The Right Stuff?
Selective Exposure and Political Misinformation on Facebook

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ABSTRACT

For a democracy to function optimally, its citizens must arrive at election booths armed with factual and complete information. If the voting public is equipped with misinformation, it is just as detrimental as if they are uninformed. Misinformation can be caused and exacerbated by a variety of causes but as online selective exposure increases along with political polarization, the possibility that individuals who gather news on their favorite Facebook platforms will be deceived by political misinformation increases. This false news has the ability to cause more and more voters to formulate beliefs and opinions based on false information. Expanding on the findings that selective exposure leads to political polarization, this paper seeks to understand the effects of partisan selective exposure practiced on social media and an individual's potential for increased exposure to intentional or accidental political misinformation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social media is a great avenue for sharing information quickly across large and varied groups of people. Individuals can use the platforms to connect with distant friends and relatives, social groups can use them to keep members abreast of group events, and political activists can disseminate information in an effort to help their party win elections. While providing advantages for the diffusion of news and ideas, it also provides an outlet for false stories to spread at a speed never before witnessed. The ability to share vital news and data is incredibly helpful and resourceful, but not everything read on Facebook is factual or worthy of sharing with others and users often risk passing along false information found in controversial posts (Shahani, 2016). Because of the increasing use of Facebook to gather news, it is important to understand if users of the platform are exposed to, believing, and sharing more political misinformation due to the social media giant's filtering abilities and personal news selection. During the contentious 2016 U.S. Presidential election, social media users turned to their favorite platforms for election coverage and details, and the effects of social media, political news, and misinformation became the highlight of campaign communication discussions after votes were tallied.

When news stories and other information are eye catching and seemingly credible, they can quickly spread with the simple click of a button or tap of a smartphone screen. Social media users need to understand that sharing political information can potentially affect the spread of political misinformation and has the potential to alter the voting public's political knowledge, campaign and policy understanding, and participation in the political process. As legitimate information is required to make informed decisions and social media is gaining

prominence as a legitimate source for news, these issues are of utmost importance in the 2016 election cycle and all that follow.

There is currently little research to guide the conversation of the impact of misinformation on selective exposure and political polarization. With the current political state and increasing reliance on social media for news consumption, this is an interesting time and topic for study. Previous researchers have focused on the sharing of news and why users choose certain sources over others but the concept of false news is largely missing from research (Hermida, et al., 2012). In addition, Stroud (2011) has specifically looked at political polarization and partisan selective exposure but did not focus on the effects that political misinformation has on engagement in the political process or even the continued dispersal of believable false news.

This study will look at previous research in the areas of social media, political misinformation shared and consumed on Facebook, political knowledge and participation, political polarization that leads to selective exposure, the motivations for sharing false information, and the potential impact of false political information. It will then delve into the theoretical framework behind the cognitive decisions made by Facebook users to ensure that they find information tailored to their own political beliefs on their newsfeed. In addition, the paper will discuss how cognitive dissonance, selective exposure, and news diffusion apply to the factors that lead to the creation and dispersal of false information, either knowingly or unknowingly. In addition, it will discuss the implications of political misinformation shared on social media and suggestions for potential modifications by the social media platform creators as well as platform users that allow for an increase in information credibility and trust as well as

information sharing standards. Finally, it will put forward best practices for uncovering political misinformation and gathering information in the current political climate.

2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

2.1 News Gathering and Social Media

A majority (64%) of the U.S. population uses Facebook, and The Pew Research Center (2013) found that 34% of those users accessed the site to find news. A follow up study in 2015 found a 14% increase in the 18-34 demographic turning to the platform for news and an 18% increase in those 35 and older. With such a large percentage of the U.S. and world population logging into Facebook on a daily basis, social media continues to be a highly studied medium by social scientists and communication researchers (Pew, 2013). Social media, and more specifically Facebook, provides a permanent window into the communication habits and tactics of its users with activities that include status updates, private messages, news sharing, and a form of identity creation. Its immense popularity gives rise to the platform's effects, and therefore more information is necessary to study how information gathered on the platform affects the message consumer and the formation of their political opinions.

According to the company's mission statement, Facebook's main goal is to "give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected" (Facebook, 2015a). In the era of Web 2.0, there are many social media platforms that offer an unprecedented level of access to varied levels of personal information about friends, family, coworkers, and even political leaders. Facebook, however, is by far the most commonly and frequently utilized platform for sharing and viewing information across nearly all age demographics and is increasingly used by an older demographic (Pew, 2015). According to statistics released annually by the social media giant, there are currently more than 1.55 billion active Facebook users (a 220 million user increase from the previous year) with more than 1.01 billion users

visiting the site daily and more than 894 million users accessing their profiles via their mobile phones each day (Facebook, 2015a).

In order to illustrate Facebook's magnitude, consider Twitter and Instagram the runner-up and third place social networking sites in the United States. In second place, Twitter has more than 320 million active users (an increase of 50 million from the previous year) that leads to more than one billion unique visits to sites embedded within tweets, with more than 80% of that data coming from users on mobile devices (Twitter, 2015). Instagram, which is now a subsidiary of Facebook, has more than 400 million active users (a 100% increase from the previous year) who post an average of 80 million individual photos each day and those photos then receive approximately 3.5 billion likes daily, all coming from users on a mobile device (Instagram, 2015). While Instagram and Twitter have experienced solid user growth in the last year, they still account for a much smaller percentage of the market share of social networking site users. In addition, Facebook is more uniquely targeted at the general public instead of niche users and allows for the dispersal of longer and more detailed posts that reappear within newsfeeds as opposed to following the chronological posting hierarchy of Twitter and Instagram. In addition, users are able to voluntarily hide posts, people, and pages to ensure they do not see similar information in the future. That functionality makes Facebook more susceptible to long-term misinformation sharing and easier selective exposure habits for the users. This function presents issues in correcting misinformation as older and debunked stories can reappear as fact long after they have occurred and been proven false.

Social media provides users of the platform with the opportunity to craft their own political information, share it with other online users, and provide feedback to the information

provided by others. In addition, users encounter news and entertainment content whenever and wherever they choose to look and based upon the search terms and connections they choose. Hanson et al. (2010) noted that the Internet is now an additional source for political information with the ability to influence the attitudes and choices of voters.

According to data collected from Parse.ly, Facebook now generates more traffic to news sites than Google (Ingram, 2015). The platform brings the news to the user so individuals are no longer actively searching for news but are accepting the information presented to them based on their profile's algorithm. Since that algorithm is based on preferences, friend choice, post likes and comments, and search behaviors, the news shown to the user is a direct reflection of their personal actions and attitudes (Ingram, 2015). This increase in traffic and influence should only be expected to rise as more individuals sign up for the platform and select their unique user preferences.

The majority of social media users are not logging in every day just to find information about national news; however, they are increasingly likely to see news inadvertently either due to the posts of individuals in their network or posts made by celebrities, pages, or groups that they follow (Kim, Chen, & Gil de Zuniga, 2013). Also called "stumble upon news," these are items posted by social media users that others in their network see without any intent of gathering news (Kim, Chen, & Gil de Zuniga, 2013). In 2014, Facebook added a "related stories" feature that has increased the likelihood of seeing multiple stories about a topic without actively searching for alternative opinions or additional information (Bode & Vraga, 2015). When a user clicks on a particular story, reads information, and returns to their newsfeed page, a scrollable story bar appears under the original, clicked-on story. That bar contains three to

five additional news or opinion pieces related to the original topic or story. Generally, they come from varied sources that range the conservative to liberal spectrum and the location of reporting. With stories generated by an algorithm that matches stories based solely on topic, the feature leads to users being more likely to become exposed to crosscutting information. Conservative newsreaders are automatically exposed to stories from liberal-leaning publications and liberals are more likely to see information coming from conservative news sources.

President Obama was the first presidential candidate to successfully use social media to his campaign advantage, and Fraser and Dutta (2008) stated that he was the first president to win the election courtesy of the World Wide Web and the outreach benefits that social media and campaign websites provide. The same social media platforms that led to his election have also facilitated the creation and circulation of many rumors and unproven statements about his personal and political past as well as current policies of his administration. Because the power and dynamics of politics has shifted to the outer reaches of the web that are filled with user-generated content not verified by traditional gatekeepers, anyone can now participate even if they are not equipped with factual political knowledge (Fraser & Dutta, 2008). Even since Obama's landmark use of social media during his campaign in 2008, the power has continued to shift more outward, replacing the old-style tactics used by elites working to sway the political conversation. In the 2016 Presidential election, the major party candidates employed social media tactics to reach voters including Donald Trump's prolific use of Twitter and the Clinton campaign's use of Facebook to share messages from the candidate and campaign details (Pew, 2016b). Pew (2016b) found that even though Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders were equally

active on Facebook and Twitter throughout the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, social media posts made by Donald Trump received far more attention and engagement.

Before social media entered the news race, there was a multitude of options for individuals to turn to for their daily dose of political information, even those that catered to their political interests. When individuals began turning to online sources for their news, political blogs became a bastion of polarized information. Those blogs still exist and some online newspapers purchased rights to them in order to provide content for their political news pages. In addition, most newspapers started online versions making news available to people around the globe and cable news stations also started pages to share their views with the citizens of the world. Social media pages are an extension of this outreach to viewers and to build their loyal fan base, these pages and blogs must provide content that is deemed credible to their followers (Johnson & Kaye, 2013). By crafting this connection, their followers are more likely to believe everything that is posted by the source without finding additional means of educating themselves about the topic (Johnson & Kaye, 2013). This blind trust of unverified sources could have adverse effects on the political knowledge of the American voter.

2.2 News Exposure, Political Knowledge & Self-Efficacy

Political knowledge cannot be simply assessed by looking at voters who are considered either informed for uninformed. Instead, a third category must be created for the misinformed who are not merely lacking any information but are armed with false information when they make their voting choices (Kuklinski et al., 2000). In a perfect democracy, all voting citizens would receive the same, unbiased and accurate information about all candidates in the race. This paper suggests that such a perfectly informed democracy does not exist, in part, because

of social media newsgathering filled with misinformation tied to selective exposure and its ability to continue the cycle of increased extreme partisanship. That extreme polarization could lead to gridlock and in turn, a loss of healthy and civil democratic debate. The issue arises when an individual only consumes or believes news that is similar to their views courtesy of the platform's filtering algorithm, personal searching habits, and intentional hiding of dissonant information. This leads to increased polarization by widening the knowledge gap regarding key political issues since the individual will likely discount any alternative viewpoints (Johnson & Kaye, 2013; Stroud, 2008).

Researchers have studied to better understand the driving factors behind "knowledge distortion" that also can be applied to the concepts of cognitive dissonance and selective exposure (Reedy, Wells, & Gastil, 2014). Their research found a connection between the heuristic and cultural cognitive theories suggesting that citizens usually have a distorted view of "facts" regarding public issues that are based on the individuals' previously crafted values and beliefs. In addition, they noted that political knowledge allows for individuals to differentiate between information that is consistent or dissonant with their values. Individuals do so by turning to what they consider reliable cues and beliefs, confirming that values and political beliefs play a potentially larger role in fact assessment than political knowledge (Reedy, Wells, & Gastil, 2014). This happens in part because voters who have a better understanding of the political sphere are more likely to "engage in biased filtering of factual claims" than their less informed peers (Reedy, Wells, & Gastil, 2014).

Exposure to campaign messages is a requirement for knowledge building about candidates, and those messages can contain a wide variety of belief building data including

policy declarations, value statements, factual claims, or even deceptive claims. According to Reedy, Wells, and Gastil (2014) this level of political education is secondary to the voter's deep-seated values due to cognitive differences that occur within the voting public. Their differences can alter how an individual perceives messages shared by political parties or candidates. With such deeply held values leading to "knowledge distortion," it stands to reason that policy and candidate choices will be impacted.

Kuklinski et al. (2000) noted that voters require easy access to factual information that allows for policy evaluation and those voters are then required to use those facts to inform their preferences. Obviously, the ideal process does not always occur. Social media does not cause this but the platforms certainly aid in the dispersal of information that impedes the function of the process. It is important to remember that this obstruction of facts is not solely the responsibility of social media platforms as they simply provide a vehicle for information created by their users. The individuals and groups best able to provide factual information are elected officials and traditional media sources that unfortunately have no benefit to sharing facts that could be potentially damaging to their own needs or wants (Kukinski et al., 2000). Instead, those groups are more enticed to sway information toward their own policies and goals and manipulate public opinion. Thus, intentional misinformation or leading information is presented that speaks heavily to partisan supporters and will do little to inform readers of fact.

Kukinski et al. (2000) believed that voters hold tightly to their formed beliefs and those that hold inaccurate views will do so with confidence. The researchers found that American voters held widely inaccurate views about welfare policies and statistics with more than half grossly overestimating the number of Americans on welfare; however, it was not the inaccuracy

that the researchers found most troubling. Instead of the misinformation, it was the respondents' attitude of being confident in their accuracy when they were wildly inaccurate. Even when presented with correcting factual information, the respondents' beliefs did not change to match the gained knowledge (Kukinski et al, 2000).

Stroud (2011) noted that certainty increases the likelihood that an individual will select news stories that are only in support of their preferred candidate. A similar example can be seen today in Facebook posts that are created to inform the world of shocking political policies that do not exist or even events that have never happened. For example, there were reports during the 2016 Presidential campaign that Hillary Clinton had been connected to the murder of an FBI agent that leaked her emails. The story was completely false but that did not stop it from being shared on Facebook more than 500,000 times (Sydell, 2016). Even when sharers are informed of the falsehoods contained in the information, some are willing to defend their original position or seek out additional consonant information to prove that they are correct or reinforce their beliefs or argument (Bode & Vrage, 2015; Nyhan & Reifler, 2012).

Abril (2015) noted that increased exposure to like-minded partisan news increases confidence in gained political knowledge, therefore leading to an increased likelihood that an individual would engage in political discussions. Since partisan news favors a particular party and point of view, it is obviously unbalanced and has an easily discernable lack of objectivity. When skewed news that does not include accurate information containing scientific support or facts is shared as factual information, misinformation occurs. Tied to Stroud's (2011) findings that polarization leads to selective exposure, this suggests that politically engaged individuals are more likely to consume an increased amount of political misinformation. As individuals

consume that information and share it with other individuals as factual, an increased number of potential voters have been clouded by false information. The number of nontraditional, partisan news sources has increased as the United States has become more politically polarized and have turned to online news outlets, especially social media platforms like Facebook (Abril, 2015).

Wells and Thorson (2015) used the big data measurement on Facebook news feeds to understand the effects of news and politics seen on the site. The study noted that an increased number of Facebook friends indicates a higher number of liked pages and both indicate a higher level of social media use, including news consumption. The greatest variable in an individual's news consumption is an initial interest in news, and those interested in a wider variety of news will like and follow more pages and blogs than those who are interested in only specific topics or sources. Those liked pages, blogs, and friends all feed into the filtering considerations of the platform opening the user to the possibility of inadvertent selective exposure. In addition, journalists and verified news organizations are not considered primary sources of news and are surpassed by civic and political pages for likes, follows, and shares of content (Wells & Thorson, 2015). False news became the news after the 2016 election and fact-checking page, Snopes (2016), compiled a list of pages that post fake or misconstrued news including News Buzz Daily, News Examiner, Conservative Tribune, Empire Herald and World News Daily Report. It should also be noted that Wells and Thorson (2015) found that even though interest in news plays a critical role in political knowledge, news consumption does not appear to increase levels of knowledge. Even considering an individual's interest and pages followed, information posted

by friends plays an even larger role for those interested in news because of inherent lack of trust in political news organizations (Pew, 2014).

