participants listed it as a primary source on the pre-survey. The thoughts of those people closest to them appeared to be the most influential in how they perceived news. One man in the third group said he received almost all of his news from a group chat he shares with his friends, who he says are older than him and follow news more closely than he does.

Using friends and family to discover news also impacts which news sources these participants received information. For example, one woman said “my dad watches CNN every morning. So, when I’m there, I watch it.” Another woman in the second focus group echoed that sentiment and explained how the perceptions of news and opinions evolve over the years:

When you're very young, you are extremely easily influenced by what your parents think is important. Your political views and your, like, social views are extremely influenced especially at a young age by your family members and by the people who you are surrounded by. So, news for me when I was younger used to be what influenced and what worried my parents. But now that I'm older, and I have my own opinions, I think that my financial situation and my social situation, my gender, my sexual orientation, things like that, really influence what news is for me.

Frequency of News. The majority of participants say they get some sort of news every single day, but mostly on topics that interest them, such as entertainment stories. Very few divulged that they like to receive political news, even though many admitted to having strong political leanings within the focus group setting.

Some participants said that news can be "too depressing," and they would rather avoid it if possible. One woman in the second focus group viewed news as more of a burden. She said "being ignorant is, like, great, because you don't have to worry about anything." She also later admitted that news was important, but it was not a priority for her at this point in her life. Also, while she may come across fake news, she said she doesn't care enough to act upon it – such as share it with others.

Seeking the Truth. When finding credible news, a repetitive theme expressed by focus group participants was a desire to find unbiased sources, although they admitted that they believed it would be impossible to find. This younger generation of voters had a consensus that the more traditional sources their parents use to get news are more credible and objective than the modern approaches to finding news.

One man in the first focus group said “I’d say for things like the New York Times or Washington Post or something, those are what I see as more credible.” One woman in the third focus group agreed with this, saying she believed traditional media is more accurate because it is targeted more toward the older generation, who she considered to be more knowledgeable about current events:

I feel like the new generation looks more at getting ratings and click bait and all that stuff, and all the older generation just do their job like to report the news and whatnot. So, I feel like I’m a little more lenient on, like, going to them because I feel like they’re actually just trying to do their job and get the news out.

These young voters mentioned how they had trouble finding an organization or a person they can trust, and they depend on reputation of the person or organization. Many participants said they put more weight on the individual journalist than the news organization itself. One woman said she grew up watching Anderson Cooper on CNN, saying “Anderson Cooper is news in my little opinion.”

Others agreed that name recognition and reputation was a key in deciding whether or not to trust news. When they find a source they trust, including politicians or celebrities, they follow that person on social media or watch their reports more closely. The person who is deemed trustworthy may also have something to do with the appearance of the newscaster. This was a theme presented in all three focus groups. For example, in the first focus group, one woman said her family intently follows one local newscaster because of her ethnicity:

I think, like, the people that they have and they hire on there has an impact on the credibility. They would have different races and ethnicities there. Because, my grandparents are very Hispanic, and they just love seeing like some really Hispanic lady

talk about something. They just love everything she says. Just because, I know it's just because she's Hispanic and they don't want to hear white women talk about something like this. Just... don't. They're not racist, because I'm white. It's just kind of funny that it does play into it.

This thought was also shared strongly by a woman in the third focus group, who said her trust in the news content centers around the person delivering the information – but not just because of their ethnicity. She said it's about “who they are and their background – their image when they present themselves or speak.”

When deciding whether to trust a source, they look at a number of issues, including: the use of sensational or inflammatory language, the insertion of personal commentary, or a hidden agenda. While some participants would say they would prefer no opinions in their news coverage, many agreed it was not possible to find a news source that was completely unbiased. One woman in the third focus group said she doesn't believe news could ever be completely factual because “human nature is human nature, and we all, whether we believe it or not, we all have our opinions when we're speaking on something. Our true feelings reflect whether it's intentional or not.” She said this could be both from what the journalist reports to the tone of voice it is delivered. This is why many of the students agreed it's best to check multiple “quality” sources.

Identifying Fake News

Defining Fake News. The younger generation defined fake news in the traditional sense – as something that is outright made-up and completely false. However, they do not separate that from other perceptions in fake news, including propaganda with showing bias, not disclosing credible sources, satire and using headlines for financial gain. All of this was seen as fake news,

but participants did not discern one theme of fake news as being more harmful than the others. In a sense, the majority of participants felt all news is fake – in one understanding of the phrase or another. One alternative definition of fake news discovered was more non-traditional and modern – used as a cultural phrase infiltrating social conversation: the use of fake news as a “meme”. This is a dismissive and amusing response to news that was not to their liking. Below are more comprehensive details of each of these six major themes found within the focus groups including: *propaganda*, *advertising*, *satire*, *bad journalism*, *complete falsehoods*, and as a *cultural lexicon*.

Fake News as Propaganda. “Trump” was the first word shouted out of the mouths of participants – regardless of their political leanings – when they were asked about the first thoughts of fake news. This happened in all three focus groups, but it was not necessarily said in a negative or spiteful light. Participants say President Trump is synonymous with phrase since he has used it so often on the campaign trail to spur public distrust of the media. Many agree this rhetoric has brought many media practices into question, and it has left many of them confused about the news gathering process. This led them to speculation about the media agenda, which they perceive as having shady practices. In each focus group, this impression was expressed through the common expression of distrust in media, with several people saying they don’t believe it’s possible for any media outlet to be completely truthful.

In this sense, they considered most media to be propaganda, which researchers explains as a message that is “intentionally manipulative and deceptive (Walton, 1997, p. 384).” One red flag that alerted participants to this kind of nature, was the language used during the news report. Here’s what one woman in the second focus group had to say about the rhetoric she finds in news:

I try to look for words that are not pointing fingers at other people. I want someone to give me what the person said. So, like, for example, Donald Trump said A, B, and C – verbatim what they said – not to tell me anything else. I don't want to know how that makes them feel because I'm here to see how that makes me feel.

The participants say they would often lose trust in a media source when the journalist used inflammatory and sensational language, and the words used are a big indicator of whether a news source is dependable. The consensus was that media that uses this language has an agenda that is not in the public interest. One man in the third focus group talked about this being a reason for distrusting Fox News, saying:

I kind of don't trust them after the past year because it seems that Sean Hannity kept denying and denying something and then it turned out to be true. And then, he kind of retracted his statement but also didn't at the same time. So, I was like, I don't know if I trust the station anymore.

Another woman in the third group claimed that “every station has an agenda.” This sentiment was shared throughout all focus groups. This shared agenda, they feel, was to obtain more viewers or retain their base viewership in order to acquire more advertising and monetary gains for the news organization.

Fake News as Advertising. One issue that was reiterated in each group was distrust stemming from the news outlet's funding – with skepticism stemming from the need for them to compete to sell the most headlines. This included having a sensationalized headline in order to lure in people to click on the article – only to have the user click through advertisements to find the article. The participants also explained how this was seen in cable news, as commentators

revealed an ulterior motive to the news coverage – like focusing on generating ratings by trying to “be first” instead of being accurate.

When perusing online websites or social media, participants in the study believed fake news included the realm of click bait headlines and spam. One woman in the third focus group had a story about coming across one of those links that a friend shared:

I had a friend who would send me, like, a news article. I cannot remember the news, whatever newspaper, at all. But, it was, like, she sent me something about Bob Marley’s death or something, and how it was like covered up and she’s like ‘wow, can you believe this?’ And I was like, ‘where are you getting this information from? This is fake.’ So, I don’t really trust too much that I find online.

Many of the participants held a healthy amount of skepticism about the information they read online due to incidents like the one listed above. They believed articles like this are created in order to gain more clicks from the online audience, which is something that is not found in more traditional sources of news, like newspapers or radio. However, this level of cynicism has spread to their perceptions of traditional sources, as one man from the third focus group mentioned: “I don’t have a trusted news source. I am like skeptical of everyone. I feel like everyone is biased to a certain degree.”

However, one woman said she believed the older generations had a higher level of trust for the news online due to being more historically trusting of traditional sources. One woman said she remembered her grandparents only having one news channel. Since then, she says, news structure has changed with the introduction of immediate news information being posted online.

I think back then, like whenever they presented news, like a lot of news outlets didn’t have an agenda like they do now. Like, a lot of it now about the media is like making

money. Back then, news was simply true. So, whenever the older generation is presented with something like then, [they think] it's what they it was back then.

The participants in the study said they believe news organizations are now all about making money – not reporting for the public good. One man in the third group said he didn't like the rhetoric used to push headlines, saying "I'm pretty sure that these organizations are intentionally using scare tactics... because it gets your interest and makes you want to look at more things on there."