As a whole, Americans have become more and more distrusting of traditional media sources, reflected by the growing number of partisan news outlets (Pew, 2014). As the population becomes more divided on party lines, each side will be less and less likely to trust sources that are not affiliated with their chosen party. With candidates now fully supporting the use of social media in their campaigns and pages dedicated to promoting or critiquing those candidates, users are exposed to even more information that confirms their belief or cynicism. Hanson et al. (2010) noted that social media has become an added source of political information that has unique potential to influence attitudes of the voting public. Because of the platform's dispersal capabilities, Facebook provides an excellent outlet for propagating unique or innovative information, value statements, and social issue declarations (Hanson et al., 2010).

Even when individuals consider themselves to be politically involved, motivated, and knowledgeable about policies and topics, they are still exposed to misinformation and risk being fooled. As the transmission of false information increases, so does an individual's level of exposure. Garrett (2011) noted that increased exposure promotes belief in misinformation even if the social media users exposed to the misinformation are initially skeptical of the content of the information or its source. Belief in information, even if it is false information, can increase the individual's political self-efficacy, causing them to be more confident in the information that they have obtained to create and confirm their political beliefs.

Kushin and Yamamoto (2010) claimed that an increase in political knowledge and confidence leads individuals to seek out information that fulfills their curiosity or knowledge base in a subject. In this respect, campaign or political involvement, Facebook news consumption, and political knowledge and confidence work together to completely fulfill an individual's interest in political news. This leads people with high confidence in their political knowledge to believe that they have a high level of understanding of campaigns, issues, and the correctness of their opinion (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). This motivation to fulfill a knowledge base about a topic with which the individual is already confident in their knowledge suggests that the individual will employ selective exposure tactics to confirm their opinions. Abril (2015) discussed similar concepts noting that exposure to heavily partisan news leads to stronger attitudes about the individual's chosen political party and candidate. In essence, the higher the individual's confidence in their political knowledge and experience, the more likely they are to discuss and share that information within their network and seek out confirming news and related sources.

2.3 Political Polarization

As Americans, we are afforded with the opportunity to choose sides based on the political party with which we most closely identify. Unfortunately, the choice of political party affiliation is not always based in fact as we often base our political opinions on beliefs that are not always in line with facts or reality (Keohane, 2010). Members of political parties view traditional news sources in different ways, and it is likely that information obtained from them will be viewed in respect to their political attitudes, beliefs, and experiences. The Pew Research Center (2014) studied the fundamental differences in news media consumption between

conservatives and liberals and found drastically different habits between the parties. More than any other group, conservatives overwhelmingly trust a single news source, Fox News, for their national and political news. In addition, conservatives distrust three quarters of the news sources provided but more than 75% of the conservative respondents fully trust their chosen news source, Fox (Pew, 2014).

In contrast, the same study found that liberals rely on a greater range of sources for the national and political news including outlets that are not as frequently subscribed to by citizens of the United States. Also in direct departure from conservatives, liberals are far more trusting of traditional media outlets, feeling confident in more than three quarters of the sources provided in the survey (Pew, 2014). These stark differences speak to the increased polarization that can currently be seen in online and traditional sources, with some directly tailoring their news coverage to match the ideals of their viewers. As this study suggests, if a viewer does not trust a particular news source, they will see information from that source as less credible but information from trusted sources will receive less scrutiny. It also implies that conservatives are relying on a single, notoriously biased news source for their political coverage that could lead to increased levels of misinformation; however, that does not mean that liberals are immune to the biased news source effect (Pew, 2014). This leads to the idea that selective exposure might not be solely about news avoidance but also news interpretation. This is not a new practice. In the early days of an independent America, political parties often sponsored newspapers and papers that were not biased toward a particular party were seen as morally repugnant and untrustworthy (Stroud, 2011). Similar to an individual showing their support for a political party or candidate on social media, having a subscription to the newspaper

sponsored by your chosen party was seen as part of an Americans' civic duty (Stroud, 2011). Just like in 1776, if a viewer feels that the source is not trustworthy, they will likely "read into" the information provided by their preferred news source, looking for ways that the information can correlate with what they know to be true. This suggests that increased polarization could lead to an increase in the sharing of political news on social media. However, it is less certain if polarization or choice of political party leads to an increased likelihood of sharing political misinformation

H1: Political polarization affects the frequency of political information an individual shares on Facebook.

RQ1: Are self-identified Democrats or Republicans more likely to share political misinformation on Facebook?

RQ2: Does a stronger degree of political polarization increase the likelihood of sharing political misinformation on Facebook?

Bode and Vraga (2015) noted that social media allows users to reinforce misinformation that is contrary to agreed upon answers within the scientific community as seen in the debate regarding the link between vaccines and autism. As users look to dispel dissonant information that threatens the beliefs they know to be true, individuals will be more apt to share information that is not completely factual or seek out friends or groups that share their beliefs.

There is a large amount of misinformation available on the Internet and a growing body of research regarding the role of social media in misinformation propagation. Messing and Westwood (2014) found that while social media is growing in its ability to expose users to news and political information, the effects of that information are insignificant. Weeks and Garrett

(2014) found that online exposure to political information, especially incorrect political information, leads to a misinformed and unprepared voting public. In addition, Nyhan and Reifler (2012) mention the lack of impact garnered by corrections to false information for those with strongly held political and social beliefs.

A study conducted by Reedy, Wells, and Gastil (2014) looked at the level of knowledge distortion regarding three ballot issues in the state of Washington in contrast to the types and levels of political knowledge and beliefs held by respondents. The study utilized a distortion scale in conjunction with five basic political information questions to gauge the respondents' level of knowledge and found that higher levels of political knowledge and media exposure did not mediate bias or misinformation for conservatives or liberals. Instead, it strengthened the bond between the respondent's pre-existing values and their voting choices. This could be easily explained by the likelihood that the political knowledge attained by each respondent was from sources that fall in line with their closely held beliefs. However, their study suggests that while media might be a source of misinformation, the voting public's beliefs based on their political values likely have a larger influence on their voting habits.

Garrett's (2011) study on the consequences of political misinformation found online seems to affirm that increased political exposure does little to mitigate the belief of false political information. The study goes further by analyzing the impact of exposure to rumor rebuttals also available online that could be likened to the related stories feature offered by Facebook. Even though the exposure to rebuttal material decreases the belief in online misinformation, it does not match the effects of exposure to false information to completely nullify the issue (Garrett, 2011). However, if a user is also exposed to verified news sources

online, the likelihood that that individual will believe misinformation greatly decreases. As partisanship increases and trust in mainstream news decreases, it is increasingly more likely that the average user will not turn to mainstream news but instead a partisan news source.

Wells and Thorson (2015) dug into the flow of political information on Facebook and questioned what effect an individual's choice of who to follow on social media had on the amount of political news they actually view on a daily basis. They noted that due to Facebook's proprietary content curating algorithm, the act of following or "liking" a political figure or page opens that user to information colored by the interests of the liked pages. In addition, Nyhan and Reifler (2012) noted that motivated reasoning leads individuals to seek out information that is consistent with their views and avoid contrary information, but the effect is stronger for congruent information. Confirmation bias leads individuals to be more accepting of information that reinforces their beliefs while also rejecting information that undermines their political stances (Nyhan & Reifler, 2012).

In their study of endorsements and partisan source affiliation, Messing and Westwood (2014) found that source labels influence who reads the information but are significantly less valuable to message consumers than message endorsements by trusted members of their social network. Their findings also suggested that using social media would then increase exposure to diverse news content due to the fact that friends and connections are preferred news sources. The strength of the ties within the individual's network also plays an important role in the diversity of information that appears on their newsfeed. The algorithm employed by Facebook should also be taken into account as it filters content based on what the user will be likely to view and endorse by using the pages and people they follow as well as personal

information available within their profile. What they share is largely because they are searching for information that is valuable, interesting, or significant to share with their social network peers (Messing & Westwood, 2014).

With a growing amount of extremism present in much of the misinformation shared on social media, it is important to understand if an individual's political party affiliation has any impact on that user's belief and sharing patterns in regards to political misinformation. Are conservatives more likely than liberals to believe the misinformation and share it, or does a person's political affiliation indicate that they are more likely to question the information's veracity?

Nyhan and Reifler (2012) noted that individually, the frequency of belief in false information greatly varies according to the person's political party or ideology. They noted that historically, Democrats were more likely to believe false negative reports about Reagan and both Bush presidencies while Republicans were more likely to believe false information regarding the Clinton and Obama administrations. It should be noted, however, that individuals who have a party but express negative views regarding their chosen party and positive views regarding the opposing party are the least likely to be deceived by false information due to their lower motivation and likelihood to engage in selective exposure (Nyhan & Reifler, 2012).

Partisanship and selective exposure enables misinformation to continue as both Republicans and Democrats are not immune to factual misrepresentations when they benefit their party (Bode & Vraga, 2015). With no official gatekeepers available to police the political misinformation and opinion that can be found right next to the information backed by credible evidence, it could be difficult for Facebook users to decipher fact from fiction. In addition, Bode

and Vraga (2015) noted the inclusion of humor and image-based memes that facilitate even swifter transmission and are more likely to be shared widely. Because the images can be satire, fact, or malicious falsehoods, consumers will likely rely on pre-existing beliefs to interpret the message.

Reedy, Wells, and Gastil (2014) found that political knowledge did not play as pivotal of a role in a voter's Election Day decision as did their partisan biases, even if those beliefs were founded on misperceptions. The researchers noted that even voters who are not exposed to traditional media and sources tasked with informing the public about policies and party platforms will make voting decisions, even if that means those decisions are made in the absence of valuable information. As a way to combat such uninformed voting, groups have created reviews available to the public that contain short descriptions and analysis of ballot items intended to make it easy for the general public to be better informed. Reedy, Well, and Gastil (2014) did not mention if these online election reviews were successful or even if those responsible for the review were seen as unbiased.

2.4 Political Participation

Political participation is not limited to casting a ballot every November and includes political discussion, debate, and sharing of news with others (Gil de Zuniga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012). Online political participation has been able to thrive courtesy of social media sites that offer users a rich, interactive communication experience. Users are able to share their political support in a multitude of ways. Instead of simply including "Democrat" or "Republican" in their online profile, users have the capability of liking and sharing pages, posts, blogs, and personal statements regarding national politics and candidates. In addition, users can donate to

campaigns online and encourage members of their social network to vote and support their candidate (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). Kushin and Yamamoto (2010) expected that usage of the platform in this way would lead to increased confidence in political knowledge and, in turn, increase voting activity; however, this was found to be only partially true as increased social media activity does not always lead to increased political engagement and involvement through casting ballots. Gil de Zuniga, Jung, and Valenzuela (2012) also found that online participation does not necessarily lead to offline participation. This suggests that either social media users are not confident enough in the information found on their newsfeeds, the information they consume is not compelling to their involvement, or they simply are not amply motivated to vote.

This supports the concept that increased partisanship leads to an increased level of selective exposure by suggesting that biased and partisan news posts and messages lead to lower levels of voter participation (Stroud, 2010). Kushin and Yamamoto (2010) also suggest that the content of the political information consumed could be to blame for the lack of impact on offline participation by being perceived as biased or increasingly negative to message receivers who prefer more balanced coverage. This effect is opposite of the assumed benefit of increased levels of available information afforded by social media. If users feel that the extra information provided by social media is not accurate, this assessment could cause them to be less involved in political conversations or even on Election Day. Even though there are a large number of users consuming and sharing information or misinformation they are not more likely than their more quiet counterparts to show up to their polling place. The impact of users or

political pages that share misinformation, however, is still felt in ways other than Election Day results.

2.5 News Propagation

Political misinformation spreads just like factual information, can spread quickly and efficiently through social media, and follows closely with the concept of the diffusion of news. Funkhouser and McCombs (1971) describe the process of diffusion as the way information spreads throughout the population, which leads to the formation of public opinion. At the time the theory was created, traditional mass media was the main source of information, but their statements can be easily translated to social media and Facebook specifically. The theory comes from Funkhouser, who created a model to predict the diffusion of news based on audience interest and probable exposure (Funkhouser & McCombs, 1971). Funkhouser (1970) noted that there are regularities in the process of news diffusion including a change in awareness, media platforms sharing news, and the reoccurrence of patterns between places and events. This model can be applied to political misinformation shared on social media since many of them are treated as or offer information similar to news and their diffusion closely follows the model.

For example, a post copiously shared during 2016 stated that Facebook's founder, Mark Zuckerberg, would be giving away a million dollars to a certain number of the social media platform's users. In order to be eligible to receive the money, users had to share the article that discussed how and why the billionaire was sharing his wealth. The fabricated news story shared enough details to seem legitimate, and since users had nothing to lose and a million

dollars to gain, the post was widely circulated even after Zuckerberg stated that the story was a hoax (Wagstaff, 2015).

The effects of news sources have been greatly debated. Adding the element of user-generated content changes the debate to no longer be about the information coming from trusted news sources but the direct effects of political information shared by your closest friends and connections. As shown in previous research, the users of different types of media base their opinions (and potentially voting decisions) of political candidates and issues upon information gathered from those media sources (Ceron, 2015).

When users turn to Facebook specifically for their news, it is unknown how much of what they are viewing is biased or even fabricated. In 2016, Facebook was accused of committing a form of misinformation by supposedly suppressing conservative news items from the "trending" side column feature of the page (Nunez, 2016). The accusation came from statements made by a former Facebook employee stating that he would remove conservative stories and give preference to chosen stories even if they were not being widely discussed online (Nunez, 2016). Other employees denied having suppressed right-leaning stories and no evidence could be found of similar suppression of liberal-skewed news (Nunez, 2016). Nunez (2016) did find that management informed coders to add stories to the list if they were breaking news or seen as headlines on multiple online newspapers. Conservatives in the U.S. Senate wanted the social media giant to testify at hearings about their assumed political bias. The director of the program stated that the accusations are false, but the issue still remains and could impact the way social media users evaluate the credibility of information found on the site. It's unknown, however, if the accusations are true or if they are part of an effort of senate

conservatives to discredit information found on Facebook, which could also lead to selective exposure and increased partisanship.

When the false information is seen as a legitimate piece of information, a user shares the information, which is now seen by their connections on social media. As others in the connected group share the information as fact, it is spread to a continuing number until it reaches a point of saturation or is possibly refuted by a member of the connection's group. While mass media and news outlets are no longer the source, the process is still the same because information gathered on Facebook is then used in face-to-face and other interactions. The process is similar for many types of information and allows for quick and complete dispersal of ideas.

Zhang, Zhao, and Xu (2016) noted that social media allows users to be instantly aware of real-world events from the point of view of others in their network as well as to voice their own opinion at their will. Liking, sharing, or commenting on such statements enhances the speed of the propagation of the information contained whether factual or fabricated. As those ideas spread, they can become social media trends and the information contained can become the public consensus.

The study also found that individuals with the most popularity or the most verified information might not always lead to the largest influence or information propagation. This can be seen in the likelihood for individuals to ignore traditional news sources in favor of political blogs or individuals sharing information. Their information is more trusted and believed even though it is not put through the same rigorous vetting processes required by traditional media. Zhang, Zhao, and Xu (2016) stated that there's an atmosphere among regular social media

users to readily accept novel information without any indication of validity. This, in turn, has created an atmosphere that is primed for the acceptance and propagation of false news. In addition to allowing for a convenient way to share ideas, social networks have changed the way that information becomes widely held as fact by individuals all across the country (Zhang, Zhao, & Xu, 2016). It should be considered, however, that a simple post "share" is not sufficient for widespread propagation, and secondary shares are the most valuable indicator for information dispersal (Zhang, Zhao, & Xu, 2016).

Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Guadet (1944) noted in their study of how a voter chooses a candidate that interpersonal communication affected how media influenced voters. While certainly media plays a role in the political education of individuals, their interpersonal connections and communication could play a larger role in their final voting decision. The Two-Step Hypothesis states that opinion leaders are the starting point for information and that information flows from them to people who are not as actively connected to the information. Those thought leaders pass that information to their peers but those leaders are easy to distinguish from others (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). The theory was created in discussion of the effects of mass media dispersal of news and explained how information was shared from the radio and newspapers; however, the general concept of the flow of information is easily translated to the flow of information through social media cannels. The effects of information flow can be seen in the diffusion of political news, including false political news, on social media and online blogs. The information shared then becomes regarded as fact because of the original opinion leader source; however, the hypothesis does not require for information to be

factual to be considered part of the process. While research has modified the hypothesis into a multiple-step model, the influence of opinion leaders is evident within their network.

2.6 Political Misinformation

2.6.1 History of Misinformation

Vis (2014) cited a study done at Oxford University that found that respondents believed the Internet to be a more reliable source of news than television or radio. While the web certainly contains a multitude of information, it is hard to say that it is more reliable than traditional media sources that have gatekeepers checking the veracity of information shared. The history of newspapers, television, and radio however, do provide a multitude of reasons for individuals to question their credibility or potential ulterior motives.

Misinformation surrounding politics and particularly presidential campaigns has been around even before the ink was dry on the Declaration of Independence. As long as separate parties and factions of the country were fighting to be heard and campaigning for the highest office in the land, members of the media have dragged those candidates through the proverbial mud. Sheppard (2008) and Stroud (2011) quoted several instances where sitting Presidents were called "the source of all misfortune," "indecisive, impractical, and impulsive," and a "weak, vain old man" by national newspapers. Derogatory statements about sitting Presidents and the country's leaders originate from sources that disagree with the positions or actions of those leaders. Even though candidates and Presidents have seen their fair share of insults in the press, they have also made accusations about the media machine.

Sheppard (2008) noted that there were times that the press itself was more newsworthy than the stories that they were covering. Today, the "so-called liberal media" has

become a talking point during presidential campaigns, made a popular stance during President George H.W. Bush's run to stay in the White House in 1992 (Sheppard, 2008). During the 2016 election, Republican nominee Donald Trump repeatedly noted his distrust of the media; he has even blamed journalists for his fall in the polls and was very clear about his dislike for members of the media (Schleifer, 2015).

History shows that in some cases, the story is not always the whole story and not entirely believable. When newspapers were owned by candidates and party leaders, it was not uncommon to see only stories that favored a candidate or party and even less uncommon to see disparaging remarks about the opposition (Sheppard, 2008). Thomas Jefferson even noted that the defamation and angry discourse was an unwelcome uncertainty of political life (Sheppard, 2008). Much like Obama's reported successful use of social media, Jefferson benefitted from his ability to manipulate the press and that skill is often attributed to his election victory (Sheppard, 2008). Similar sentiments have been echoed about Donald Trump's ability to manipulate the press while denigrating journalists during his presidential campaign, and that manipulation could have played a role in his election (Cary, 2015).

Because political parties and government administrations financially supported newspapers, it seems safe to assume that fair and balanced news was not reaching the public. In addition, Congress passed the Sedition Act of 1798 that allowed for the prosecution of newsmen who were willing to write disparaging news about the President or the government, disguised as a law made to keep the country safer from foreign enemies (Sheppard, 2008). Instead of keeping the country safer during its infancy, it allowed for the sitting administration to conduct business without the fear of criticism or questioning from the general public. Even

though the Act was not successful or kept as law, it did allow for rampant political bias to rule newspapers and government coverage. It also ensured that stories containing very little fact were sent to the public for consumption.

Just like the breaking news stories that appear on social media without substantiated fact, partisan newspapers shared details of ongoing news stories without verifying the information. In 1798, yellow fever was ravaging the country and many wanted to know the source of the medical scourge. The Federalists printed that the source of the sickness was a French ship while members of the Republican Party blamed the spread of yellow fever on a British ship (Sheppard, 2008). Whether the difference in "facts" occurred due to partisanship or a difference of source is less important than the fact that at least one of the pieces of information was completely false.

Long before the 2016 election, political scientists were concerned about the value of news content being shared about political candidates and issues. Several presidential elections have experienced contentious debates along with their fair share of misinformation being shared through biased news sources, some stories even shared by sources that were supposed to be reliable. Early in the Internet age, the most common tactic for controlling the flow of advantageous information was to game search engines to show specific pages for search terms (Ehrenberg, 2012). Google has since made changes to their search algorithms that make this practice mostly impossible and certainly much less effective (Ehrenberg, 2012).

After social media arrived and became a campaign tool in the 2008 election, its use for news collection and campaigning has only increased. With that increase also came an increase in the use of the tool to intentionally spread false news stories about candidates or issues. In

her 2012 article for *Science News*, Ehrenberg described a social media smear campaign against Democratic candidate Martha Coakley. In what social media researchers call a "Twitter bomb," false claims about the candidate were made via cryptic Twitter accounts. In a little more than two hours, the accounts were able to spread information to tens of thousands of social media users to discredit Coakley and make false statements about her policies. While maybe not completely at fault, the cyber attack very well could have been a factor in the Democrat's last-minute loss (Ehrenberg, 2012). It should be noted that these types of false information attacks are against Twitter's user agreement but are not completely possible to erase or stop (Ehrenberg, 2012; Twitter, 2016).

Unlike the street new criers of 1776, the anonymity of social media and the ability to mask your true identity allows for the lines of news and trustworthiness to be blurred. Because social media provides an outlet for everyone, platform users must approach news with the understanding that you cannot get the convenience of factual news on your Facebook feed without the real potential of misinformation and false news featuring on their timeline. Ehrenberg (2012) noted that before the time of social media it was easy to tell who was espousing which candidate or policy. Because advertisements and other materials being shared with the masses were vetted though journalists, the ability to fool the public seemed more contained. Now, however, social media pundits have a direct connection to an audience of millions while offering very little to back up their political claims (Ehrenberg, 2012). Now, one person with a social media account and a political agenda has the ability to do the damage of a well-oiled political machine on a rampage. With a basic understanding of the platform's

algorithm, that one person can reach millions with misinformation that could certainly affect the outcome of an election.

2.6.2 Sources of Misinformation

Every media consumer is exposed to at least some type of misrepresentation of news or events on the Internet, and more specifically, Facebook. Garrett (2011) defined political rumors as news that has not met a standard of verifiable evidence and instances where statements made out of paranoia can be construed as fact. Rumors and political misinformation could work on the same definition with the exception that some rumors end up being true while political misinformation is always false. Political misinformation is unverified information parading as factual claims and those claims can be made intentionally or through the misrepresentation or misunderstanding of facts. In regards to social media, political misinformation can occur for a variety of reasons including misattribution of satirical content; however, true misinformation should be limited to content that is not intended to be humorous or for entertainment purposes but instead false information that is shared as factual content.

The exposure to false information can happen courtesy of another individual or news source within the user's social network intentionally crafting content to mislead their social following, an individual or news source believing a satire article from a political humor site to be true and sharing it as such, or even an accidental misrepresentation of facts in rushed news reports about events in progress (Baker, 2015). How much political information a person is exposed to can vary based on a wide array of factors including political affiliation, self-reported political affiliation or political polarization of members of the social network, organization or individual pages liked and followed on social media, additional news sources viewed by the user

and time spent browsing their social media feeds. Garrett (2011) found that individuals who more frequently gather their political news online are more likely to encounter an increased level of political misinformation and are then more likely to believe more of the misinformation they encounter. All of these factors also play a part in the users' want or ability to verify the news they consume from their social networks (Johnson & Kaye, 2014). These factors and an individual's increased use of Facebook for newsgathering could lead to an increased exposure to and belief of political misinformation.

H2: Facebook use for political newsgathering will be positively related to the belief of political misinformation.

Political misinformation could be caused by and can occur due to intentional fabrication of information or by inadvertent sharing of false news or misunderstanding. With a wide variety of complex topics being discussed in tandem, it is easy to assume that there will be a certain level of misunderstanding that is shared as fact. However, there is big business to be made crafting and sharing intentionally falsified information. Sharing false information has become its own industry with everyone from entertainers and political groups to global terrorism regimes uploading news content for general consumption. Even more, the groups that are using social media as a propaganda tool are doing so while utilizing the agreed upon best practices of ensuring that information spreads thoroughly. Online platforms have been praised for the same reasons that they allow for the quick dispersal of misinformation including speed, space efficiency, easy editing, and pervasive access (Szabo & Huberman, 2010). However, the potential negative effects that can occur through the intentional or unintentional use of misinformation are largely ignored (Fitzgerald, 1997). Using websites like Digg or Reddit

allows for content creators to post information with very little monitoring for credibility. If posts receive a large amount of attention, they are moved to a more prominent location that reaches even more viewers (Szabo & Huberman, 2010). This is similar to the function of Facebook's filtering algorithm that also factors the user's preferences and previous activity in what content is pushed higher in the newsfeed.

Some misinformation is intentionally created to further an individual or group's political agenda, for entertainment purposes, or possibly even with the attempt to sabotage the effects of opposed legislation. For example, many posts were created and propagated by far right groups suggesting that President Barack Obama was not an American citizen but instead born in the Middle East, making him ineligible to serve as the President of the United States (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Even after an eight-year presidency and verified citizenship via his long-form Hawaiian birth certificate, this is still an often-discussed topic by conservatives. Nyhan and Reifler (2012) also mention the number of Republicans that believe President Obama is a Muslim despite his proclamation that he is a Christian. The claim regarding his religion was difficult to disprove even without any evidence showing that Obama was a member of the Muslim faith.

One of the basic characteristics of Web 2.0 is that it allows for user generated content, or content created by the platform's users as opposed to news outlets, corporations, or marketers. Because of that functionality, individuals encounter information almost everywhere and are able to grab information that interests them and avoid information that does not. Baresch et al. (2011) noted that social media users rely on their online connections to keep them informed as opposed to traditional, verified news sources. As an individual's social

network increases, so does the sheer volume of information they are exposed to. In order to decrease the amount of information into a manageable and understandable size, filters are employed to weed out information that is uninteresting or against our beliefs or understanding (Baresch et al., 2011). When considering the common understanding that political discussion heavily depends on word of mouth, it could be easily connected that social media is the new version of that communication concept.

Some political misinformation comes about due to lack of verification by news outlets when reporting breaking stories. Social media has ushered in a new era of journalism and newsgathering courtesy of user-generated content that can often go unverified. Baker (2015) noted that when adopted, user-generated content opened the doors for news consumers, most trying to be helpful and add to the conversation about situations they encounter. While verified news sources employ journalists to check the facts of a story, some of what is shared on the Internet is done so without the same exactness. Millner (2013) noted that journalists shared a story about a fabricated web browser without complete verification because they neglected to ask the right questions. Reporters were more concerned about the image they would have if they did not quickly share the story in comparison with their competitors instead of following the basic journalism rule of verifying information and not reporting on rumors (Millner, 2013). These unverified news stories containing partial truths or complete falsehoods could have been the beginning of several false posts and beliefs.

The BBC News social media team receives approximately 3,000 unique pieces of news every day and then must go through verification steps prior to sharing information from their available platforms (Baker, 2015). Throughout their vetting process, the researchers have

found ways to spot staged, reframed, and repurposed footage that is posing as valid news stories. As cameras in cell phones become more and more capable of taking high quality photos and video footage, it is much easier to share high quality graphics and information to news outlets and also to turn an image or news story into something it is not. Also, as creating fabricated news posts (political and otherwise) has become easier and occurs almost completely unchecked, it is important to understand the effects that occur when people see political misinformation as political truth.

Baker (2015) noted that while we hate to be tricked, the general public (and sometimes mainstream media) tends to "share-first, verify-later" with information that is seen as breaking news. Since stories are making their way onto newsfeeds before facts are checked, the chances that they contain false information rise and the ability for false information to spread increases. Unfortunately, researchers noted that even though follow-up reports with corrected information are shared, people who saw the original report are less likely to see them and continue to believe the erroneous information instead of the truth (Baker, 2015).

While the speed and interactivity afforded by social media curated news can be regarded as an achievement of technology, users must also be wary of the content that is shared before any confirmation is allowed. In an interview with Television magazine, Lyse Doucet (2012) of the BBC noted that at the height of the protests following the 2009 Iranian elections, social media registered up to 2,500 updates from individuals participating in protests. While the vast amount of information helped paint the picture of life in Iran, many of the posts were simply not true (Doucet, 2012). Journalists cannot always be certain who was on the other end of a post noting that it could be anyone with "an axe to grind, someone spinning the

news" (Doucet, 2012). This could lead to a potential news story by someone who sees something too salacious or interesting not to share but what is shared could be a complete fabrication of facts.

One of the most basic causes of political misinformation is that most Americans do not know the fundamental differences between the political parties and the specific details of what they support (Fowler & Margolis, 2014). At the heart of the issue is that many political platforms and policies are worded in ways that do not lend themselves to easy understanding by the general public, which could inhibit political knowledge and efficacy (Fowler & Margolis, 2014). Most Americans consider themselves knowledgeable about the tent-pole platforms that their chosen party stands for and use that knowledge to establish decisions on issues with which they are unfamiliar (Fowler & Margolis, 2014). Without fully understanding the stance of their chosen party, it would prove difficult for voters to form accurate opinions and beliefs regarding policies and candidate platforms. In fact, this causes a real issue as it keeps citizens from being able to update their stances and beliefs.

On the Web, false information has found its way to social media newsfeeds courtesy of political websites and blogs that, in an effort to bolster their political viewpoints, are prone to sharing misinformation and rumors (Garrett, 2011). Even if the intent is not to share misinformation, many of the publishers or individuals behind these pages are quick to trust sources because the information shared is consistent with their own political views. In turn, they are quick to share the misinformation with their audience, creating a rapid dispersal of false news beginning with their followers. Since individuals are more likely to trust misinformation that is provided by a trusted source and share false information that they

believe, this can have a potentially devastating effect on the flow of information and the accuracy of political news available to those that gather information on social media (Garrett, 2011).

Ceron (2015) noted that news media have been shown to increase democratic support by skewing their reports so that viewers will have an increased level of trust in political institutions or candidates of the station's choosing. This should be considered political misinformation, as it does not provide the full facts and mirrors the types of false political information that is often shared via social media channels. The creator leans to a certain political belief and slants the information they share based on that belief, once again choosing to confirm their political bias as opposed to challenging the beliefs they hold.

Johnson and Kaye (2014) studied the credibility of news found on social media sites as related to individuals who are interested in politics. They found that even content labeled as unbiased news was rife with political persuasion. Regardless of real or perceived political bias, individuals are going to choose sources they trust the most.

Johnson and Kaye (2014) defined credibility as the judgment made by the social media user based on believability, accuracy, potential bias, relevancy, trustworthiness, and reliability. It is also important to note that the attractiveness and ease of use within the site is also paramount to that judgment. Because social media is comprised of material that is generated by the platform user and not a news organization, the benefits of gatekeepers that filter out misinformation do not exist so determining veracity falls to the message consumers (Johnson & Kaye, 2014). Flannagin and Metzger (2007) found that this verification of information by message consumers is not happening as often as one would hope. Users are not clicking on

links or researching information presented to them in social media posts or taking the time to research the topic before sharing a piece of news with the network connections.

As seen by dwindling trust in traditional media sources, their impact and role in informing citizens on political matters has greatly decreased. Partisanship in the country has increased, and trust in news sources that speak to an individual's preferred policy and position are gaining influence (Pew, 2014). However, it is not entirely certain what role this plays on levels of misinformation or even on voting habits of U.S. citizens. Reedy, Wells, and Gastil (2014) expanded on their previous study to find out where misinformation begins and to better understand the consequences of the false factual beliefs of Americans. When trying to locate potential sources of misinformation, they found that 85% of political ads aired between December 2011 and May 2012 contained at least one deceptive claim (Reedy, Wells, & Gastil, 2014). If citizens were not aware that any of the claims were deceptive, they likely took them as fact and could continue to share them as such. This leads to what Reedy, Wells, and Gastil (2014) termed as "knowledge distortion" which could likely be exacerbated by selective exposure employed on social media news feeds.

2.6.3 Motivations for Sharing Misinformation

There are varied reasons and motivations for creating and dispersing political misinformation, and Atkins and Huang (2013) likened it to a form of social engineering. They defined social engineers as individuals looking to intentionally mislead or manipulate others for personal benefit (Atkins & Huang, 2013). The tactics used can include political affiliations, emotional distress, personal issues and needs, and safety and health concerns and manipulate readers to process information quickly and without rigorous assessment (Atkins & Huang,

2013). Festinger (1957) suggests that an individual could be motivated to share misinformation as an act of cognitive dissonance or a sort of mass proselytization. When a group of people are connected by a tightly held belief such as political party affiliation, that belief is extremely resistant to change. If a member of the group happens upon a piece of information that directly challenges the belief but is not powerful enough to dispel the belief, the individual will seek out others within the group to help with the increasing dissonance. If the dissonance is not significant enough to challenge the beliefs of the group, they will likely help dispel the incongruence and push forward with the original belief (Festinger, 1957). Pertaining to social media groups, this means that a network with similar beliefs can help reinforce shared false content that is congruent with the group's beliefs or help an individual disregard information that challenges those same beliefs.

Previous research has tested if social media usage causes individuals to participate in the political process or if it instead distracts them from relevant issues and in turn causes political disengagement (Gil de Zuniga, Jung, & Valenzuela 2012). Gil de Zuniga, Jung, and Valenzuela (2012) noted the information gathering motivations gratified by social media usage. The social capital gained by sharing political information is dependent on the motivations for use. Traditionally, social media has been used for identity construction, fostering relationships, and entertainment purposes, but those that consider politics part of their identity will share and consume political information via social media platforms (Gil de Zuniga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012).

Before the social media era, Fitzgerald (1997) noted several types of misinformation available online that can be applied to political information currently circulating on Facebook.

Of the ten types of online misinformation identified, six can be applied to the concept of false information shared through social media channels including the lack of a central gatekeeper for information, ability of data to be changed and manipulated freely, intentional misconduct, content removed from context, author and reader bias, and loss of timeliness caused by information permanently available without update or correction (Fitzgerald, 1997). Because of the huge potential for misinformation, social media users must employ tactics to determine if they are being misled. Social media users should use vigilant consideration of information and their sources, verify through additional sources and be careful to assess information to determine if it contains fact or opinion (Fitzgerald, 1997). It is important to employ a level of scrutiny when consuming mainstream media news sources; however, with the speed, manipulation, and lack of oversight on social media, that level of scrutiny should increase.

In addition to false information about candidates or political figures, misinformation can easily cloud a voter's judgment regarding sensitive social issues like healthcare and health practices, abortion, and racism. When President Obama announced his plan for healthcare reform, misinformation led many Americans to believe the plan supported euthanasia for the elderly, similar to beliefs regarding President Clinton's healthcare plan in 1993 (Nyhan & Reifler, 2012). In addition to those beliefs held by Republicans, Nyhan and Reifler (2012) also noted that conservatives who believed they were more informed about the topic were more likely to carry misinformation than those who believed they were less informed.

2.6.4 Combatting Misinformation

Verifying information takes time and effort and predicting the virality of a piece of content is next to impossible. However, the value of both concepts can be illustrated with the

missteps in communication that occurred via news outlets in the aftermath of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings. Information sourced from the social media site Reddit caused the New York Post to circulate the images of two potential suspects on the front page of their newspaper. It was later discovered that the two individuals had nothing to do with the act of terrorism and they then had to combat misperceptions about them (Nyhan, 2014; Vis, 2014). Had the New York Post verified information gained from a social network before running with the story, they could have avoided damaging the reputations of two innocent people.

Correcting misinformation can often seem an impossible task because of its ability to persist in memory (Bode & Vraga, 2015). As Keohane (2010) noted, an individual's beliefs are not always grounded in fact and those misinformed beliefs often affect what additional information the individual is willing to accept as fact. When an individual's beliefs are questioned, they are likely to disregard the information at hand, continuing to believe what they know to be true even if that information is categorically false. In addition, media consumers are likely to seek out sources that confirm their beliefs, and the ability for fringe sources to craft believable tales out of conspiracy theories leads the information to be more widely accepted. In addition, humans tend to have faulty memories, but if something seems familiar and the argument appears valid, that individual will likely believe and share the claim (Coronel, Federmeier, & Gonsalves, 2012). Without a compelling argument, the misinformation could remain as most humans find it threatening to accept that their knowledge is incorrect (Keohane, 2010).

Some misperceptions decrease over time due to additional, undisputable information. Nyhan and Reifler (2012) shared the example of the belief that Iraq was hiding weapons of

mass destruction in June of 2003 compared to June of 2006. In 2003, approximately 70% of Americans believed the weapons existed. That number hit its lowest point in 2005 when only 35% believed it to be true. There can also be instances of corrections causing more people to believe the misinformation instead of the corrected information. Nyhan and Reifler (2012) gave the example of the tax cuts signed into effect by President George W. Bush. In a previous study, Nyhan and Reifler (2010) gave a random group a mock news article that claimed the tax cuts created increased revenue for the U.S. Treasury. A segment of the respondents were also given a correction that noted the cuts were followed by a three-year decrease in tax revenues. The results were staggeringly different for liberals and conservatives with fewer liberals agreeing that the tax cuts increased revenues after the correction and more conservatives believing in the increase even after the correction noted the decline in revenues for years following the cuts, indicating a "backfire effect" for the correction information (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010).

Since individuals hold tight to existing beliefs in the presence of contradictory information, this effect is not surprising. Stroud (2010) noted that individuals who are confident in their beliefs are more likely to argue their political point. This holds true for individuals who are confident with their political opinions even if they are armed with misinformation. With that effect, misinformation will continue as those individuals utilize that information to combat contradictory information that may even be true.

In an effort to reduce the amount of false information available on their site, Facebook has activated a feature that allows social media users to tag information that they believe to be false. In early 2015, the social media giant announced that users would be able to report

potentially false information from a dropdown menu connected to each post. If enough users marked a post stating that it could contain misinformation or even a scam, the post will continue with a small tagline above that reads, “Many people on Facebook have reported that this story contains false information” (Facebook, 2015b). The feature worked similarly to the ability of users to report spam or unwanted content and Facebook (2015b) noted that scams or deliberately misleading news are reported two and a half more times than links to other types of news stories. In addition to the misinformation tag on the post, information marked as false will also be filtered more stringently through Facebook’s newsfeed algorithm. The feature was not successful and has not been fully launched; however, in the wake of allegations of swaying the 2016 U.S. Presidential election with false news content, Facebook reintroduced plans to combat the spread of misinformation (Chappell, 2016).

False news and propaganda long predate Facebook, let alone the Internet. The lightning speed of sharing increasing seemingly by the day, the issue is no longer necessarily the stories themselves but the ability for message receivers to be savvy enough media consumers to avoid spreading false information. The need for source evaluation is key to ensuring that the posts users share are not riddled with fabricated, manipulated, or misrepresented information. The magnitude of this need is underscored by the number of sites that have been created with the sole purpose of debunking misinformation, including snopes.com, hoaxbusters.com, scambusters.org, and urbanlegends.com. Several sites including Politifact.com and FactCheck.org focus solely on information shared by politicians or political pundits. Politifact, a Pulitzer Prize winning site launched in 2007, rates claims made publicly by politicians or pundits by using their trademarked “Truth-o-Meter” (Politifact, 2013). The statements are rated from

"true" to "pants on fire," reserved for the most ridiculous and unsubstantiated claims (Politifact, 2013). The existence of these sites speaks to the unending amount of misinformation media consumers are exposed to about an almost equally unending list of topics.

Coronel, Federmeier, and Gonsalves (2012) noted that citizens can reward politicians they feel support or propose what the voter believes is good and right but can also punish candidates that have run afoul of their morals, opinions, and beliefs. This practice of voting requires that citizens are well informed and pay close attention to the facts presented about candidates and policies. However, the success of any candidate or policy can be easily derailed not only by uninformed voters but also by voters who arrive at polling locations armed with vast quantities of misinformation. Due to human nature, incorrectly remembering events is a common occurrence and Coronel, Federmeier, and Gonsalves (2012) noted that it is well documented in our country's political history. This is not an issue that was created by social media, nor is the intentional dispersal of political misinformation a catastrophic sign of the state of our country. Instead, misattribution, misinformation, and the spread of false political propaganda has been occurring long before Facebook allowed users to share their political opinions.

It is not completely understood why we make these memory errors or why they persist, but Coronel, Federmeier, and Gonsalves (2012) noted that the prevailing understanding in the world of political science has clear ties to cognitive evaluation practices by suggesting that individuals who have a lack of information regarding a candidate's policy stance will use general knowledge about the candidate such as political party or learned information about other

topics to fill in the gaps (Coronel, Federmeier, & Gonsalves, 2012). This information is then stored as fact, even if there is no evidence that it is valid data or even if it is later suggested or discovered that the belief is based on false information. Just as that data storage affected the political knowledge of generations past, similar information now obtained on social media can now impact the knowledge base of the current generation heading to the polls.

One study mentioned an example of the public's misattribution of policy statements to George H.W. Bush when it was in fact the policy stance of his opponent, Michael Dukakis. There were also several instances of the effect working in reverse in that election (Coronel, Federmeier, & Gonsalves, 2012). This misattribution issue is not unique to that election that occurred before the emergence of the Internet and is an issue that will certainly not end with the presence of social media. Conversely, social media could likely exacerbate the problem by allowing misinformed users to share the information they believe to be true with a larger number of people and do so with increased confidence in their position due to selective exposure.

This type of false communication intended to persuade viewers into believing a certain "fact" or point of view could be termed propaganda which could be further defined as "suspicious rhetoric" (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2014). In more recent debates and beliefs, the phrase is used to imply negative or biased information and often refers to the act of information spin or skewed sentiment given to intentionally deceive a message receiver. When looking at the propaganda pieces that are intended to paint a particular image with false information together with an individual's practice of cognitive dissonance, the question of voluntary compliance arises (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2014). This voluntary consumption and

compliance with misinformation speaks directly to the potential effects of self-imposed selective exposure and the potential act of intentionally dispersing false political information. It is important to discover if American voters are likely to share information found on social media that they suspect could be false simply because it matches their own political beliefs. Further still, it is important to understand how this information continues to pass through social networks exposing a growing number of voters to potentially misleading information that could in turn impact their final decision in elections and future political belief creation.

2.7 Cognitive Dissonance & Selective Exposure

Social media allows for average citizens to share their opinions and beliefs as well as comment and share the views of others. Because of this functionality, it is easier to see and understand what topics are important to your friends and connections. The platform also allows politically interested individuals to seek out and join conversations that potentially feed into a heightened level of political cynicism. The ability to pick and choose news that appears within an individual's newsfeed is a direct form of selective exposure caused by political affiliation, which can lead to an increased level of political polarization.

In contrast, Bode & Vraga (2015) found that the addition of news stories curated by Facebook's "related news" algorithm could reduce the belief of misinformation. However, it is important to note that a filter must curate the news in order to avoid being immediately discounted by misinformed social media users. The U.S. Senate who recently accused Facebook of filtering stories that appear in their side column "Trending News" feature could render this untrue as Facebook's filtering practices are now under scrutiny (Nunez, 2016). The Senate accuses the social media giant of requiring staff members to ensure that more liberal stories

are included in the trending list while also keeping stories involving conservative positions from reaching the list. The Facebook executive in charge of the feature stated that the accusations were false and that it is impossible for staff to skew the list as information is pulled from an algorithm tied to the website's content, not managed by employees (Nunez, 2016).

The practice of finding friends, groups, and news sources on Facebook that reaffirm an individual's beliefs is thought to create a space in which the user only sees confirming information is considered selective exposure. Similar to confirmation bias, selective exposure occurs on social media when an individual actively tries to avoid information that is contrary to their previously formed opinions and beliefs, insulating users from alternate political news (Garrett, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2011). Bode and Vraga (2015) argue that instead of insulating users from dissonant information, social media provides an unexpected way for users to be exposed to differing ideas that could potentially contradict previously held misperceptions.

A 2014 study by the Pew Center for Research found that a large majority of Facebook users say they see at least some political content including posts from friends, shared news stories, and posts from news organizations or political figures. Of the 86% that see some political content, 19% say that at least half of the posts they see contain some sort of political information (Pew, 2014). Twitter users reported to be more likely to use the site to gather real-time news, but more Facebook users are admitting to encountering political information on a daily basis even if they are not overly interested in politics or news information (Pew, 2014).

In an additional study completed in 2015, Pew Research found that 30% of Facebook users surveyed said that they use the social media platform as a source of news. A smaller percentage of that subset noted that Facebook was the primary source of their gathered news.

It should be noted that while most users might not intentionally log in to gather news, they are likely to, at the very least, scroll through several news stories or politically motivated posts (Kim, Chen, & Gil de Zuniga, 2013). Depending on the types of pages they like, the political participation level of the social network, and the types of information shared by the user, the content, veracity, and frequency of that information can fluctuate.

While other researchers have discussed the ability for Facebook feeds to insulate users from opposing viewpoints, Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic (2015) observed individuals being exposed to information that opposed their own political views courtesy of posts made by their social media connections. In an effort to see what types of information Facebook users chose to share on their personal pages, the study observed 10.1 million active Facebook accounts with self-reported political leanings to see what "hard content" or information pertaining to national news, politics, or world affairs was shared and to what types of "hard content" the user might be exposed (Bakshy, Messing & Adamic, 2015). Even though the technologies associated with social media have the potential to expose users to diverse information, they also allow for the user to limit their exposure to belief-challenging information by "un-following" an individual or content source. This can lead to political polarization and skewed understanding of current events and the political sphere. In order to limit their exposure to dissonant views and statements, the offended user can choose to block the individual who shared the information, the source of the information, or even add a filter to keep certain topics or keywords from reaching their newsfeed. Facebook makes this very easy within the platform's settings and the option to block individuals or pages is available on every post listed on the newsfeed. However, it is important to note that research findings suggest that even

though exposure to diverse ideas is good for democracy, being exposed to such differing opinions has been blamed for a decrease in voter participation (Bakshy, Messing & Adamic, 2015).

However, being well informed may not play as big of a part in political news consumption, offline participation, and belief formations as might be inferred. In addition, the age of Facebook users has increased since its inception and is being utilized in widely different ways by different generations.