Fake News as Satire. This media manipulation, as a few participants view it, crossed into the comedic sector of entertaining and satirical shows that twist news information to illustrate a certain political point of view. In the demographic survey, nine of the twenty-seven participants said they go to TV satire, such as *The Daily Show* or *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, for a main source of news. Some focus group participants suggest that these late night satirical shows are a new wave of journalism, providing the functions of journalists. However, the participants did not reveal whether they realized these satirical shows are not tied to the same commitment of ethical standards as traditional journalists.

Identifying satire as fake news can sometimes be a problem, even when it is in plain sight. One participant in the first group said he caught two of his friends sharing the same satirical article on Facebook, not realizing it was fake, saying "they both shared a video confirming the Super Bowl was rigged. It was from an account called 'Pure Satire'. And both of them shared it not knowing it was satire."

One woman in the third group admitted she watched the talk shows and late night to get the news in a fun way. Many others agreed, saying they watch late night shows, such as the *Daily Show with Trevor Noah* for entertainment-based news information. The first focus group

mentioned *Saturday Night Live* as a form of satire some participants watched regularly. They mentioned how it appears the skits have become increasingly political, often including anti-Trump rhetoric. One man said “they make it comedic, so more people are inclined to watch it.”

In the second group, one female participant asked the moderator if she could consider satirical news like *The Daily Show* as a source of news at all. This suggests that perhaps the younger generation ultimately recognizes that it is not the best source to receive the news of the day, but they watch it because it is an entertaining way to get the information – unlike the traditional platforms like cable news, radio or newspapers.

Fake News as Bad Journalism. One reason to distrust traditional media as a solid news source is due to bad reporting practices. With the need for immediacy with online news or the 24-hour cable news cycle, more news organizations push to have the information first, even if it isn’t necessarily correct. This is something the participants say they’ve noticed, and it’s a reason they say they do not always believe information the first time they hear it.

According to the focus group participants, examples of bad journalism include: *stretching the facts, not citing sources, sharing partial facts, sharing one-sided information or ignoring a story.* A man in the first focus group explained it by saying “bad journalism to me is very similar to fake news... facts are so stretched and twisted that it doesn’t really resemble the truth anymore... It’s just a hyper-analyzed sensationalized version of the truth to where it’s fake.”

1. Stretching the Facts. Some say that news sites will take a nugget of truthful information and stretch it to become outright false. And this kind of altered news happens so often that many of the participants agreed that they rarely believe anything at first glance. One woman in the first group said, “anybody will make up anything to get attention, like hype it up or hype it down.” This kind of bad journalism includes sharing only part of the facts in order to

push a certain agenda or sway the viewers to believe a certain way. One woman in the first focus group said that when there is a topic that is particular interest to her, she collects news from both CNN and Fox News to obtain both sides of the issue. She does this because each has a different perspective of the same news event. She says, “you have to come up with your own kind of idea of how you perceive that topic.”

2. *Not Citing Sources.* The Internet and First Amendment laws in the U.S.A allow for an open expression of ideas and content online – with exception of cyberbullying and threats. One student in the first group, who is from China, highlighted the point that this level of freedom is found uniquely within democracies, which may cause bad journalism to become more rampant. He discussed his feelings about an article that had been written that put China in a negative light. He said it was full of inaccuracies that were not supported by cited sources:

I come from China. I know that if you share something you can try this [fake] news when you come back [to China] and you may have a little trouble. I read the British created an article about [how] the economy in China needs to change. [Then] our government arrest[ed] all of his family members. So, after that, you just quit writing.

This worldwide perspective was reiterated in the second group, with one man mentioning how a change to libel or slander laws would change the future of fake news in the U.S.A., but it’s a double-edged sword. He says it would hinder social activism, like the recent “Me Too” movement, which supports survivors of sexual violence. He said the laws enacted by countries like Great Britain limited the spread of the movement overseas:

That’s because you can’t go on Twitter and say ‘This person sexually assaulted me’ and that person just lose their job. In Britain, to publish something like that you have to have actual evidence that you can put in court that this person does that, and you don’t have

that. You're not even allowed to push the fact that you know someone made those allegations or someone said 'this person raped me'... So, this does mean journalistic standards have to be applied higher. It also means that the truth could be shut down a lot easier. It definitely means that if someone lies, it has long-term consequences.

Another participant piped in after his answer and explained how it might lead to a downward spiral with free speech regarding satire, to which many others nodded in agreement. Also, upon research, this comment was also a misconception. The "Me Too" movement did spread to the United Kingdom and all around the world (Burke, 2010). Also, in Britain, sexual harassment is against the law – in accordance with the 2010 Equality Act. However, at least one survey from Britain of more than 2,000 people shows that women fear speaking up about sexual harassment, especially in the workplace, but that is mostly due to fear of social repercussions (BBC, 2018).

3. Sharing Partial Facts. The participants in the study extended their views of bad journalism to include journalists who only report partial facts. This has an impact on other social movements as well, like Black Lives Matter, which is an organization created to bring awareness of violence inflicted against members of the African American community. One participant in the first focus group explained how he's seen journalists only report the "bad part" to viewers so "people would think 'oh, our country's police are doing a bad job.'" To that, a woman replied in agreement, saying "Yeah, police just shot a black guy, but like, OK, what happened before the police pulled a gun out?... There are steps for them to have shot him." These so-called half-truths leave out pertinent information for the public to make an educated decision about how to feel about a particular issue.

4. Sharing One-Sided Information. Bad journalism is also considered being biased by sharing only one side of a story. One woman in the second group said she doesn't follow CNN or Fox News. She said "I think it's very rare to find one that dedicates itself to looking at both sides of the spectrum of political news... For me, it's vital that people do their research to look at media outlets... that try to have news that's not biased."

5. Ignoring the Story. Ignoring a story altogether is also considered to be a segment of bad journalism. The participants discussed how they distrust cable news that they believe knowingly omits stories from the broadcast or publication. This was a particular topic of concern for one participant in the third focus group who said she believed news organizations intentionally change the topic from more important news in order to cater to their audience:

Like fake news can kind of be something to use as a distraction. So, whenever they were reporting the whole Korea thing [Japanese broadcasters report false North Korea missile alert, Wakatsuki & Masters, 2018] there were a lot of things going on with the immigration ban that a lot of reporters were not talking about. They were talking about like, international relations when there are things that are going on domestically to kind of draw away from what's important.

Many participants agreed this type of news selection process was ultimately not in the public's best interest. Even so, they admitted they all have different approaches to what interests them individually and did not have a recommendation for a more accurate agenda setting procedure for the media.

Fake News as Complete Falsehoods. Each group mentioned stories they've seen that were completely false and made-up for entertainment purposes (including entertainment tabloids and *The Onion*). Participants expressed that fake news was something that cannot be supported

through research. They mentioned they see a lot of false news stories or half-truths being shared on Facebook – especially by their parents. They do a quick google search to find out if something is true before taking it at face value. One woman in the third focus group said “I just think fake news is anything I read online that looks true, but it’s fake.”

An example of this would be conspiracy theories shared online. The 2016 presidential election has had many researchers scrambling to understand the new age of media and how the spread of false information impacts public perceptions. Six-in-ten Americans say they receive their news through social media (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). The *Pizzagate* scandal serves as a prime example of the serious outcome of spreading fake news online (Snopes, 2017). *Pizzagate* is a conspiracy theory that the democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton was running a child sex ring out of a pizza shop in Washington, D.C. The conspiracy theory quickly spread and spiraled online through discussion boards (such as 4chan and Reddit) and shared repeatedly on Facebook and Twitter in those crucial weeks before election day. Even though this story was completely false, it was accepted as fact by at least one man from North Carolina, who decided to “self-investigate” the pizza shop. He opened fire inside the restaurant and searched for a basement that did not exist. When he was arrested, investigators say Welch admitted that he was there to check into the rumors from *Pizzagate*. In the second focus group, one participant mentioned *Pizzagate* as what he would consider “legitimate fake news.”

It’s obviously fake news, just like, I mean there are stories so outlandish and zone unbelievable that you just shrug them off just on instinct, which I know maybe that’s not particularly fair. It’s just outrageous. Hillary Clinton having a sex slave ring is one of them, but it’s just you know, social media is like that. It’s like a magnet for this type of stuff. So, if you ever see anything, even just like opinions... Word of mouth is like a huge

source of news... So, I just got to take a lot of stuff on the Internet with a grain of salt. That's what I've learned.

When scrolling across fake news such as this, many students say they are quickly able to discern it from being fake, laugh and continue scrolling – like one woman in the second group who said “I wouldn't necessarily watch the video and be like ‘Oh my God, I need to go get my shotgun. I would laugh and then would go do research. They're just ridiculous.” However, not all fake news is so easily spotted, as one participant shared with the third group:

I was in Arlington during [Hurricane] Harvey and someone posted on Twitter, like, this picture of all the airplanes, like, flooded at Hobby [Airport]. And, I sent it into my group chat and my whole team and stuff, and I was like, ‘look, this is what is going on in Houston right now. It's crazy.’ And, it' wasn't Hobby. It was just like, it's from a movie.

Meanwhile, others participants admit they thought something they read was fake, only to later realize it was real news. As an example, one participant in the third group who said she read about a comment made from President Trump about him calling on “shithole countries.” She was inclined to dismiss it at first, but only after seeing repeated by major news outlets, she read it more in detail to learn more about the story:

I know they might lie. They might fabricate a little bit. Like I never believe it the first time, like when Donald Trump was talking about the ‘shithole country’. At first, I was like, ‘No, he didn't say that.’ You know, I know that he's a bad person. Well, to me, you know. But I was like, ‘No he wouldn't do that.’ Like, that's too far. He knows not to do that. And, I kept hearing it everywhere. I go see it, and was like, ‘OK. Dang.’

Another type of complete falsehood is deceptive and inaccurate entertainment gossip, as mentioned by one woman in third focus group. She sees tabloids as being the epitome of fake news content, and she believes it contains news content that people are all-too eager to believe:

I think a lot of magazines, like fashion magazines or entertainment magazines, are just filled with fake news. I don't think anything in those is true. It's like, you know, when they post like the Kardashians, like Kim is having an affair. Like, they just post nonsense because people are going to be like, 'Oh my God. I can't believe that's happening.' But, it's like, all fake news.

This definition of fake news was repeated throughout the other focus groups as well. One woman in the first focus group mentioned how she also followed pop culture and celebrity gossip, but she prefers to get the certified information directly from the Kardashians' official Twitter accounts. The participant said that she read a headline of an article about Kim Kardashian being pregnant with a fourth child, but when she checked Kim Kardashian's official account, she "tweeted that all those rumors are fake."

Some say they're alerted to it from the language used or blatant typos, such as one participant who said she constantly has to fact-check for her mother, saying "she believes everything she reads." She said she recently sent her an article about how Beyoncé would be starved as a child by her parents and forced to undergo strenuous training to become a better performer. She said when her mother shared the article with her, the first response was to laugh, saying, "I'm laughing, not because of the abuse, but because it is so ridiculous, and it also had typos as well. Which, I mean, come on."

Fake News as a Cultural Lexicon. The most interesting perspective on fake news was the phrase used as a social phenomenon, as it works into the lexicon of the younger generation. For

them, the phrase “fake news” is a comedic turn-of-phrase used to end an argument about a topic that doesn’t align with their beliefs. It’s used humorously in daily social conversation within the public sphere to describe something that is either perceived untrue or something they don’t want to discuss. The participants mentioned how President Trump coined the term for modern-day usage, but it has been altered to be used as a meme, which is defined as a culture of behavior that is passed from one individual to another, or as a humorous idea spread online. One woman from the second group explained it as such:

I think fake news is almost a professional way to say, like ‘F.U.’, because when you say that, like there’s no comeback. It’s just like, I think it’s irrelevant... it’s an end all... So, if we look at it like that, you can throw that term at anything that’s not relevant to you – anything you don’t feel is true.”

Many participants say they use it in conversations in a comedic manner – something to say as a joke to a friend who says something disagreeable. Others say it has become politicized, especially within the context of the recent 2016 Presidential Election. A deeper discussion in the second group reflected this, saying it’s a phrase often used to deter further discussion on a controversial topic:

Oh, that person doesn’t like what’s being said about them. They’re using this very flippant response. You know, it’s like a way to deny something without an actual argument, that it’s like, fake news, even if it’s like stuff like a video recording of that person doing things like, ‘Fake News!’

To that response, another man within the second group agreed, saying:

It’s popularized by Trump and used a lot by his surrogates to deny claims like that as a very effective flippant response to something, as in saying ‘I don’t even have to have

these conversations. Why should I deny something? This conversation shouldn't even be happening in the first place.' But while this is very easy to say that, you know, that's just their way of trying to take credibility from these news sources and that it's their way of trying to say 'this obviously isn't true' – that anyone who writes something negative or something scandalous is all fake.

Respondents in the third focus group also shared this idea, saying they integrate it sarcastically in conversation with one another. One woman said "it's like a joke now." The participants suggested that this social phenomenon was a direct consequence of the rhetoric used by President Trump during the election. One woman in the second group said "now it's just satire. Donald Trump made it that way."

RQ2: What do eligible voters perceive should be done to combat fake news?

Throughout the course of these focus groups, the participants were eager to explain their encounters with fake news and criticize the media about their reporting methods. However, when it came time to shed light toward a resolution, despite extensive probing, many were left with little insight on how to solve the problem. For example, one woman in the third group said "I think at this point, there's nothing you can do."

Despite this shared pessimistic perspective, the participants discussed amongst themselves some reasons why some individuals would be more gullible than others when encountering fake news. Two major themes were discovered in these discussions: technological evolution in the news industry and varying levels of media literacy.

Technological Evolution Within News Industry

The students in the focus group found a real disparity between their generation and the generation of their parents and grandparents regarding perceptions of news and the spread of

fake news. One participant wrote, “I don’t sit in front of, like, World News at 6 p.m. every day and watch it. But, we are like on our phones all the time and on the computer, and you just always have news – just not seeking out to watch it.” This opinion was shared throughout all the focus groups, as many believed the older generations were more susceptible to believing false news online, because they are accustomed to not having to question the news they acquire.

Another participant talked about how the shift in the amount of news information being generated over the decades has led to a developed distrust of media, saying “now that news outlets have 24-hour news cycles, they’re not really concerned with necessarily informing people. They’re trying to translate, you know, their opinion into dollars.” She said it’s not just about being accurate, the news outlets are in competition to be first – to get the most views on air and most clicks online.

The problem of fake news is exacerbated online, because it provides social media platforms that make it easier to create and share false news to people all over the world. All you need a smartphone and a Wi-Fi connection to share information. One woman in the first focus group brought her concerns to the issue as it pertains to others her age. She says the younger generation has made it a habit to stop reading or researching what they read online:

That’s the thing. People don’t read anymore. They LOOK – BAM – SHARE. They don’t read anymore. Click. Share. That’s all this is. And when I heard him say (*points finger at one of the participants across table*) ‘I read the news,’ I was like ‘What, you READ?’

Oh, my people (younger generation) don’t read anymore.

The participants don’t necessarily blame social media for creating the problem. They say they agree the Internet should be an open platform to share ideas with one another openly and freely. However, the majority agreed that it is up to the individual to be more informed and

educated in how to decipher what is credible, as mentioned by one participant in the first group who is a political science major and was born in China:

I know in political science, I read the books, and I found out this: If you really want to do the freedom of speech, freedom of the press, first, your mental knowledge has to be strong enough to think about it like every time you [see] something on Twitter or heard something from CNN or every kind of social media. Yourself is the person who actually have to think about it, because I see the news is just trying to make [a] business. They're trying to do their business – no wrong about them... I mean, I shouldn't say this, but look, I mean, people are dumb. It's easy to make money from them. So, they want people to be dumb. You don't want yourself to be dumb. So, you have to be really strong, mentally.”

Lack of Media Literacy & Education

Learning from Experience. Several participants revealed they simply do not have an understanding of the structures used by media organizations to combat fake news. Media literacy is something that can be cultivated through experience or education. Within the focus groups, there were only two participants who expressed being knowledgeable of media practices. One woman in the first group said she was a journalism major. The other was in the second group who had an internship working for *Houston Public Media*. Through the conversations, both showed higher levels of news-seeking behavior and appeared to have a higher interest in political news. The participant with the media internship says her experience working at a news station helped her develop her media literacy skills:

I think that it's very rare to find a broadcasting or news station that doesn't take a side. And I currently work on a political show called Red, White and Blue Skies. We tend to

like focus on getting people from both sides – from liberal and conservative sides. So, I feel like working at Houston Public Media has helped me find a balance between conservative and liberal news.”

Learning at School. Participants mentioned that their professors at the university were a vital part in their understanding of media, and it can provide a crucial role in educating young voters about the news gathering process. One participant in the third focus group said she watched a documentary in class about a man who made a living from generating fake news stories. She said it made her realize what inspires people to generate fake content online. Another participant in the third focus group said a public relations professor had assigned a movie to watch for homework. This movie became an eye-opening experience – altering her perception of fake news:

The movie basically shows you that the president slept with the secretary and to cover up... they hired this public relationist [sic] and their tactic was to create a fake war and make it look like the president was doing everything in his hand like his power to make this go away and they literally created visual contact in a studio and put it in the news. And everybody thought that this place was in war and that this little girl that they chose to act was like tormented by the war and whatever. So, for me, like I'm understanding about what fake news really was.