When those individuals log into Facebook, their biased consumption of news continues. Conservatives stated that most of the political news they encountered shared opinions similar to their own and almost half (48%) of both groups say they got news from the social media platform in the previous week (Pew, 2014). Compared to Twitter, the other leading social media platform for news, Facebook has a much larger base and a broader reach for news dispersal. With the billions of posts made every day, it is likely that an individual will encounter news that is counter to their political beliefs even while sharing their own. Pew (2014) found that consistent conservatives and liberals are much more likely to lead political discussions online and offline and that about half of them disagree politically with one of their closest discussion partners. Even with a healthy level of disagreement, consistent liberals are more likely than their conservative counterparts to hide or "defriend" someone because of politics, increasing their likelihood of political polarization (Pew, 2014).

Stroud (2010) questioned if political polarization was caused by consumption of partisan news or if that skewed news simply drew a more politically polarized audience. Selective exposure was initially believed to have limited the beliefs of individuals because if they are not

exposed to information that runs contrary to their beliefs, there is very little reason for them to change those beliefs. Therefore, by avoiding contrary opinions, the individual strengthens their original position or attitude leading to increased polarization (Stroud, 2010).

In a later study, Stroud (2011) found that studying selective exposure caused by political polarization brought three contributions to the field of communication research, including challenging the concept of limited media effects, changing how researchers look at media and message receivers, and informing future research on the relationship between media and interpersonal communication. Stroud's research (2011) indicated that media has more than limited effects when it comes to selective exposure and political polarization, and the media shares differentiated news to different publics. That differentiation and fragmentation can only be exacerbated by selective exposure on social media platforms.

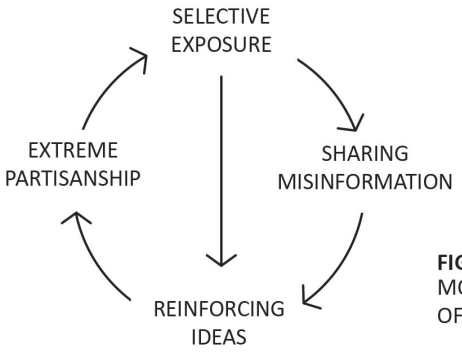

FIGURE 1:
MODIFIED CYCLE
OF SELECTIVE EXPOSURE

Even though some research shows that exposure to complimentary political information increases levels of political participation, it should be noted that consuming only likeminded sources also leads to less tolerance and more extreme views. This is glaringly apparent in today's political climate. Less apparent, however, is the role that political misinformation plays in this ideology and participation fragmentation. Stroud (2010) put forth the idea of the cycle of selective exposure where choosing what news you see leads to increased political

polarization which leads back to the individual employing selective exposure in their newsgathering. This research takes that concept a step further by incorporating political misinformation in the form of false political news found on Facebook. As seen in Figure 1, selective exposure still leads to political polarization but also has the potential to lead to the sharing of false political news, which will also serve to increase political polarization.

As individuals seek out information as a means of social utility, they will be more likely to gather information that confirms their beliefs and makes them seem more credible to their discussion partners (Stroud, 2010). Since highly polarized information is more likely to contain misinformation, an individual's contribution to the discussion pool could very possibly extend the reach of misperceptions and misinformation posited by others.

The influence of opinion leaders could also be clouded by the social media user's selective exposure. Facebook has a function that allows users to "hide" any information they choose not to see. For example, if a user is a Democrat and does not want to see posts from a page that could offer information contrary to their beliefs, like the right-leaning "Conservative Tribune," they can simply add the page to a personal list that will no longer be visible on their newsfeed. This ability leads to selective exposure or confirmation bias which relies on the assumption that people seek out information that aligns with previously held beliefs as opposed to consuming information that could lead to a contradiction (Nickerson, 1998).

Selective exposure to political information is obviously not an issue created by social media but it is possible that the medium exacerbates the effects. Individuals who intentionally use a single online news source or cable news program to facilitate their newsgathering process are limiting the information received to stories that affirm their political bias. Certain political

blogs and news sites were created with the intent of moving forward the political agenda of a particular party or interest group. Those interested in the politics of the party or group are more likely to use those sources for their news. A survey completed by Pew found that more than one third of Americans admit to looking for news that confirms their political beliefs but only one of every five actively searched for information containing opposing view points (Smith, 2011).

Stroud (2010) noted that selective exposure was caused by certainty and confidence in beliefs and known information. Certainty is an individual's belief that their choice is better than any alternatives. This explains why members of each party are positive that their party is a much better choice than the opposing party. Confidence is how sure an individual feels about their perspective compared to others sharing their opinion (Stroud, 2010). Stroud (2010) also stated the striking similarity between confidence, certainty and polarization, noting, "a polarized individual who is maximally favorable toward a preferred candidate and maximally unfavorable toward a disliked alternative arguably has very high levels of confidence." By that belief, it would make sense that the more confident a person is in their position, the less likely they are to select only confirming information as they are confident that they can refute any claims made by opposing opinions.

Messing and Westwood (2014) investigated which held more weight in helping individuals choose appropriate news content online: partisan source affiliation or endorsements by trusted network connections. With information sharing online and specifically social media being as simple as clicking on prominent icons on news sites or posting original content to a profile page, it is important to understand which type of source fosters the

most trust, selection, and sharing within news consumers. When news consumers choose only news that confirms their beliefs, political polarization increases leading to legislative gridlock, policy inaction, and a decline in public discourse (Messing & Westwood, 2014). News consumption plays a vital role in furthering democratic discourse and now social media is playing a large part in that effort.

Social media has become an increasingly valuable format for consuming news, making it necessary to consider the platform a fundamental part of our political environment. Individuals looking for political news no longer choose from sources with editors and verified gatekeepers but choose from specific stories that are deemed important (and factual) by friends, family, co-workers, and pages of the individual's interest. This increased fragmentation has the potential to expose a social media user to an increased amount of political misinformation, increasing their likelihood of passing that misinformation along to their network. It is less certain if members of either political party are intentionally sharing false information to make the opposing party look bad or their party look better.

H3: Increased selective exposure of political news will lead to increased sharing of misinformation.

RQ3a: Are Democrats likely to share information they suspect may be false if it supports the Democratic Party?

RQ3b: Are Republicans likely to share information they suspect may be false if it supports the Republican Party?

The act of avoiding information that is incongruent with an individual's belief is rooted in Leon Festinger's (1957) Theory of Cognitive Dissonance. The theory suggests that every

communicator is equipped with a variety of cognitive elements including attitudes, perceptions, knowledge, and behaviors. These elements do not act alone but together in a system of information evaluation (Festinger, 1957). The system weighs the validity or meaning of information based on its relationship to the cognitive elements by deciding if the information is irrelevant, consonant, or dissonant. Where that information lies within the evaluation varies by person, as each person's elements are unique (Festinger, 1957).

Individuals can choose political candidates, based on evaluations made by the individual's attitude toward politics and the particular candidate, the perception of the candidates and their policies, knowledge of the political sphere and the candidate's platform, and the behaviors of the individual within the political process. Throughout election coverage, each individual will potentially encounter irrelevant, consonant, or dissonant information on his or her Facebook newsfeed. Ideally, the individual would evaluate political misinformation as irrelevant as it is false information; however, due to selective exposure and the individual's cognitive elements, that is not always the case. The decision making process described by Festinger (1964) suggests that before an individual arrives at a choice, their evaluation is unbiased toward either option. However, with political affiliations deeply rooted in the decision making process, that choice evaluation changes drastically and shifts to help decrease dissonance and avoid the choice option that is incongruent with the individual's beliefs (Festinger, 1964). After the initial choice of party affiliation is reached, the individual should only seek out information that is congruent with their chosen beliefs and reduce the impact of information that is not (Festinger, 1964). Since the dissonant impact of information that is

more striking and damaging to beliefs will increase the individual's discomfort, the urge to discredit or lower the dissonance will also increase.

Since dissonant information creates tension or stress, an urging for change is present. An illustration of dissonant information in action would be when a consistent conservative encounters a piece of political news from MSNBC shared by a friend who is a consistent liberal. The information is incongruent with their political beliefs and therefore creates a certain level of dissonance, dependent on the individual's certainty and confidence with their position. In order to reduce the tension and call for change provided by the dissonant information, the conservative individual will potentially avoid the liberal-skewed news story and ensure that additional dissonance is reduced.

According to Festinger (1957), dissonance is the result of the importance of the individual's cognitive elements added to the number of those elements involved in the dissonant relationship. In order to reduce the tension and urging for change, an individual will likely turn to selective exposure to moderate the information they view to correspond with their views and not with opposing views. It is uncertain what effects an individual's political experience during past elections might have on the likelihood that the individual could be duped by political misinformation found online. We all incur dissonant information on a daily basis (Festinger, 1957). With the speed of information sharing that occurs on social media, that daily occurrence can quickly turn into something that happens every minute. During a contentious election cycle, political polarization could likely become a common thread viewed on many newsfeeds.

An individual's political polarization can be of great use when trying to get rid of dissonance. Festinger (1957) noted that dissonance could be dispelled through rationalization of presented information, ignoring the presented incongruence, or demeaning of the dissonant information. A person who sees political information on their Facebook feed that falls outside of their own political views will likely feel a need to dismiss the information to return to a state of consonance with what they know to be true about politics and government. That individual could do so by completely ignoring the information based on perceived invalidity, hide the content or source from their newsfeed, post a comment arguing against the content of the post, or even read the content with the intent to disprove its message. It should be noted that this decision is based on the political opinions of the reader, and Festinger (1957) stated that an individual would not hold an opinion if they did not believe it to be correct. In turn, when no dissonance occurs, there is very little motivation for the social media user to seek out new information (Festinger, 1957). In the political arena where almost no individual is completely impartial, impartial decisions about candidates, policies, or platforms would be impossible (Festinger, 1957; Stroud, 2011).

The spread of online political news and sources are directly tied to selective exposure because it is impossible for one person to access all corners of the web and therefore must choose what to pay attention to and what to hide (Johnson & Kaye, 2013). By hiding the content or its source, the individual is actively committing selective exposure, ensuring that he or she only sees information that is consonant with their beliefs or political views. Because the pressure to reduce dissonance magnifies with the strength of the dissonant information or of the opinion of the individual, it stands to reason that an individual's use of selective exposure

would increase with the strength of their partisanship or political polarization. It is also worth mentioning that beliefs lead to actions so an individual who believes information to be true would be more likely to share that information with others (Festinger, 1957). Moreover, certainty in an individual's belief would increase their likelihood of selective exposure, as new information would be unnecessary since they are already correct (Stroud, 2011).

Even with the recent explosion of political interest by a younger demographic, it is still easily understood that older Americans have a higher amount of political experience. That experience includes exposure to varied partisan debates, advertisements, statements, and presidencies. In addition, political experience also includes the number of elections in which the individual has participated. It should be noted, however, that not all older Americans automatically have a higher level of experience if they have voluntarily avoided political discussions, news and participation.

2.8 Consequences of Political Misinformation

Garrett (2011) noted that the emergence of technology use in political campaigning highlights the ability for social media to undermine a citizen's understanding of the political reality due to the large number of political rumors that appear on social media during the campaign cycle. Where once this information was shared mostly through chain emails and seen by a smaller subset of voters, the ease and speed of sharing information on Facebook allows for the wider dispersal of misinformation and leads to the larger consequences of an uninformed voting public. Garrett (2011) stated several consequences that could arise from political rumors found on social media including increased violence caused by disagreements based on rumor and misinformation, uninformed or misinformed voters at the election booth,

and increased exposure to additional misinformation that would further exacerbate the problem.

Once Facebook users are exposed to a type of information or topic or they choose to follow certain sources, the content of their newsfeed will be altered by the site's filtering algorithm, adding an even larger impact to the original misinformation (Coronel, Federmeier, & Gonsalves, 2012). This effect is made possible by the almost non-existent costs of sharing information on social media as well as the increased number of political sites, groups, and pages that can be found all over the internet but more specifically on social media. In turn, following those groups could increase the likelihood that voters will be exposed to an even greater amount of misinformation especially if the intent of the pages followed is to foster misinformation and political rumoring. Considering that sharing biased political news is likely an indicator of heighted party polarization, the effect ties directly to the cycle of selective exposure and increased political polarization, enhanced by misinformation.

As the political sphere was set in overdrive by the 2016 presidential election, the ability for false or misleading information to spread on social media became an interesting problem with growing and varied consequences. Fowler and Margolis (2013) studied the potential consequences of uninformed voters in the United States in addition to what could change if the country's citizens were informed. The study did not specifically look at the effects of misinformation, but since a misinformed voter holds a similar level of political knowledge as an individual who is truly uninformed, the data compiled in the study is applicable to this use even though making decisions based on false information seems more dangerous. Their study noted that most citizens are not well informed and have a hard time converting their policy stances

into voting decisions (Fowler & Margolis, 2013). This sentiment is echoed by many and speaks to an observable lack of political knowledge across the country.

Just like with natural disasters and crisis communication, it is very easy for unconfirmed or fabricated information to be posted and shared on the most popular social media platforms. Even though false information might be shared inadvertently, it leads to the formation and dispersal of rumors. Rumors are difficult to control and often lead to a distorted message, further disrupting the flow of helpful information (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2014). The potential damaging effects of propaganda turned runaway rumor were highlighted by Jowett and O'Donnell (2014) in the example of Proctor & Gamble's logo featuring the moon and stars being associated with a satanic symbol by fundamentalist Christians and The Amway Corporation. It was later discovered that the association was based upon a political attack due to differences in beliefs or issues stances (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2014). This type of attack is similar to current false proclamations like Starbucks being against Christian views because of their plain, red holiday cups and Target being labeled anti-Christian because they do not allow the Salvation Army to solicit donations outside their stores in December even though other stores have similar policies (Kircher, 2015; Teague, 2004). Because the rumor was so damaging and difficult to correct, Proctor & Gamble considered changing their trademark and still battles statements regarding their logo to this day, similar to the public relations battles that are fought by corporations that run afoul with strong, politically active groups.

3. CURRENT RESEARCH

Social media is currently a central focus of much research and there have been multiple studies on the effects of social media use on political engagement; however, studies have largely ignored the effects of false political news and information shared on social networks. With voters increasingly relying on social media for news and information, it is important to understand how the misinformation alters the political process.

Social media continues to be an increasingly important component of news gathering and sharing of information. A Pew study in 2015 found that Americans 18-25 used social media as their main source of news consumption. Social media users older than 25 are also turning to social media for news at an increased rate but it should be noted that even if their exposure is not intentional, many users are exposed to political news through their preferred social media channels though news headlines, political memes, and even political cartoons. That unintentionally consumed information can still play a role in the individual's beliefs and political opinion formation.

Putnam (2000) noted several concerns about the proliferation of television and the effect that it had on the quintessential American social experience. A similar sentiment has been loudly declared in those opposing the use of social media for news consumption. With the United States experiencing an increase in voter turnout during the most recent presidential election and some of the increase being directly attributed to social connections created by the Internet, the concern over the quality of information that drove them to the polls is certainly valid (Bond, et al., 2012; File, 2015). This study hopes to find the effects of false user generated content on the political process.

In order to continue the conversation of false information being passed as truth online, questions need to be answered regarding the credibility assessment process of social media users, how their political party factors into that assessment, and if increased exposure or selective exposure play a part in the transmittal of false political information. Here, the analysis allows for a better understanding of the effects of political polarization, selective exposure on social media, and choice of political party on an individual's likelihood to believe and share false political news.