Learning from Entertainment. These documentaries are not only influential in media literacy, focus group participants also mentioned how it spurs activism by inspiring them to change their lifestyle decisions. One woman in the third group said the documentary *What the Health* convinced her to modify her diet, saying “now I am plant-based and hashtag-pescatarian

too.” Another said she went vegetarian for three months after watching the *Fooding* because she “was so disgusted with the documentary.”

It’s not just documentaries that can influence change. One participant in the third group, who is a white female, mentioned how a single episode from the TV series *Grey’s Anatomy* completely changed her perspective on the Black Lives Matter movement:

The two doctors had to sit down their son – and he’s black – because the boy got shot and they had to give him the talk, and the talk was, like, as a black male you’d have to do certain things to keep from being shot. It’s so sad, that you know, someone of a different race has to go through that (*participant begins crying*). I think that episode, and sort of seeing that, even though it wasn’t real, like you know it’s real life. So, I think to me, like, that would really open your eyes because I’ve never had, never had to deal with something like that. It just, it just breaks my heart (*begins sobbing*).

Education is Key to Combatting Fake News. A shared perception from participants in this study is that education is key. It’s key to identifying fake news, acknowledging it, and limiting it – but not necessarily eliminating it. It starts on the individual level.

One man in the first focus group said the best way he could combat fake news is to hold yourself responsible. He said he strives to do this by “being a lot more cautious” whenever he reads something and not having “an immediate knee-jerk emotional reaction” upon reading a news headline. Another participant said he’s more careful about what he clicks on. One participant in Group 3 said the best way to fight against the spread of fake news is to “make the right decisions and get educated,” but he also acknowledged it’s easier said than done:

It’s kind of difficult for everyone to, you know, handle their own lives and stay educated as well. But, I guess one thing that can help is to... make a point to find the people who

are experts and well-regarded – and, like, do good research and whatnot, and I guess, find that one source or multiple sources to trust.

Another participant said that keeping fake news contained is more than just a personal education issue. She said that individuals should confront and address other postings online. She said, “let them know, ‘hey, this is not true.’” Another woman agreed, saying she believes it’s everyone’s responsibility to educate others on what to look for with fake news. “You educate them like we’ve been educated, you know, like it would be different,” she said.

Overcoming Shortfalls in Discovery of Truth. Even when presented with the facts, not everyone is susceptible to believing it. As woman said in the first group said, “people are stubborn and they want to believe what they want to believe.” So, the participants discussed with each other how to best help others open that mental roadblock, including having *open discussions, travelling, and education.*

1. Open Discussions. Multiple participants expressed how having open discussions is beneficial – like on man in the second group, who said group facilitations like what he was experiencing in the focus group could help in spreading awareness. This was echoed in the third focus group, as one student mentioned how attending open forums at the University of Houston campus for extra credit inspired him to learn more about a topic and feel comfortable enough to talk with others about the situation.

However, not all discussions are created equal or have the same potential for constructive learning. One participant in the second group explained how “it depends on the tone of the conversation and their motives.” He gave an example of how it is difficult to have a productive conversation with a preacher shouting from the pulpit on campus, saying “it’s kind of hard to listen to someone who’s screaming at Muslims, that you know, you guys are responsible for

terrorism, saying women shouldn't vote and you know, the destruction of humanity is an act of love." To that, a woman replied a broader view, saying, "I find that a lot of times people only say things to try to convert you, because that's their motive." For many of these young voters, they are more receptive to conversations about news literacy when it's not forced and there is no lurking motive behind the message.

2. *Travel.* Participants expressed how one way to be more receptive and open-minded to new ideas is to travel. In the demographic survey, all 27 participants noted that they were likely to return to a new source in which they agreed with the content (this was marked within varying degrees noted in Table I). This may indicate that the young eligible voters prefer to stay within their own bubble of thought, rather than branching out to explore other ideas. Even so, several participants expressed personal accounts about how they were enlightened after experiencing other cultures around the world or from branching out to talk with others who look different or have different opinions than their own. They say, this experience is the best way to not only grow as a person, but to escape the social circles of similar thought – so individuals are less naïve about the world around them. One woman wrote, "wherever you are in the world is a huge factor." She shared her experience from attending another university that was more insular than the University of Houston. "When I came back here to Houston, it's like, so diverse. And there are so many different opinions and open minds. It just, like, so different." Another participant in the group agreed, saying she felt sheltered before moving to the Middle East. She said it helped her escape the bubble of thought and expand her perceptions of reality.

3. *Education.* Above all, the participants regarded research and education as a key part in identifying fake news. However, they expressed doubt about whether education would make a difference. Some participants said they believe that the spread of fake news will only get worse

with time as more people freely contribute false or slanted content online; thus, the perceptions from individuals will become more polarizing as it becomes easier for them to find news sources that align with more extreme beliefs. This potentially reveals that more needs to be done to promote media literacy, particularly eligible voters within the younger generations.

RQ3: What are the characteristics (e.g., problem recognition, level of involvement, constraint recognition, referent criterion) young eligible voters utilize to discern fake news effectively?

Analyzing News-Seeking Behavior

Varying examples of all characteristics from the Situational Theory of Publics and the Situational Theory of Problem Solving – problem recognition, level of involvement, constraint recognition, and referent criterion – were discovered in each of the focus groups. From the demographic survey participants took before the focus groups began, it's clear that the majority of the participants do not actively seek out news. The majority (20 of the 27 participants) were either a little knowledgeable or somewhat knowledgeable. None of the participants were comfortable declaring themselves “very knowledgeable”, even though one participant declared to be “not knowledgeable at all.” The majority, 18 of the 27, marked that they receive their news occasionally or only a few times a week. The majority received through online news or social media sources. The third highest was through friends or family, which could potentially show the importance of referent criterion in how they distinguish fake news from real news.

Within the focus groups, it was clear that the higher interest the individual has on a particular issue, the more likely they are to spot fake news on that topic – because they are more likely to take the necessary steps to research the claim. Additionally, the lower the interest on the issue, the less likely a participant is to take time researching a news story on the topic to determine if it is fake news. The lower the constraint involving a certain topic, the more likely

they are to increase activism on the issue – whether that be something as small as sharing a post online or taking the issue to the next level by being actively involved in a protest. In turn, the higher the constraint – like fear of social repercussions or lack of knowledge on the issue – the less likely the person is to being involved on the issue. This supports the findings of research conducted on Situational Theories from prior studies explaining the factors that create *active*, *aware*, *latent* and *non-publics*. By segmenting these publics upon their communications activity on political issues, it can assist in understanding how they also recognize fake news on these particular issues when it is encountered.

Active Publics

It is nearly impossible for a person to be an activist on every single social issue around the world; there are simply too many problems for one person to try to solve them all. As such, some participants in the focus groups were more inclined to become active some issues more than others. The publics were more likely to be active on issue if they experience high problem recognition, high level of involvement, low constraint recognition and relate with a personal connection to the issue.

Debunking Fake News. Through the course of the interviews, it became apparent that active news-seeking publics were more knowledgeable about the current events regarding the specific issue they deemed was a priority to them.

One man in the second focus group claimed he was able to debunk fake news about the video game, *Grand Theft Auto 6*. He says a family member shared the article that claimed the video game was being set in Houston. Instead of immediately sharing the exciting news with others, he paused and researched it with a quick Google search and found out that it wasn't true at all. He says he “realized it was just a fake. It wasn't even, like, a real news website.” Having a

moment of pause to make way for brief skepticism kept him from sharing an outright false story with others, and he was able to inform his family member of the correct information.

For those admittedly highly involved in social issues are so active because of their prior knowledge and experience of the issue – the referent criterion factor – coupled with higher problem recognition set off by a current event. Whether participating in the Women’s March, Black Lives Matter rally, or raising money in a walk for breast cancer research, they all admit to having a personal connection with the issue. One woman in the first group, who is African American, says she became active in a Black Lives Matter rally in downtown Houston after seeing the news coverage of Trayvon Martin.

Another woman in the first group says she participates in the Susan G. Komen breast cancer walk because “a lot of family members have had to go through that and I’ve grown up going to that walk.” One woman in the second group said she attended the Women’s March in 2017, which was the first protest she had ever participated in.