4. RESEARCH METHODS

With millions of people participating in social media, the effects of the content created and curated are endless. As people grow more connected than ever before, it is logical to believe that an increased level of connectivity could create a noticeable difference in how individuals consume and share news, how readers assess information's credibility, and in the type of information we choose to share with our networks. High-level social media usage is a fairly recent development for individuals outside of the college setting; those uses and effects have not been the focus of much research in the communication world. In addition, much of the research completed on social media focuses on the 18-25 demographic. Moving forward, it seems beneficial to not only look at the social media habits of the early-adopting college students and teenagers but also to look at the growing habits and effects generated on the population as a whole especially as Facebook's user demographics steadily increase in age (Facebook, 2015a).

This study relies on survey data collected from individuals, focusing on those who are Facebook users in the United States. A survey created with Qualtrics was sent to personal contacts of the researcher via email and social media links were shared with a convenience sample consisting of the researcher's social network and professional connections. No reward for completing the survey was offered and participants had to be at least 18 year of age to respond. The participants received the survey's URL, a brief description of the study and its purpose, and the deadline for submitting their response. In the initial request for participation, potential respondents were not notified of the full scope of the project, excluding any information about the effects of misinformation. This omission was intentional to avoid any

potential bias when reviewing the sample posts contained within the survey. While the sample has the potential to be representative of the gender, age, and racial demographics of Facebook users, it is possible that the data could be skewed by the convenience sampling method. In an effort to increase the number of the study participants, respondents were urged to forward the original participation request email to their own personal contacts and the respondents reached through Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn were asked to complete the survey and forward the link to their social networks. This turned the original convenience sample into a larger respondent pool by using the snowball method of sampling. In addition, members of the University of Texas at Arlington faculty shared the survey link on their personal social media pages to encourage their networks to respond and share the survey link to their networks. The dispersal across multiple networks helped to ensure that many locations could be reached and were not limited to the connections of one individual. It is important that participants be located in varied states, cities, and communities to avoid any potential bias created by the traditional political views of the respondent's area of residence. However, with the anonymous collection method of the survey, it is impossible to determine the location of each respondent without potentially violating his or her anonymity.

The researcher's initial goal for participation was 500 respondents, affording a large enough sample size to ensure a valuable statistical analysis. Survey links and information were shared three separate times on social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn to reach the response rate goal.

Because the target population for data collection is registered voters in the United States who have active Facebook accounts, sharing the survey link on the platform and using

the convenience sample is appropriate. In addition, the potential snowball sample frame allowed by shared posts on Facebook increases the reach of the sample population as well as the diversity of respondents potentially included. For those purposes, the convenience sample was a sufficient method of collecting data. The anonymous data collected addresses the hypotheses and research questions according to the variables provided in order to better understand the role selective exposure plays in political misinformation found and shared on Facebook.

4.1 Variables

The dependent and independent variables for this study were analyzed to discover the effects of selective exposure on the levels of misinformation users encounter on Facebook and how that information is consumed, rated for believability, and potentially shared with network connections. Misinformation belief and sharing, the dependent variables, were examined through several different independent variables including political party affiliation and level of polarization, intentional and unintentional selective exposure habits, Facebook usage amounts, types of pages followed, and alternative forms of political news consumption. In addition to finding if selective exposure increases exposure to political misinformation, the research examines the effects of political party affiliation and the potential impact each party has on the distribution and consumption of political misinformation on Facebook. For each variable, data collected from the research survey was compiled and analyzed to determine the effects of selective exposure, how political polarization potentially increases selective exposure, the effect party affiliation has on misinformation exposure, and of course, misinformation evaluation.

In addition to the main variables collected for analysis, the researcher collected basic respondent descriptive data like respondent gender and age. That data was used in analysis to test if they have a higher influence on selective exposure and the sharing of misinformation than the assumed factors of news consumption, polarization level, and political party affiliation.

4.1.1 Measurement: Political Polarization

In order to measure levels of polarization, respondents were asked to share their registered political party affiliation. Choices included Republican, Democrat, and Independent. While Independents are not strictly part of the research hypotheses, it is important to note their chosen party and allow members of the party to participate as their registration and political understanding may differ. After noting their party affiliation, respondents were asked to select where they fall on the political spectrum from a five-point scale ranging from (1) very liberal, (2) slightly liberal, (3) moderate, (4) slightly conservative, and (5) very conservative. This measure is important to gauge an individual's self-reported political polarization that can be an indicator and connection to selective exposure. Respondents were asked both questions in attempt to ensure accurate and consistent responses. In addition, both responses were used to measure polarization and party influence on the belief and sharing of misinformation on social media.

4.1.2 Measure: News Consumption

To measure news consumption habits, users were asked a series of questions regarding the information they consume on Facebook as well as the types of information they share. On a five-point Likert scale, respondents were able to share if they go to Facebook for political news (1) Always, (2) Often, (3) Sometimes, (4) Rarely, or (5) Never. This measurement was used

to discover the effects of increased usage of Facebook for newsgathering. As part of a measure for newsgathering and selective exposure, survey respondents answered how interested they are to see political news containing opposing political views. That measure, tied to consumption and alternative means of newsgathering are good indicators of the amount and types of news each respondent views online. Respondents were also be asked to share "what sources they use to gather political news" and were allowed to select from online as well as traditional news sources including newspapers, radio, and local news programming. Respondents were able to choose multiple answers. In addition to self-reporting their news consumption habits, respondents were asked to acknowledge the types of political posts they share on their own news feed if they are in the practice of posting political or government information.

4.1.3 Measurement: Selective Exposure

In order to operationalize selective exposure, a series of questions was asked of survey respondents to gather information about their social media news consumption habits as well as their habits when it comes to sharing news they encounter on Facebook. This research will be an extension of Stroud (2010) that found a significant connection between selective exposure and partisanship. In order to find the effects of misinformation on that cycle (see Figure 1), data must be gathered to see what intentional and unintentional selective exposure tactics Facebook users are employing.

First, the measure for intentional selective exposure was gathered through asking respondents if they have ever intentionally hidden, blocked, or "de-friended" someone because of their posts about government or politics. This indicates intentional selective exposure

because the social media user has implicitly removed dissonant information and a source of potentially more dissonant information from their newsfeed. This measure will be tested against each respondent's likelihood of sharing and believing political misinformation to determine if intentional selective exposure is stronger than unintentional.

In order to evaluate unintentional selective exposure created by Facebook's algorithm, respondents were asked to share if they like or follow any political or candidate pages. An increase in number of partisan pages would allow the filter to select posts and stories that correspond to the partisanship of the followed pages. Respondents also reported how often information they see on their feed regarding politics or political news is in line or contrary to their political beliefs. Similar to measuring newsgathering, this allows a better understanding of the partisanship displayed for each individual, a higher polarization potentially indicating an increased amount of misinformation. In addition, respondents were asked about their consumption of contrary information by answering if they "enjoy seeing posts that are opposite of their political views." Respondents could answer on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "very much enjoy" to "very much dislike" with an option of remaining neutral. This data directly ties to hiding dissonant information without implicitly doing so.

To further test if an individual is likely to involuntarily engage in selective exposure, respondents were asked how often they "like," "comment" on, or "share" political posts on their personal Facebook pages. These actions are a way for Facebook's filtering algorithm to better target what types of information an individual might be interested in reading, allowing for increased selective exposure involuntarily. This provides the user with a more homogenous newsfeed that would not provide information that challenges the user's beliefs but instead

reaffirms their political opinions and increases their partisanship, potentially also increasing their exposure to misinformation.

4.1.4 Measure: Political Misinformation Belief and Sharing

As previously noted, political misinformation is operationalized as belief and intent to share information that contains fabricated news or stories about political parties, candidates, or institutions that lead the reader to believe that the information being shared is truth. In order to measure survey respondents' ability to identify misinformation found on social media, they were given a series of five politically motivated social media posts that were crafted to look like real posts found on Facebook. This method is similar to that used by Garrett (2011) to determine how often people encountered and believed political rumors circulating during the 2008 U.S. Presidential election. The sample posts contain information from social media posts that have circulated online, have been investigated by fact checking organizations Snopes.com and Politifact.com, and were found to be completely false. Parody posts from entities like "The Onion" were not considered as they are intended for humor. It should be noted, however, that these types of posts certainly can lead to instances of misinformation.

Using all false posts allows for more consistent analysis of results and alleviates any potential errors in calculation. Post content was chosen based on a variety of factors including relevance to 2016 election topics, 2016 candidates for U.S. President, and believability of information included in the claim. Each respondent saw the same five mock posts and was asked to evaluate each post for information accuracy. Two posts contained false information that was damaging to the Democratic presidential candidate and two were damaging to the Republican candidate. The fifth post contained a false claim about a non-partisan organization.

The posts were created to look exactly like those found in a Facebook newsfeed with the source name and profile image blurred to prevent source recognition. In addition, the number of "likes," "shares," and "comments" were removed to prevent any potential bias regarding source or virality induced credibility. The full content of the mock posts can be found in the survey located in Appendix A.

Respondents selected how accurate they believed the information to be on a four-point scale: (1) Completely False, (2) Partially False, (3) Partially True, (4) Completely True. It should be noted that three respondents contacted the researcher to request an "unsure" response be available for the factual analysis questions for each post. Including the option was considered but would have allowed a form of non-answer about the respondent's belief of the information. Answering "partially true" or "partially false" indicated which way the respondent was leaning regarding the information contained in the post and allowed for a more accurate testing for RQ3.

Finally, respondents were asked to answer how likely they would be to share the information to their personal Facebook newsfeed. Respondents were able to select an answer on a five-point Likert scale: (1) Extremely Unlikely, (2) Somewhat Unlikely, (3) Neither Likely or Unlikely, (4) Somewhat Likely, and (5) Extremely Likely. In addition to answering if they would share the post, each respondent was able to explain their reason for sharing the information with their social network and were able to select from five answers including "to inform my social network," "to mock or joke about the information," "to fact-check the information," "to offer an argument against the information," and "would not share."

5. RESULTS

5.1 Respondent Profile

In total, 432 respondents started the survey but only 368 completed all of the questions. The analysis for a respondent's likelihood to believe and share misinformation required a mean of multiple questions so incomplete responses were discarded in an effort to ensure accurate analysis. Of the 368 complete responses, 31% were male and 69% female. This type of disparity between genders is to be expected in a snowball sample, but Pew (2016a) noted that the gender breakdown of Facebook users is 58% female to 42% male making this disparity seem like a more accurate representation of the user population. Regardless of the skewed gender count, the respondents are almost evenly balanced between Democrats, Republicans, and Independents with roughly 33% for each party.

The largest age group represented is the 25-34 range, which is in line with the largest age group of Facebook users, followed closely by the 35-49 age group (Pew, 2013). All respondents being of legal age to vote, all but twelve reported being registered to vote and only three stated that they do not have an active Facebook account. While not completely representative of the American population, the respondent sample is an adequate representation of Facebook users for analysis and population representation is not necessary to see significant impacts of political misinformation and selective exposure habits.

5.2 Consumption Leads to Polarization

Courtesy of platform filtering algorithms, social media allows for users to consciously and unconsciously tailor their news and information to their political beliefs. Because individuals who are more politically polarized are more confident in their tightly held beliefs, it

stands to reason that they would be more willing to share political information with their social networks (Stroud, 2010). In order to test if increased political polarization increases the frequency with which an individual shares or posts political information on their personal Facebook page (H1), variables for polarization and social media newsgathering frequency were tested. Polarization was measured using the self-reporting on a five-point Likert scale ranging from very liberal to very conservative. The data was recoded to create a secondary variable for analysis with a value of (3) for both extreme ends of the polarization spectrum including "very liberal" and "very conservative," and value of (2) for slight polarization consisting of all responses of "liberal" and "conservative," and (1) for moderates (M= 1.850, SD= .772, N= 368). This put polarization on an increasing scale with (1) representing the lowest level of polarization and (3) representing the highest level of political polarization.

Respondents also answered how often they share political information on their Facebook newsfeed on a five-point scale ranging from always to never. That variable was recoded to match the low to high values of the polarization variable to allow for a more accurate analysis (M= 2.0870, SD= 1.003, N= 368). The dependent variable of newsgathering was measured against polarization, determining the directionality of the relationship between polarization and social media newsgathering.

As seen below in Table 1, political polarization is positively related to the frequency with which an individual shares political information on their personal Facebook feed ($p<.001$). This suggests that as an individual's level of political polarization increases, so does their likelihood of sharing political information on their own Facebook page. This does not suggest that they

are more likely to post misinformation but that their interest and participation in the political realm includes sharing political news, offering significant support for H1.

Table 1 – Does Polarization Affect the Frequency of Sharing Political Information?		Frequency of Sharing Political Information	Level of Polarization
Frequency of Sharing Political Information	Pearson Correlation	1	.246**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	368	368
Level of Polarization	Pearson Correlation	.246**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	368	368

Notes: **p<.001. DV of Frequency of sharing political information has a mean of 2.0870 where a higher value equals a higher frequency of sharing, IV of political polarization has a mean of 1.8505 where a higher value equals a higher level of polarization

To better understand the reasons for dispersing false political information, data was tested to see if either Democrats or Republicans were more prone to sharing political misinformation (RQ1). Respondents answered with which political party they most closely identified. Independents were excluded from analysis since polarization is the focus of this research. The political party variable was tested against the likelihood to share political misinformation in a linear regression. Each respondent's five answers regarding the accuracy of each sample posts were combined and a mean likelihood to share false information variable was created (M= 1.414, SD= .676, N= 368). The lower the mean, the less likely the individual was to share false political information.

Table 2 Do Democrats or Republicans Share Misinformation?	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.402	.061		22.920	.000
Democrats	-.137	.079	-.099	-1.730	.084
Republicans	.010	.083	.007	.121	.904

Notes: Dependent Variable – Sharing of Political Misinformation, R-squared value = .183

There are no significant results to determine which political party is more inclined to share political misinformation, as seen in Table 2, therefore addressing RQ1 but not finding out if either party is more likely to share misinformation. Even without a significant relationship, it should be noted that Democrats are negatively related to the sharing of misinformation and Republics are very near zero.

The same low to high polarization variable (M= 1.850, SD= .772, N= 368) was used to test if increased political polarization leads to an increase of sharing misinformation with an individual's social media followers (RQ2). In a linear regression, the variable created to find the mean likelihood of each individual to share political misinformation was tested against the polarization variable.

Stroud (2010) suggested that polarization leads to selective exposure and potentially an increased exposure to political misinformation; however, it has been undetermined if polarization leads an individual to share political misinformation. The data contained in Table 3 shows that polarization does lead to an increase in the sharing of political misinformation. In fact, an increase in polarization has a very significant ($p<.001$) positive relationship with the sharing of misinformation, meaning that a more polarized individual is more likely to share misinformation they encounter on social media.

This is not surprising since an increase in polarization leads to an increase of news exposure and gathering. This suggests that polarized individuals might not have a higher level of political knowledge and self-efficacy even if they are more likely to be interested in political news. Researchers ran a similar test to see if political polarization led to an increased likelihood

of believing political misinformation and found a negative relationship between increased polarization and likelihood to believe political misinformation.