I was upset about the election, but also [there was] the social media buzz, like, so I think social media was creating a real sense of community, like, because before I was, like, ‘hey, like I feel almost like alienated like by the election,’ because I feel like the country really doesn't share my views or by perspectives at all. But then, you know, with the Woman's March you reaffirm that, you know, there was a place for our beliefs. And you know there were other people who were willing to fight for the same things that I want to fight for. So, as much as I've been talking down to social media that you know it's a double-edged sword. There are a lot of benefits, and this is a really good example of one of them.

Becoming aware of social issues surrounding the environment on social media also inspired one man in the second group to no longer buy case cartridges of video games. He said “I made a point to get it digitally, so there's not a factory that has to make like the plastic boxes and stuff like that.” Several participants also agreed that entertainment media, like documentaries and the aforementioned TV show episode from *Grey's Anatomy*, inspired them to take action on political or social issues that they had not normally been interested in, such as health education or Black Lives Matter. As media provides a new way to express messages to the public, the more aware the public becomes on the issues. This can then inspire them to learn more about the topic and become less susceptible to being fooled by fake news.

When Hurricane Harvey hit Houston, the level of involvement was high because their problem recognition was high. It was felt in nearly every community and became a quick hot-topic issue that many people felt a strong desire to do something they typically wouldn't: get off the couch and become involved. Many focus group participants say that posts they saw online or the images shared by the local media about Hurricane Harvey inspired them take action through community service. For one woman in the first group, she said those posts inspired her to do something that was extremely rare for her to do: re-tweet information and volunteer.

I'm not one to like re-tweet stuff... but like I was re-tweeting like a lot of, like, the Harvey stuff. There was, like, numbers you could call. And, like, I would volunteer at, like, a church because, like, I directly wasn't affected. So, like, I was able to, like, help out, and I felt like I was, like, I know re-tweeting, like, a ton of links and things for Harvey. But, that is, literally in my 21 years of life, the only thing I've retweeted.

However, this combination of high problem recognition, high level of involvement, and low constraint recognition did not always mean individuals were immune to being duped by fake

news – such as the participant from the third focus group who said she accidentally spread a fake picture that she thought showed airplanes flooded at Hobby Airport during Hurricane Harvey. In this case, it was especially difficult to discern real vs. fake news without taking an extra step and researching the origin of the information or image. Listening to the conversations within the focus group, it was apparent there was no shortage of these similar stories – whether it happened to them or someone they knew.

A participant in the first focus group also said current events also were a factor in him deciding to take action online. He said he shared suicide prevention hotline numbers to help those people struggling with PTSD. He explained, saying “I had multiple members of my family that are in the Army struggling with PTSD depression. So that’s a very close issue to me.” He says he’s also signed petitions online for net neutrality.

Slacktivism. Taking action can equate to any level of activism, including slacktivism, which are actions performed online in support of a cause that requires very little time or involvement – like signing an online petition or sharing a post about a social or political issue. Many participants in the focus groups say they would share posts online when they became more informed about a particular issue, which is indicative of higher problem recognition.

It was a shared action by members in the second group, who say they also signed petitions online and contacted their local congressional leaders about social issues they cared deeply about, such as net neutrality and Planned Parenthood:

I know I contacted my congressman because of net neutrality and because of Planned Parenthood when they were going to shut down nearly all the abortion clinics except two in Texas. And Wendy Davis was giving that speech in the capitol. Those were the only

times I've ever felt that, even if I wouldn't have an impact, I should probably say something or do something in those things.

Activism Constrained by Perceived Impact. These young publics say they also take their issues to the election, and many were open about the presidential candidate they voted for. Even though they take this action, they expressed pessimism over how much of an impact that vote really makes. In Focus Group 1, one woman said she feels like it's pointless.

I do feel like [the Electoral College] leaves a lot of people confused as to whether or not voting actually makes a difference at all. I voted and I'm not sure that made a difference at all... It's just something they encourage us to do to make American citizens feel like you're doing something that you're not... But then people vote and they go, 'Well, I don't think that I actually did anything' and then the news was like, 'No, you did for sure.'

To that, another female participant in the group chimed in, agreeing with that remark:

Yeah. Well, actually I didn't vote this year. I didn't want Hillary nor did I want Trump. So, I didn't actually vote. And so people were like, 'Why didn't you vote your vote that it could have helped.' And I'm like, 'if I didn't want them, why would I vote?' Because my ticket would say, 'Hey Barack, I'll fight for you to do this four more years.'

The latter quote reveals a common thread among the focus groups – as the aware publics. While many people mentioned here took their knowledge and problem recognition about a social issue and acted upon it, the aware publics did not.

Aware Publics

The vast majority of participants say they were informed about political issues; however, there was something that was constraining them to take action. The level of involvement was different pertaining to the individual issues being discussed. The justifications for constraint ran

the gamut: no personal connection to issue, fear of judgment from peers, fear of job loss, lack of time or lack of interest. This was the case especially in controversial issues or topics, like the 2016 presidential election. In the second focus group, one participant said “the only time I ever took action or thought about taking action was if it influenced me. As shallow as it sounds, like, let’s say there was a massacre like in some other country, right? Although we feel bad, we won’t take action because it doesn’t directly affect us.”

Impressions of Referent Criterion. Within the focus groups, personal identity and family history were some of the upmost reasons for being aware of a certain issue. For example, one African American female participant said that she feels that she lives the social issue every day – but that she doesn’t feel the need to educate others on the plight of growing up as both an African American and as a woman.

Like when you want to be better... you are going to take it upon yourself and you're going to have the initiative to educate yourself and to interact. So, I'm not that person where it's like I feel like I constantly have to teach people because I don't I don't feel like that's my job. I don't feel like that's my responsibility for you – for me to teach you how to value our differences. It's like, either you want to know or you don't. And I'm only going to do so much to make you understand I guess, because, like, constantly having to tell my sob story is just depressing for me to make you see like oh she has a hard life for people like her experience hard things.

Participants admitted that the best method for fact-checking news is to compare and contrast to find credibility. However, very few admitted to actually doing it. When prompted, one woman in the third focus group said she compared and contrasted only a couple times a week, saying “I can only take so much Fox [News]. Sorry, it’s blatant bias.”

Another woman said she doesn't take the time to do it; instead, she depends on her family vetting her news sources. "I'm not go lie, I, like, I have the same views as my dad, and my dad's like super smart. And, so, he watches CNN. So, like, I just think that because CNN is very, like, moderate. So, like, I don't compare the other ones because I, like, kind of trust that one the most. But I don't really seek out it."

Those participants who admitted to actively seeking out their information say they consistently go to the same sources to find the truth. Hot issues, like the election season, increases the level of interest in news. One man in second focus group said "after the election, I go after news more actively. I feel like it's become almost exhausting to keep up with current events."

Latent Publics

Latent publics within this study do not perceive fake news or social issues to be a problem for them – at least not at this point in their lives as younger eligible voters. This includes participants who only occasionally or very seldom seek out news, but they are aware that there are social issues happening that impacts them and the people they know. This was collectively a quarter of participants within the three focus groups.

These focus group participants gave several reasons why they feel unable to become involved in the news gathering process. Some say news was boring and didn't offer what they were interested in. They believed the less they were knowledgeable about a topic, the less inclined they were to actively speak against fake news. One participant in the first group said "My friends now in college, they're Middle Eastern, and they talk a lot about the country, and like, I stay out of it. I won't put my two cents in there just because I don't know much about it."

Others shared feelings of helplessness, like one participant in the second focus group who said, “I feel like... change happens and there’s nothing we can do until, like, a congressman finally gets involved later on and we have another chance to vote.” Some say they lacked the time to do the appropriate research, so they try to find a journalist they can feel confident will be a factual source of information – as one participant from the second focus group believes:

Trust comes from, like, building reputations over time. So, this is something that does take a lot of time and you know with the way we consume media it's like easier to do that with a single specific person you know than like does broad conglomerate like CNN or Fox News or whatever.

Other participants admitted the news sources they view are strictly from convenience, like one man from the second focus group who admitted, “my mom would turn on the TV and I would watch whatever they watch.” In this digital age of smart phones, convenience helps eliminating constraints. One participant from the second focus elaborated saying, “I have Apple News on my phone so I always read articles from a bunch of different news sites.”

Some participants agree that they make an effort to avoid news altogether because they view it as too upsetting, like one man in first focus group who says “I read a lot more, I guess, entertaining news articles and some stuff about science and things like that. When I got to news websites and scroll down, it’s mostly just sad stories and murders and shootings, and it’s tiring to read after a while.”