Table 3 Political Polarization leads to Increased Sharing of Misinformation	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Mean	Sig.
(Constant)	1.727	.277		6.240		.000
Political Polarization	-.064	.042	-.073	-1.524	-1.524	.128
Gather News on Facebook	.088	.030	.172	2.924	3.782	.004*
Share Political News	.034	.035	.070	.971	2.087	.332

Notes: Dependent Variable – Sharing of Political Misinformation, R-squared value = .275, *p<.005

Because respondents were given posts about both parties, it was possible that the increased likelihood to share some posts about one party was not fully analyzed by the decreased likelihood to share posts about another party. To clarify this potential shortcoming, new variables were created for polarization specific to each party, making a conservative polarization (M= .364, SD= .637, N= 368) variable and a liberal polarization (M= .486, SD= .738, N= 368) variable where extreme polarization carried a value of (2) and slight polarization carried a value of (1). Those variables were then tested against the likelihood of belief of each sample post, separated by the party they benefit. Sample posts one and four are considered pro-Republican and sample posts two and five are considered pro-Democrat. Each post was analyzed to see if either conservatives or liberals were more likely to share specific posts. This allowed for a deeper understanding of what the respondents believed and were willing to share based specifically on their chosen political party and provided interesting insight into the differences between the parties.

As seen in Table 3A, liberals more frequently have a negative relationship with sharing misinformation than conservatives. Conservatives have a negative relationship with sharing

political misinformation that benefits Democrats but the relationship with either post is not significant. However, conservatives are significantly more likely to share information that benefits the Republican Party. As their polarization increases, so does their likelihood to share posts that would benefit their political party. Liberals hold a significant positive relationship with the sharing of Sample Post 2, which suggested that Donald Trump chose to run as a Republican because they were easier to fool. These findings show that the political party of the individual certainly influences their likelihood to share political content, especially if it could be beneficial to their party. It also shows that this effect is stronger for the conservative respondents of this research.

Table 3A Political Polarization leads to Increased Sharing of Misinformation	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
Sample Post 1 – Pro-Republican – r-squared value = .050, M = .0435					
(Constant)	.031	.016		2.013	.045
Conservatives	.060	.018	.186	3.382	.001*
Liberals	-.019	.015	-.070	-1.277	.202
Sample Post 4 – Pro-Republican – r-squared value = .040. M = .0571					
(Constant)	.046	.018		2.578	.010
Conservatives	.060	.020	.165	2.974	.003*
Liberals	-.022	.017	-.068	-1.236	.217
Sample Post 2 – Pro-Democrat – r-squared value = .014, M = .0543					
(Constant)	.036	.018		2.067	.039
Conservatives	.001	.020	.002	.034	.973
Liberals	.037	.017	.119	2.120	.035**
Sample Post 5 – Pro-Democrat – r-squared value = .005, M = .7092					
(Constant)	.069	.018		3.822	.000
Conservatives	-.026	.021	-.073	-1.290	.198
Liberals	-.005	.018	-.015	-.265	.791

Notes: r-squared value and mean of sharing sample posts indicated with each post where a higher value indicates a higher level of sharing the post content

Because belief in misinformation allows citizens to make political opinions and decisions based on false data, it was important to understand if either conservatives or liberals are more susceptible to the belief of political misinformation and that requires a more detailed analysis since the mean belief factor could be negated due to the bipartisan nature of the posts included. The dependent variable of this analysis was the respondent's belief in the accuracy of the information contained in the posts (M= 2.078, SD= .485, N= 368) where a higher value means the respondent believed the post to be more accurate and a lower value suggesting that the respondent suspected the information to be false. Results shown in Table 3B suggest that conservatives overwhelmingly believed political misinformation that is damaging to the Democratic candidate or that could benefit the Republican Party, with posts that were pro-Republican having an extremely significant positive relationship suggesting that as a conservative's polarization increases, so does their likelihood to believe misinformation that is beneficial to Republicans.

Liberals were less likely to believe misinformation about either party with the exception of Sample Post 5 that suggested that Republican candidate Donald Trump does not possess the business acumen he has stated. Even so, the relationship between liberal extremism and belief of the misinformation is not significant. Liberals did show a significant negative relationship between extremism and the belief of misinformation that was pro-Republican as well as a significant negative relationship between their potential party bias and the belief of misinformation that could have benefitted the Democratic Party (Sample Post 2).

Table 3B Political Polarization leads to Increased Belief of Misinformation	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
Sample Post 1 – Pro-Republican – r-squared value = .139, M = .0817					
(Constant)	1.855	.057		32.577	.000
Conservatives	.316	.065	.255	4.871	.000*
Liberals	-.205	.056	-.193	-3.672	.000*
Sample Post 4 – Pro-Republican – r-squared value = .151, M = .75					
(Constant)	1.979	.057		34.984	.000
Conservatives	.322	.064	.261	5.008	.000*
Liberals	-.220	.056	-.206	-3.962	.000*
Sample Post 2 – Pro-Democrat – r-squared value = .026, M = .6332					
(Constant)	2.300	.062		36.877	.000
Conservatives	-.107	.061	-.097	-1.744	.082
Liberals	-.218	.071	-.171	-3.074	.002**
Sample Post 5 – Pro-Democrat – r-squared value = .058, M = .7092					
(Constant)	2.242	.055		41.113	.000
Conservatives	-.255	.062	-.225	-4.106	.000*
Liberals	.034	.054	.034	.627	.531

Notes: IV ideology/partisanship (M= 1.8505, SD= .7720) (higher values correspond with stronger polarization), DV of belief of misinformation (higher value corresponds with stronger belief). *p<.001 **p<.005

An individual who believes information is more likely to share that with their social network, as they would think the information is true and valuable. Furthermore, an individual who relies on a single source for most of their political news is more likely to believe misinformation that comes from that source. To that end, an individual who more frequently uses Facebook as a news source is more likely to believe misinformation presented on the platform (H2).

To test this hypothesis, respondents were asked to self-report how frequently they used Facebook to gather political news and information (M=3.782, SD= .951, N= 368). The previously mentioned belief variable (M= 2.078, SD= .485, N= 368) was tested along with additional measures included in the linear regression analysis to discover if other variables had

similar or more significant effects than gathering news on Facebook or the respondent's likelihood to believe political misinformation.

Table 4 News Gathering leads to Increased Belief in Misinformation	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Mean	Sig.
(Constant)	1.551	.271		5.730		.000
Gather News on Facebook	.086	.030	.169	2.859	3.782	.005*
Like Political News	.080	.035	.161	2.304	2.567	.022**
Comment on Political News	-.028	.038	-.053	-.732	2.054	.465
Frequency to Access Facebook	-.003	.031	-.006	-.110	4.641	.913
Crosscut News Frequency	-.048	.023	-.117	-2.090	3.391	.037**

Note: Dependent Variable – Belief of Political Misinformation (M=2.078, SD=.485, N=368), r-squared value = .056, *p<.005 **p<.05

As seen in Table 4, an increased use of Facebook for gathering political news is significantly related to the belief of political misinformation found on the social media platform, indicated by the significance level of .005, which is far below the accepted level of .05, meaning there is an extremely significant relationship between gathering news on Facebook and the belief of false political information. This analysis shows that individuals who gather news on Facebook on a more frequent basis are more likely to believe the misinformation that they encounter on their newsfeed, supporting H2. In addition, the belief variable is positively related to an individual's likelihood to like political news posts and negatively related to the frequency with which they see information that is from opposing political viewpoints. Both of these discoveries seem reasonable since someone who likes political news posts will see an increased amount of politically motivated posts, potentially exposing them to increased misinformation. Individuals who frequently see news from both parties are less likely to be deceived by false news as they have been exposed to more political knowledge and a wider

variety of sources and opinions. This also suggests that the individual is experiencing a lower level of political selective exposure as they more frequently see crosscutting news pieces.

5.3 Selective Exposure and Sharing Misinformation

Findings for H1, RQ1 and H2 suggest that respondents are more likely to seek out political news online but are hesitant to share any political information on their personal Facebook news feeds. While 70% reported using Facebook as a news source at least on a consistent basis, 95% of respondents stated that they seek out news through other mediums including online newspapers, political blogs, and cable news stations. Of those news consumers, more than half said they are at least somewhat interested in seeing news that differs from their political ideology and almost 60% reported hiding or "un-friending" someone because of dissonant political information shared on the other person's newsfeed. These practices lead to selective exposure on intentional and unintentional levels.

Selective exposure of political information should lead to an increased likelihood of sharing political misinformation (H3). Survey data allows for selective exposure to be analyzed in two different ways: intentional and unintentional. Intentional selective exposure is based on a self-reported measure provided by answering if individuals had or had not hidden or "de-friended" someone or a group for posting political or government information with which they did not agree (M= 1.60, SD= .490, N= 368). Unintentional selective exposure is measured by finding the mean of multiple survey responses including the number of candidates or political pages followed, frequency of liking, commenting, or sharing political information on personal Facebook pages, and how interested the individual is in seeing political posts that contain information from opposing political view points (M= 2.979, SD= .535, N= 368). Unintentional

selective exposure was analyzed as a mean and separately to see if any one action has a larger impact on the respondents' likelihood to believe or share misinformation.

Table 5 Selective Exposure leads to Increased Sharing of Misinformation	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Mean	Sig.
(Constant)	1.727	.277		6.240		.000
Gather News on Facebook	.088	.030	.172	2.924	3.782	.004*
Share Political News	.034	.035	.070	.971	2.087	.332
Like Political News	.092	.035	.185	2.647	2.567	.008*
Comment on Political News	-.031	.038	-.058	-.816	2.054	.415
Crosscut News Frequency	-.058	.023	-.142	-2.511	3.391	.012**
Follow Political Pages	.057	.045	.068	1.257	3.804	.209
Intentionally Hide Dissonant Information	-.099	.072	-.072	-1.378	1.60	.169

Note: Dependent Variable – Sharing of Political Misinformation, r-squared value = .056, *p<.010 **p<.05

As seen in Table 5, several acts that lead to unintentional political selective exposure are significantly related to the sharing of political misinformation. As with an increase in believing political misinformation, this data shows that an increase in gathering news on Facebook (M= 3.782, SD= .951, N=368) leads to an increased likelihood of sharing political misinformation. Similarly, liking political news (M= 2.567, SD= .979, N=368) leads to an increased likelihood that the individual will see more political posts in their feeds and have an increased likelihood of both believing and sharing political misinformation. These two variables offer a partial support for H3, suggesting that certain unintentional selective exposure tactics lead to an increase in the sharing of political misinformation. With the exception of commenting on political news (M= 2.054, SD= .911, N= 368), all variables lead to at least a slight increase in likelihood of sharing political misinformation. As suspected, frequently seeing political news that challenges the individual's political views leads to a decreased likelihood to share misinformation.

Digging deeper into the effects of selective exposure on the sharing of political misinformation, a mean variable was created by adding the responses of seven questions that indicated an increase in the possibility of unintentional selective exposure. Those questions included the frequency of following political pages, engaging with political content posted online, and gathering news on the social media platform. That mean variable (M= 2.979, SD= .535, N= 368) was tested against the dependent variable of sharing political misinformation. The results of that regression analysis can be seen below in Table 6. There is a significant correlation between an individual's unintentional selective exposure and their likelihood to share political misinformation online. This makes sense as individuals who like, comment on, and follow partisan pages and posts will view more partisan information in their newsfeed, potentially increasing the likelihood that they will encounter misinformation. This effect can be seen on any Facebook page, not limited to political information. An individual's feed does not contain all of the posts made by their friends or followed pages but instead features posts that are most likely to interest the user based on preferences and previous activity. In this regard, the user does not know which information that they missed unless they seek out a specific page, source, or individual. To that end, the user has a lack of information without knowing that they are uninformed.

Table 6
Unintentional Selective Exposure leads to Increased Sharing of Misinformation

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Mean	Sig.
(Constant)	-.028	.185		-.149		.882
Unintentional Selective Exposure	.484	.061	.383	7.926	2.979	.000*

Note: Dependent Variable – Sharing of Political Misinformation, r-squared value = .147, *p<.001, Independent variable of unintentional selective exposure is a mean of multiple actions that cause filtering of content (M=2.979, SD=.535, N=368) where a higher value indicates a higher level of selective exposure

To answer if an individual's chosen political party has an effect on their likelihood to share political misinformation on Facebook (RQ3a & RQ3b), new variables had to be created to separate respondents who believed the sample post information was false from those who did not. In addition, a new variable was created to separate those who stated that they would share the information contained in the post with their social network. An individual who answered that the post was partly or completely false were coded as (1) and an individual who answered that they were somewhat or extremely likely to share the post were coded as (1) in a separate variable. These two variables were created for four of the five sample posts. The four selected were each about either the Democratic or Republican presidential candidate and the fifth was omitted since it reflected negatively on a non-partisan organization and could not be attributed to a specific party

For each post, the product of the new variables was used to create a third variable, finding that any individual marked as a (0) either believed the information to be true and shared or believed it to be false and didn't share. Posts one and five contain information that is damaging to Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton and are considered "pro-Republican" (M= .029, SD= .185, N= 368). The product variable for those posts was tested for respondents who shared their political affiliation as Republican). Posts two and four contain information that is damaging to Republican candidate Donald Trump and are considered "pro-Democrat" (M= .038, SD= .205, N= 368). The product variable for those posts was tested for respondents who shared their political affiliation as Democrat. The posts were tested separately to ensure accurate assessment according to political party, belief of false information, and sharing of false information.

As seen in Table 7, there is no significant proof showing that either party is more likely or at all likely to share political misinformation they know is false. Even without significant results, this provides insight into the sharing habits and shows that neither party is likely to share misinformation for the sake of misleading their social network.

Table 7A Democrats Intentionally Sharing Political Misinformation		Share False Pro-Democrat	Democrats
Share False Pro-Democrat	Pearson Correlation	1	-.014
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.789
	N	368	368
Democrats	Pearson Correlation	-.014	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.789	
	N	368	368
Table 7B Republicans Intentionally Sharing Political Misinformation		Share False Pro-Republican	Republicans
Share False Pro-Republican	Pearson Correlation	1	.044
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.398
	N	368	368
Republicans	Pearson Correlation	.044	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.398	
	N	368	368

6. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

With social media usage becoming more and more prevalent in our daily lives, it is important to know how the different types of information shared on the social platforms affects the knowledge individuals use to make political choices. As more people join the platforms and groups continue to use the connection to millions of Americans to disperse misinformation about candidates and policies, it is of utmost importance that each user ensures that the information that they share is accurate and true. Given that increased polarization leads to increased emotions and a potential increase in tense conversations, knowing that the members of your network fact-checked their post could go a long way to alleviate the vitriol and partisan accusations. With so little specific research done on the effects of this newer digital communication, the data collected will be very valuable in understanding the threats or benefits created by false information shared on a user's Facebook account either intentionally or unintentionally.

Understanding that misinformed citizens could be considered uninformed, they cause issues with the function of the democratic process. When those citizens arrive at their polling places armed with information they believe to be true, their voting choices are likely skewed by the information that the voter has inferred or learned from the biased information they have consumed. Since the voter's political affiliation plays a role in the type of information that they either choose to consume or inadvertently consume on social media, that partisan selective exposure could be blamed for the voter's lack of political knowledge. Therefore, misinformation and increased political partisanship could have a large effect on the final outcome of the election. If enough citizens are exposed to the same biased and false political

information, a majority of voters could be selecting candidates based on misperceptions and falsehoods.

There are important limitations to note for this analysis. Because this study was completed in the days leading up to the very contentious 2016 U.S Presidential election, the impact of the surrounding political climate could have an impact on answers provided by respondents thus making the results difficult to generalize. This study looks specifically at the effects of selective exposure and exposure to political misinformation but knowing if the effects of misinformation in the non-political sphere are similar would require additional, more targeted research. It should be considered that the current political climate is tenuous and seemingly chaotic. Both candidates are very well known public figures but both did not necessarily appeal to their party's voter base. Because the candidates were polarizing figures on their own accord, it is possible that their personas affected voters' analysis of information presented about the candidates. For example, if a Republican did not support the Republican candidate, it would have been possible for them to believe and share misinformation about their own party, which could have altered research results regarding the effects of polarization.