Whatever the reason for not taking action to stay informed, the fear is that these latent publics are leaving themselves open to falling for fake news, as many may make a conscious decision not to question what they read. This fear is shared by one woman in the third focus group:

Sometimes you'll hear something that aligns with something you already know, so you just automatically believe it. You don't even think, like, this is fake or this is real, because you've heard so much about something else that goes with it... So, you don't even realize it could be fake.

Non-Publics

Non-publics are publics who do not face a problem or believe there's a problem. In the case of fake news, the majority of participants admitted to the problem in some form. However, there were only two instances in which participants expressed no interest in news or social issues.

One woman in the third group said she has "zero interest" in political issues. She said she's not even registered to vote because her interest in politics is so incredibly low. By admitting this, in essence, she has no problem recognition, no level of involvement and no constraint recognition. She went on to explain her logic, saying "Politics, I think I could literally care less. Yeah, one, because I'm sort of selfish." Throughout the focus group session, this participant eluded that she does not actively seek out news and does not engage in controversial topics with friends or family members, saying "I normally kind of avoid it." Notably, this sentiment was not shared by any other participants within all three focus groups.

One participant in the second focus group mentioned how she is opinionated on social issues but felt no need to obtain news information. As such, she admitted she is less likely to address or research fake news when she stumbles upon it online. She says "being ignorant is, like, great because you don't have to worry about anything, but it's also kind of a burden that you have to go through because you don't really know what's going on in the world." While during the course of questioning she acknowledged the hurdles she encounters due to her

information deficit, she explained that it was not a problem she felt she must overcome at this stage in her life; therefore, lack of news information was a non-issue for her. It was undetermined how this behavior or absence of information may impact any perceptions of fake news or how it could determine how they discern fake news from real news.

CHAPTER 5: Discussion and Conclusion

This study used qualitative methods to explore how fake news is perceived through the eyes of the youngest decade of eligible voters in the United States (18 – 28 years old). It studied 27 participants of varying backgrounds, news knowledge, news consumption and political affiliation. They were interviewed in three groups and probed about their news-seeking practices and interpretation of fake news as they've experienced it. The Situational Theory of Publics and Situational Theory of Problem Solving were used as a framework of understanding to better segment participants into their associated publics as the conversations evolved within the focus groups. Through concepts within Media Literacy theory, this study was able to establish a connection between education of news practices and trust in credible sources of news information – which can assist in the discretization of fake news sources.

Results reveal varying definitions of fake news, including propaganda, advertising, satire, bad journalism, complete falsehoods and cultural lexicon. Those who discern fake news well are largely those displaying active communication behaviors. This consists of (a) high problem recognition, (b) high level of involvement, (c) low constraint recognition, and (d) applied referent criterion. Those who feel they have a personal stake in the issue are typically more informed; and thus, they are less likely to be fooled by fake news. Additionally, the first step toward preventing the spread of fake news online is through education and research. Those who are less informed about issues are less likely to take action on issues, but it makes them a bigger target for online “trolls” whose mission is to spread fake news.

This study adopts a cultural approach to understanding fake news from the view of young eligible voters who applied their own meaning to the phrase. The location where they primarily receive their news is different than the older generations; and thus, it provides a diverse

perspective. Fake news isn't just about satirical skits on TV. It's not only made-up stories on the radio. It's not just about the commentary in the opinion sections of the newspaper. All of those definitions are still relevant; but with the news now experienced online, "fake news" opens a whole new interpretation for these young eligible voters. They see click-bait headlines that lead to false sites looking to generate money. They see websites or social media pages that impersonate real news sites or bloggers without a journalistic background writing false news stories online and passing it as real. They experience polarizing opinions based on biased or half-truths. This has all led to a change in their lexicon, where they feel inclined to spin the phrase and turn it into a social joke within the public sphere.

It is important to research these younger generations now, more than ever, as they become more active in the political process. A report released in April 2018 revealed that there is a rush of teenagers pre-registering to vote – over 100,000 16- and 17-year-olds pre-registered to vote in California since it became legal in 2016 (Hamedy, 2018). There was a spike in political activism among these young people in the aftermath of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida that killed 17 people. The students who survived initiated a nationwide movement on gun control. With the future elections in sight, it is imperative to understand their influence, what drives them to become active and how they utilize social media to find credible information that sways the decisions they make.

Elaborating on STP and STOPS

This exploratory study expands upon the Situational Theory of Publics and the Situational Theory of Problem Solving by analyzing which types of publics are better at discerning fake news from credible news. In this paper, the term "fake news" has revealed as a politically polarizing phrase – understood as synonymous with President Donald Trump within

the 2016 presidential election. This research found that active publics who are aware of the political issues tend to be more informed and less likely to believe fake news when it is encountered. Furthermore, they are also likely to correct someone else who shared it or offer feedback on the presented topic.

The younger generations in the study show a high tendency to become active on hot topic issues. The independent variables in this public represented high problem recognition, high level of involvement and low constraint recognition. Often, referent criterion was an important factor in whether the public became active on an issue. The personal experiences discussed within the focus groups had an influence on whether the publics become active and whether they were able to distinguish if what they were seeing was true. However, the majority of participants were classified as latent or aware publics, which acknowledged news was important but did not make an effort to actively seek out the information. When coming across fake news, these participants admitted to not believing it as fake or disregarding it completely without researching its authenticity.

Elaborating on Media Literacy

News-Seeking Behavior. What the research discovered was that in general, those who had a knowledge of how media operates were more likely to recognize traditional news media as a credible and reliable source for information. They were also more likely to seek news and share their ideas about current controversial topics with others. From these focus groups, there appeared to be a connection between the news-seeking behavior and the level of trust they have in traditional media. Those participants who had a knowledge or understanding of news practices voiced that they were more trusting of traditional news outlets, like *CNN*, *New York Times*,

Washington Post, *BBC*, etc. Those who did not have media training were more skeptical about the underlying intentions of news outlets.

Importance of Trust. That view is not partial to just young eligible voters. Since the introduction of fake news as a dominant paradigm in American culture, trust in media is at an all-time low (Gallup, 2016). According to a POLITICO/Morning Consult poll, nearly half of American voters actually believe the media makes up phony stories about President Trump (Shepard, 2017). This number rises drastically higher among people who identify as Republicans, with 76% believing the news media invents stories about President Trump's administration. Only one-in-five Democrats and 44% of independent voters think the media make up stories about Trump. If the public cannot trust the media to report accurately nor turn to their political leaders for guidance, it can lead to a spiral of misinformation.

Why are people less likely to trust the media? Lack of media literacy leads to confusion over truth. Like one man from the second group said, "I don't watch news too much so I don't have a side. There's so many resources out there, so there's no true way to know events like the actual source or not." This is a comment from one of the future generation of eligible voters and taxpayers in the United States. If they don't trust the media now, what is the likelihood they will trust the media decades from now? And, what ramifications will this have on democracy as we enter more elections ahead?

When applying political bias toward news media, researchers studying the 2000 and 2007 primary elections found the level of hostility toward media was higher among those with a high level of involvement in politics (Gunther et al., 2009). One study discovered that "people with strong party identity had more HMP than those with weak party identity (Oh et al., 2011, p.11)."

The study also found that people with a strong opinion on an issue perceive the media (even if those with neutral coverage) as being biased in favor of the opposing side.

Cognitive Dissonance. Research also found that people perceive more bias in media that does not agree with their personal political views (Coe et al., 2008; Gunther & Christen, 2002; Gunther et al., 2001). The final question in the pre-survey of this study found that the majority of participants were likely to return to a news source that agreed with their beliefs. Without diversifying news sources, an individual is stuck in a loop of thought – feeding their own views without ever experiencing cognitive dissonance. Vraga and Tully (2015) created the most substantial study in media literacy that supports why more research in fake news is so necessary. It found that political bias and cognitive dissonance are factors in hostile media perceptions. The researchers conducted an experimental study online on the effect of a news media literacy PSA appearing before political programming. It found that its impact depends on the political position of the news program and the political ideology of the viewers. In this case, it improved perceptions in conservatives when viewing a neutral or conservative-leaning news program; however, they still perceived liberal programming negatively. Liberal evaluations were unaffected. This explains how extreme perspectives foster more cognitive dissonance in news information. Even when presented with facts, extreme views (even misguided or false views) may still be left unaltered.

Lashley (2009) conducted a study on the politics of cognitive dissonance and found how “spinning” the information impacts voter behavior and the election outcomes in the 2008 presidential election. This information may explain how people who have polarized political beliefs may be unwilling to see the other side of the issue and more likely to believe in fake news

that aligns closer with his/her beliefs. It may also explain how the media (even fake news media) sets its agenda based upon the needs of its targeted audience.

Practical Implications

Finding Trusted Sources. The idea of fake news is so concerning, it even inspired Pope Francis to address it in January 2018 (Vatican, 2018). He condemned fake news, calling it a “sign of intolerant and hypersensitive attitudes,” saying it “leads only to the spread of arrogance and hatred.” He likened fake news to the *Bible*, saying it has roots as old as the book of Genesis, with the serpent in the Garden of Eden.

It’s true that fake news is not a new phenomenon; but, ever since the 2016 presidential campaign, fake news has become integrated in society worldwide as a modern-day phenomenon. It has become a concentration of news organizations as they strive to find ways to regain the trust of its viewers. In April 2018, Sinclair Broadcasting Group was under fire after they required all 173 of its news stations to create scripted promotional advertising spots on television denouncing fake news. The script read that there was a “troubling trend of irresponsible, one-sided news stories plaguing our country. The sharing of biased and false news has become all too common on social media (Deadspin, 2018).” This method of handling the situation sent shockwaves across the country after the website Deadspin linked all the videos together from Sinclair-owned stations, in what many people online referred to as “eerie,” “creepy,” and “disturbing” (Deadspin, 2018). This situation led to a movement online to boycott the stations.; and more, this kind of rhetoric fuels the flames of mistrust in fake news. From this thesis, it can be argued that there are four major ways news organizations can regain the trust of its audience, but this benefits primarily the active/aware publics who are concerned with collecting truthful information:

- *Do not use inflammatory or sensationalized language.* Avoid inserting personal views or adjectives that would be opinionated descriptions of a situation. Manipulation through emotion was discussed in these focus groups as a method of controlling the audience, which they found distasteful.
- *Verify and cite sources.* The public already has a lack of trust, so explaining who or where the information comes from can build a better bond with the audience.
- *Establish a balanced reputation.* This takes time. While the older generation may have more trust in traditional news outlets, the primary method for building trust with the younger audience is through online and social media platforms. Create trust by immediate correcting information.
- *Educate the public.* Few people in the public know the idiosyncrasies of the news business. Educating the public by making the news gathering process more well-known would open the door for explanations rather than having the perception of “shady” behavior.

Striving to Become More Informed. On the side of the audience, in order to better identify fake news and stop it from spreading in our social circle, the focus group participants shared several significant ideas. This includes taking personal responsibility, becoming more knowledgeable or enacting changes on the government level. The participants expressed how it is up to each person to be more open-minded, which is easier said than done. As one woman from the second focus group notes, “I think it’s really hard for you to be able to look at the perspective of other people when you’re so worried about yourself.”

Understanding this means individuals have to be at a certain socio-economic level – as per Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Those individuals who are more concerned with physiological

concerns, like having enough money for basic necessities like groceries or paying their bills, are going to be less concerned with social issues happening in another state or country. With the students who participated in the study, they were all undergraduate students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Many of them voiced that they had other priorities that were more important to them then, for example, brushing up on what the North Korean leader was talking about. At this point, they are still assessing their other needs: getting an education. Many others say they were working several jobs to attain that goal. They mentioned there just wasn't enough time for them to care about current events.

So, what about forcing news outlets to be held accountable for fake news? On the government level, the focus groups tossed around the idea of enacting stricter laws against libel or slander, which were not well-received by other participants in the group. The other, less punitive method, would be for the government to enact education programs within the public school system. This was expressed by one participant in the third group, who said:

Schools do teach you lot. So, I guess, you know, maybe implement it even more. So, why don't school educate kids on like the Internet, that anyone can post on it; you really got to be careful what you what you use as a source. They should just emphasize that more, especially nowadays because of fake news.

Throughout the course of the focus groups, participants gave expressed what they deemed as important in order to decide whether or not a news source was credible. These include:

- *Find the purpose or agenda.* Is the goal to entertain, persuade or inform?
Acknowledge the language used and read the "about us" section or the mission statement. Is the language unbiased and free of inflammatory rhetoric or emotion?

- *Look for indicators of accuracy.* Does the news source have citations? Are there websites or credible links? What is the evidence that backs up the claims? Does it have spelling or grammatical errors?
- *Look for the news producer.* Is this person creating the story credible or from a legitimate news organization? What are the qualifications of the journalist?
- *Reputation of news source.* Is this news organization well-known? Look at the other works and content from the source.
- *Find the publish date or origins.* How current is this story? When was it created, published or distributed? Was it updated? Online, pictures can be misleading. Do a reverse Google search to find out the origins of the photo.

Accessibility of Information. Participants discussed another problem with finding accurate sources is due to the accessibility of information. With advances in technology, the students in this study explained that news can be found virtually everywhere. The amount of information available is vast and encompasses a wide-range of topics accessible through numerous platforms and expressed through countless points of view. Many participants agreed that news is not only important, it's vital to our society. So why, even with the plethora of knowledge that is literally at their fingertips, do the majority of participants claim not to be knowledgeable about current events? One woman in the first focus group emphasizes that it "should" be important, "but like with anything valuable, it's up to the public whether or not they want to use it to its full potential."

According to many of the focus group participants who fall within this category of non-news-seekers, they also experience high levels of constraint recognition. These reasons include being outright bored or uninterested in the topics, having feelings of depression upon seeing

negative news, not having enough time to be informed or not feeling as if news a priority in their lives. Those who do stay informed also feel constrained to take action for several reasons including not having a personal connection to the issue, fear of judgment or fear of losing their jobs. These restrictions would need to be lifted before aware publics would feel comfortable enough to become active on an issue.

Reflexivity

As a news producer by profession, I would be remiss if I did not admit the frustration I felt hearing some of the focus group responses. I faced an internal conflict as I attempted not to correct, interrupt or educate the participants about the media. The most I interjected was to ask for clarification on viewpoints, and I strived to conceal my nonverbal cues in an effort to not betray my true thoughts on some of the more eccentric notions discussed within the group. Sometimes, the focus group participants would be knowledgeable or comfortable enough about a topic to disagree with the individual. I encountered one such case during the second focus group, as I listened to one participant attempt to recall a news story – but she recalled it incorrectly. She said “I think I saw something about Trump trying to, what is it, like, remove the marriage equality thing that affected me as well.” A man interjected and corrected her saying “no, not really. Not really.” To which, she replied, “I did remember saying – I don’t remember exactly, but he did say he’s going to ban transgender people from the military.” A man replied, saying “He hasn’t made any steps toward trying to dismantle the marriage equality.” This kind of debate within the focus group makes it apparent that more needs to be done to counter false information so the public can be better informed.

As a 31-year-old graduate student, I am about a decade apart from the majority of participants in the study. I didn’t realize how large of a gap this would be until discussions

began. As younger students, many were unaware of current events or the impact it has on their lives. I was alarmed to hear that many said they were perfectly content being in the dark – uninformed – about national or international issues. I was perplexed how some people were comfortable discussing the Kardashians in Hollywood, but less likely to care about the political matters that influence the lives of people in our own community. But, I also wondered, would the older generations be any different?

What was inspiring for me, through the course of these focus groups, was how willing and open these young eligible voters were to become active. Most appeared to have an affinity for at least one or two social issues, things like equal rights for minorities (LGBTQ, women and African Americans), breast cancer awareness, climate change and net neutrality. The fact that many of these people actually took time to either sign a petition, attend a forum, share thoughtful posts online, participate in awareness walks, volunteer or actively protest, means that this generation is becoming active contributing members of their communities. This younger generation gave the impression that they only need a nudge – whether from a hot topic news event (like Hurricane Harvey) or a situational impacting them personally (like a family member getting breast cancer) – to get them activated. The more they care about political or social issues, the less susceptible they are to being tricked by fake news.

It's perplexing that knowledge is more accessible than ever before with technological advancements, but essential education in media training still remains elusive for many Americans. Through this research, I've come to a conclusion that a good first step toward stopping the spread of fake news is through easily accessible extensive media literacy programs available as early as a child can use a phone.

Limitations of Study & Future Research

This study only includes ages 18 – 28, with the vast majority were in the “older generation Z” group. Many participants allege that there is a disparity between the younger and older generations of voters. They shared a belief that, in general, older generations of voters are more knowledgeable about current events and are more likely to vote. However, they expressed that this older generation was also more likely to be gullible and more trusting of news sources online. In future studies, this would be a hypothesis to explore further, especially through quantitative research.

On a college campus, the participants in the focus groups held mostly liberal viewpoints. It was clear from the demographic survey, there were only a handful of conservative-leaning participants. It is plausible that the definitions of fake news might differ given more variety of thought, such as more participants expressing conservatives or right-leaning ideals. This would have diversified the results and allowed for more cross-dialogue between the participants.

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APPENDIX A

SUBJECT LINE: UH study about media perceptions: participants needed!

Hello. My name is Felicia Russell Perez. I am a graduate student at the University of Houston in the School of Communication. I am conducting three focus groups. The purpose of the study is to explore voter perceptions of media.

You do not need any prior knowledge to participate – there are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions. If you are interested in participating, the focus groups will last approximately 45 minutes to 90 minutes, and all information you give me will be kept confidential. That is, your name, identity, and affiliation with your current or previous organizations will not be revealed in the study.

Those who qualify to participate in the focus group will be of voting age between 18-28 years old. Only 12 people will be accepted into each focus group. The location will be on campus in the Jack J. Valenti School of Communication.

When you arrive, I will provide you with a form stating the details of the report and whom you can contact with any questions. I will also ask that you fill out a quick questionnaire and sign a form granting me permission to audio-record the group conversation.

Pizza and drinks will be provided.

Dates for the focus groups - Choose one:

- Monday, January 29 – 1 p.m.
- Wednesday, January 31 – 11 a.m.
- Friday, February 2 – 11 a.m.

Thank you for your consideration. After the interview is over, if you request to see the final report, I will be happy to provide you with a copy. In the meantime, please contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Felicia Russell Perez
Graduate Student
Jack J. Valenti School of Communication
University of Houston
Phone: (501) 804-4348
Email: feliciarussellperez@gmail.com

This project has been reviewed by the University of Houston's Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (713-743-9204, cphs@central.uh.edu).

APPENDIX B

Title of research study: Exploring the Perceptions of MediaInvestigator: ***Felicia Russell Perez******Why am I being invited to take part in a research study?***

We invite you to take part in a research study because you are a voter between 18-28 years old.

What should I know about a research study?

- Someone will explain this research study to you.
- Whether or not you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part.
- You can agree to take part and later change your mind.
- Your decision will not be held against you.
- You can ask all the questions you want before you decide, and can ask questions at any time during the study.

Why is this research being done?

This research explores perceptions of media among young voters. ***The purpose of this research is ultimately to discover how voters verify and identify truthful news sources. The study also provides data that can assist news producers as they combat the spread of fake news.***

How long will the research last?

We expect that you will be in this research study for one visit, for 45 minutes to 1.5 hours.

How many people will be studied?

We expect to enroll about 40 people in this research study.

What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?

At participants will be asked to participate in this project for the focus group, split into multiple groups.

Time and Location:

We will conduct the interview in a place that is convenient for you, at a time that is convenient for you, in coordination with other participants.

What you will be asked to do:

First, I will ask if it is OK for me to tape record this conversation. It is OK if you do not want me to.

At the beginning of the focus group, there are about 10 questions in a questionnaire about your occupational role that I would like you to answer. These questions ask about your relationship with news information. For example, I will ask you questions like “How would you rate your news knowledge?”

You are not required to answer any or all of these questions – your participation in this section and the entire interview is completely voluntary.

When we are done with the focus group, I will ask if you have any questions for me. That will be the end of the session, and I will not need any additional time from you. However, if you realize later that there is something else that you would like to talk about regarding this topic, you can contact me, and I will be happy to come interview you again. However, this is totally your choice.

Number, frequency and duration of interactions:

I will only ask you to join the focus group once.

Total time commitment:

The total time commitment by you to participate is approximately 45 minutes to 1.5 hours, depending on how much you would like to participate.

Audio-recording (please circle or check one option):

- I agree to be audio recorded during the research study.
- I do not agree to be audio recorded during the research study.

If you do not agree to be audio recorded, you may still participate in the study. I will take handwritten notes instead.

What happens if I do not want to be in this research?

You can choose not to take part in the research and it will not be held against you. Choosing not to take part will involve no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are otherwise entitled.

What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?

You can leave the research at any time it will not be held against you.

If you stop being in the research, already collected data ***will not*** removed from the study record.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?

Because your interviews may be audio-recorded (with your permission) and may be identified by name, this project presents minimal risk to you, as a participant. However, your name and your affiliations will remain confidential. Your participation is voluntary, and you can decline to answer specific questions or to end your participation at any time without penalty.

Will I get anything for being in this study?

You will not receive any compensation or payment for your participation in this study.

Will being in this study help me in any way?

While you will not directly benefit from participation, your participation may help news producers and media organizations combat the spread of misinformation.

What happens to the information collected for the research?

Efforts will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study and medical records, to people who have a need to review this information. Each subject's name will be paired with a code number, which will appear on all written study materials. The list pairing the subject's name to the assigned code number will be kept separate from these materials. We cannot promise complete secrecy. Organizations that may inspect and

copy your information include the IRB and other representatives of this organization, as well as collaborating institutions and federal agencies that oversee human subjects research.

We may publish the results of this research. However, unless otherwise detailed in this document, we will keep your name and other identifying information confidential.

Who can I talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, you should talk to the research team at FeliciaRussellPerez@gmail.com.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the University of Houston Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may also talk to them at (713) 743-9204 or cphs@central.uh.edu if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Signature Block for Capable Adult

Your signature documents your consent to take part in this research.

Signature of subject

Date

Printed name of subject

Signature of person obtaining consent

Date

Printed name of person obtaining consent

APPENDIX C

Demographic Survey

Date: _____

1. Please indicate your gender

- Female
- Male

2. How old are you?

- 18 – 23
- 24 – 28

3. What is your class distinction?

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Graduate

4. How do you identify your ethnicity?

- Asian
- Black/African
- Caucasian
- Hispanic/Latinx
- Native American
- Pacific Islander
- Multi-ethnic/Mixed
- Prefer not to answer
- Other: _____

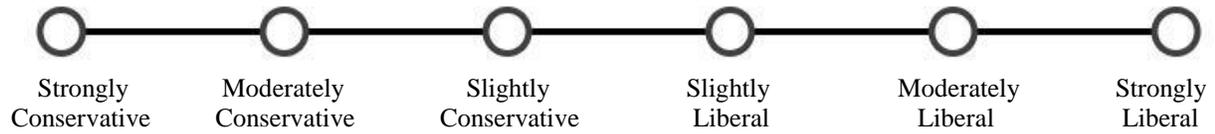
5. How often do you read, watch, or listen to the news?

- Daily
- Few times a week
- Once or Twice a month
- Occasionally
- Never

6. How do you get your news? Mark all that apply.

- Online News Websites
- Social Media (like Facebook or Twitter)
- Push alerts on phone or e-mail
- Cable TV News (like CNN, FOX, BBC)
- Local News Stations
- TV Satire (Late Night comedy)
- Newspapers
- Radio
- Friends/Family
- Other: _____

7. How would you describe your political beliefs?



8. How would you rate your news knowledge?



9. How likely are you to return to a news source that you agree with?



APPENDIX D

Interview Guide

Opening: Tell me something about yourself, something that gives us an idea of who you really are.

Question: First, I'd like to ask a basic question: What do you consider to be news?

PROBE:

How often do you read, listen, or watch news?

Do you actively go to news websites or do you receive push notifications?

RQ1: Define & Identify Fake News

Transition: I want you to think about what makes a news source credible or trustworthy. What qualities do you look for and what do you expect from a credible news outlet? You can make a list on the notepad in front of you.

PROBE:

What are some of those qualities you look for?

What are some news sources you feel meet that criteria?

Question: When I say the words "fake news" – what do you think about?

PROBE:

What do you consider to be fake news?

What are key indicators that alert you to fake news?

Is there a difference between fake news, biased news, comedy, propaganda or just bad journalism?

Question: Tell me about a time you came across fake news. What was it? Where was it? How did you recognize it? What did you do with it?

PROBE:

Explain what hurdles you face in finding factual information.

RQ2: Combat Fake News

Transition: Given your experience with fake news in acknowledging it and identifying it, tell me how your news habits have changed?

PROBE:

To what extent do you believe social media can provide credible sources for news?

Why do you believe fake news is shared by others?
What are ways you address fake news with others online or in person?

Question: How do you feel is the best way to combat the spread of fake news?

PROBE:

What would you like to see from news outlets as they tackle fake news?
What does fact-checking in news media mean to you?

RQ3: Aware vs. Active Publics

Transition: Now, I will attempt to understand more about how you individually discern real news from fake news. I know that fake news can often revolve around political issues. So as eligible voters, I'd like to know how interested you are in political topics or matters?

PROBE:

How comfortable are you in discussing political matters with others?
Under what circumstances would you share political topics or opinions online?

Question: Think about a time where you've been so passionate about an issue that you became involved and take action. What did you read or see that inspired you to do so?

PROBE:

In what ways has media inspired or influenced you to take action on an issue or participate in community or social events?

Final Question: Is there anything that we should have talked about but didn't? This is the first in a series of groups that we are doing. Do you have any advice on how it can improve?