In addition, the methods used for measuring exposure and belief of misinformation potentially restrict conclusions, as they are specific to potentially unknown current events. Posts containing more universally known claims could have produced varied results. However, the sample posts used for this research are varied in nature and provided false information targeted at both conservative and liberal topics and candidates. Finally, as a snowball sample, this study does not analyze a representative sample of the United States population and future research should aim to reach that representation.

This study has strengths that contribute to the existing literature regarding social media, selective exposure, and misinformation research. This research expands upon previous studies looking at political selective exposure and social media use for news consumption to include the effects of misinformation (Stroud, 2010; Stroud, 2011). Specifically, this study shows that increased levels of selective exposure lead not only to increased levels of polarization but also to increased belief of political misinformation. That belief tied to extreme polarization, leads to an increased likelihood of sharing political misinformation with additional members of an individual's social network.

With the vast amount of misinformation focused on political news and elections, it is important to consider the potential effects of sending the American public into voting booths every election year to make decisions based on faulty data. In addition, with increased partisan information being shared by multiple outlets like Fox News, Conservative Tribune, MSNBC, and others, it is important to know how that polarization increases the possibility of being exposed to political misinformation. In an effort to avoid sharing misinformation, a social media user could reduce their potential for exposure by gathering news from a wider variety of sources, including fact-checking pages that determine the validity of information floating around online. It would also be valuable for readers to know which sites and social media pages commonly feature misinformation to allow the user to approach their stories with caution. The simple act of reading additional information and not sharing news based on the headline alone could drastically curb the amount of misinformation that is shared on Facebook.

After the results of the 2016 Presidential Election were tallied, some blamed false news stories on Facebook for the unexpected outcome (Weinberger, 2016). While it is certainly true

that the social media platform was overrun with false news and misleading headlines, the platform cannot be specifically held liable for the actions of its users and those users should remember that there was fake news available on both sides of the aisle. As the site's content is created and curated by the user, the onus of ensuring that the information posted is accurate and honest is up to those users, not Mark Zuckerberg and those that he employs. However, the platform's newfound eagerness to combat false news can be seen as a step in the right direction, protecting the users of the platform from those that intentionally and unintentionally spread false political news.

Should the American public be concerned about the findings of this study? Possibly, but more importantly, they should take the knowledge that their political affiliation makes them more susceptible to being misinformed and choose to do more research when faced with choosing red or blue in the voting booth. Facebook users, at least those included in this study, should rest a bit easier knowing that their friends and connections who have opposing political views are not sharing intentionally misleading information to further their political opinions. However, it is as important as ever to verify the news gathered via any social media platform as there is never a guarantee that the posts you read are the posts written with facts in mind.

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APPENDIX A

SURVEY CONTENT

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT: Thank you for your interest in taking this survey! The following survey will be the extent of data collected for a research study conducted by Amanda Jordan (amanda.jordan@uta.edu) for a project titled "Social Media and Political News." The survey should take approximately 15 to complete. Your responses will be anonymous and will be recorded by the survey program without any identifying characteristics. Any printed data and analysis will be kept in a secure place in the Fine Arts building of the University of Texas at Arlington and none of the acquired data will be used for any other purpose than the completion of this study. However, all data will be retained for possible future analysis. If the results of this research are published or presented at scientific meetings, your identity cannot and will not be disclosed. Participation is completely voluntary.

You have the right to discontinue your participation at any time for any reason without explanation or expectation of penalty. There are no known benefits or risks expected from participating in this study. You may contact the Office of Regulatory Services with the UT Arlington Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 817.272.3723 with any question related to your rights as a research participant. By clicking “Next”, you confirm you have been informed about this study’s purpose, procedures, and risks. You are also 18 years of age or older.

Q1 What is your gender?
- ❍ Male (1)
- ❍ Female (2)
- ❍ Other (3)

Q2 What is your age?
- ❍ 18-24 (1)
- ❍ 25-34 (2)
- ❍ 35-49 (3)
- ❍ 50-64 (4)
- ❍ 65+ (5)

Q3 Are you registered to vote in the United States?
- ❍ Yes (1)
- ❍ No (2)

Q4 Do you have a Facebook account?
- ❍ Yes (1)
- ❍ No (2)

This section will ask questions in regard to you usage of Facebook as it pertains to posts about government and politics. Please respond to questions according to your usage of the social media site for personal use only. Do not take into account any uses for business purposes.

Q5 How often do you get on Facebook?
- ❍ Several times a day (1)
- ❍ About once every day (2)
- ❍ A few days per week (3)
- ❍ Once a week (4)
- ❍ Less than once a week (5)
- ❍ Never (6)

Q6 How often do you get political news or headlines from your Facebook news feed?
- ❍ Always (1)
- ❍ Often (2)
- ❍ Sometimes (3)
- ❍ Rarely (4)
- ❍ Never (5)

Q7 Are you interested in seeing news or posts that contain opposing political view points?
- ❍ Very interested (1)
- ❍ Somewhat interested (2)
- ❍ Neutral (3)
- ❍ Somewhat disinterested (4)
- ❍ Very disinterested (5)

Q8 Thinking about the opinions you see posted about government and politics on Facebook, how often are they similar to your own views?
- ❍ Always (1)
- ❍ Often (2)
- ❍ Sometimes (3)
- ❍ Rarely (4)
- ❍ Never (5)

Q9 Have you ever hidden, blocked, defended or stopped following someone on Facebook because of their posts about government or politics?
- ❍ Yes (1)
- ❍ No (2)

Q10 How often, if ever, do you share posts about government or politics on your personal Facebook page?
- ❍ Always (1)
- ❍ Often (2)
- ❍ Sometimes (3)
- ❍ Rarely (4)
- ❍ Never (5)

Q11 If you share posts about government or politics, what most often motivates you to share these posts to your personal Facebook news feed?
- ❍ To share the information with my network (1)
- ❍ To show my agreement with the posted content (2)
- ❍ To fact-check the information presented in the posted content (3)
- ❍ To mock or make fun of the posted content (4)
- ❍ I do not share government or political posts (5)

Q12 How many political candidates, groups, or pages do you follow on Facebook?
- ❍ 1-5 (1)
- ❍ 6-10 (2)
- ❍ 11-15 (3)
- ❍ 16+ (4)

Q13 Do you "like" posts about government or politics that appear in your Facebook news feed?
- ❍ Always (1)
- ❍ Often (2)
- ❍ Sometimes (3)
- ❍ Rarely (4)
- ❍ Never (5)

Q14 Do you comment on posts about government and politics that appear in your Facebook news feed?
- ❍ Always (1)
- ❍ Often (2)
- ❍ Sometimes (3)
- ❍ Rarely (4)
- ❍ Never (5)

Q15 If you comment on posts about government or politics, what most often motivates you to make a comment?
- ❍ To share information to add to the posted content (1)
- ❍ To show my agreement with the post content (2)
- ❍ To offer differing information to the posted content (3)
- ❍ I do not comment on government or political posts (4)

In this section, you will be given five posts that have been found circulating on Facebook. Please read each post and answer the questions below the image as honestly as possible.

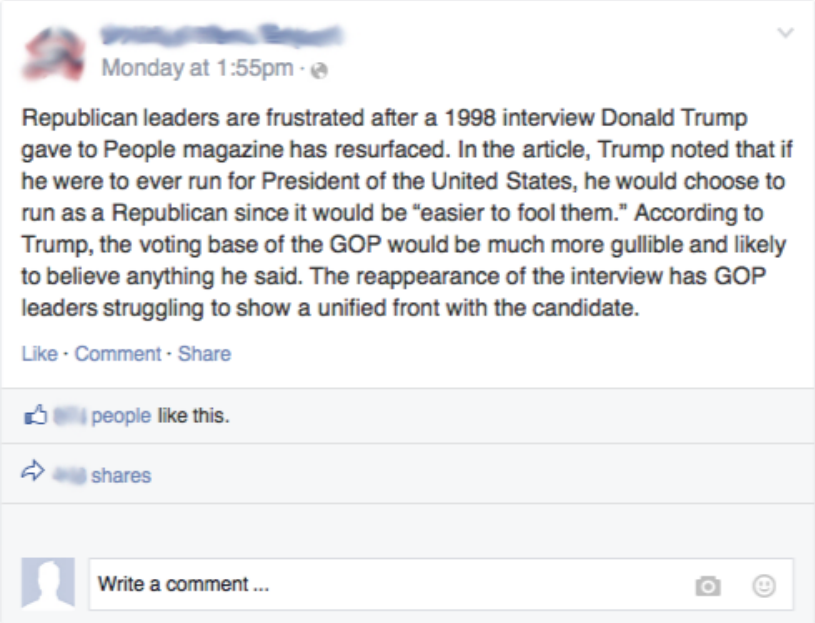
SAMPLE POST 1

Q16 How accurate is the information contained in the post?
- ❍ Completely False (1)
- ❍ Partially False (2)
- ❍ Mostly True (3)
- ❍ Completely Factual (4)

Q17 How likely would you be to share this information on your own page?
- ❍ Extremely unlikely (1)
- ❍ Somewhat unlikely (2)
- ❍ Neither likely nor unlikely (3)
- ❍ Somewhat likely (4)
- ❍ Extremely likely (5)

Q18 What reason below would motivate you to share this information on your personal Facebook page?
- ❍ To inform my social network of the information in the post (1)
- ❍ To mock or joke about the information in the post (2)
- ❍ To fact-check the information in the post (3)
- ❍ To offer an argument against the information in the post (4)
- ❍ I would not share this post (5)

SAMPLE POST 2

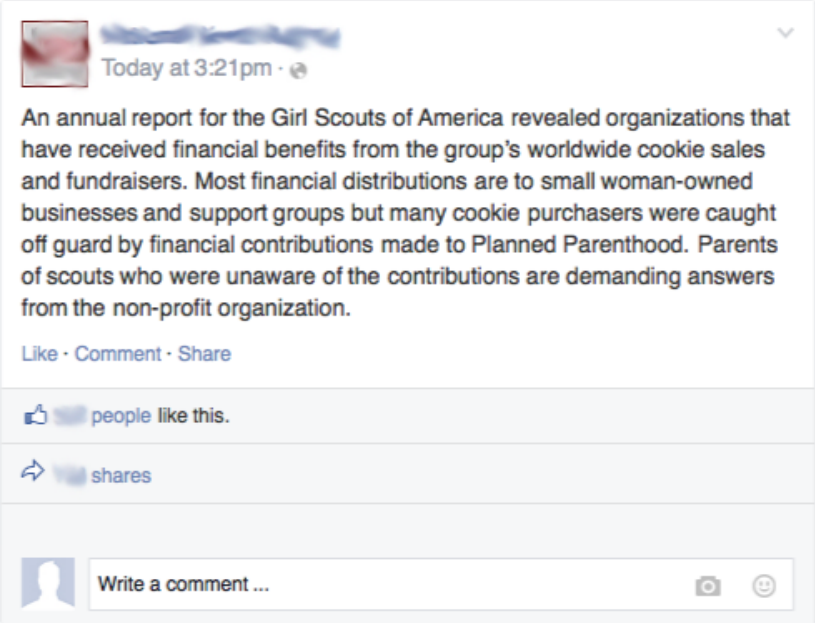


Q19 How accurate is the information contained in the post?
- ❍ Completely False (1)
- ❍ Partially False (2)
- ❍ Mostly True (3)
- ❍ Completely Factual (4)

Q20 How likely would you be to share this information on your own page?
- ❍ Extremely unlikely (1)
- ❍ Somewhat unlikely (2)
- ❍ Neither likely nor unlikely (3)
- ❍ Somewhat likely (4)
- ❍ Extremely likely (5)

Q21 What reason below would motivate you to share this information on your personal Facebook page?
- ❍ To inform my social network of the information in the post (1)
- ❍ To mock or joke about the information in the post (2)
- ❍ To fact-check the information in the post (3)
- ❍ To offer an argument against the information in the post (4)
- ❍ I would not share this post (5)

SAMPLE POST 3



Q22 How accurate is the information contained in the post?
- ❍ Completely False (1)
- ❍ Partially False (2)
- ❍ Mostly True (3)
- ❍ Completely Factual (4)

Q23 How likely would you be to share this information on your own page?
- ❍ Extremely unlikely (1)
- ❍ Somewhat unlikely (2)
- ❍ Neither likely nor unlikely (3)
- ❍ Somewhat likely (4)
- ❍ Extremely likely (5)

Q24 What reason below would motivate you to share this information on your personal Facebook page?
- ❍ To inform my social network of the information in the post (1)
- ❍ To mock or joke about the information in the post (2)
- ❍ To fact-check the information in the post (3)
- ❍ To offer an argument against the information in the post (4)
- ❍ I would not share this post (5)

SAMPLE POST 4

Q25 How accurate is the information contained in the post?
- ❍ Completely False (1)
- ❍ Partially False (2)
- ❍ Mostly True (3)
- ❍ Completely Factual (4)

Q26 How likely would you be to share this information on your own page?
- ❍ Extremely unlikely (1)
- ❍ Somewhat unlikely (2)
- ❍ Neither likely nor unlikely (3)
- ❍ Somewhat likely (4)
- ❍ Extremely likely (5)

Q27 What reason below would motivate you to share this information on your personal Facebook page?
- ❍ To inform my social network of the information in the post (1)
- ❍ To mock or joke about the information in the post (2)
- ❍ To fact-check the information in the post (3)
- ❍ To offer an argument against the information in the post (4)
- ❍ I would not share this post (5)

SAMPLE POST 5

Q28 How accurate is the information contained in the post?

- ❍ Completely False (1)
- ❍ Partially False (2)
- ❍ Mostly True (3)
- ❍ Completely Factual (4)

Q29 How likely would you be to share this information on your own page?

- ❍ Extremely unlikely (1)
- ❍ Somewhat unlikely (2)
- ❍ Neither likely nor unlikely (3)
- ❍ Somewhat likely (4)
- ❍ Extremely likely (5)

Q30 What reason below would motivate you to share this information on your personal Facebook page?

- ❍ To inform my social network of the information in the post (1)
- ❍ To mock or joke about the information in the post (2)
- ❍ To fact-check the information in the post (3)
- ❍ To offer an argument against the information in the post (4)
- ❍ I would not share this post (5)

Q31 What sources do you turn to for political or government news? (Select all that apply)
- ❑ Cable News (television) (1)
- ❑ Newspaper (2)
- ❑ Radio (3)
- ❑ Social Media (4)
- ❑ Local Television News (5)
- ❑ Online Newspapers (6)
- ❑ Political Blogs (7)
- ❑ None of These (8)

Q32 With which political party do you most closely identify?
- ❍ Democrat (1)
- ❍ Republican (2)
- ❍ Independent (3)

Q33 Where do you believe you fall on the scale below?
- ❍ Very Liberal (1)
- ❍ Liberal (2)
- ❍ Moderate (3)
- ❍ Conservative (4)
- ❍ Very Conservative (5)

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT: Thank you so much for participating in this survey. Your participation is very valuable, as I know you are very busy. There was some information about the study I was unable to discuss prior to taking the survey, because doing so could have impacted your answers and potentially skewed the study results. I would like to explain these items to you now. In this study, I am interested in understanding not only the effects of political news on social media but specifically focused on the effects of false political news that is found on the social media site Facebook. Based on prior research, I expect to find that increased political polarization leads to an increased amount of false political news shared on social networking channels. This deception was necessary to ensure that all answers to this survey were unbiased and honest. For your knowledge, all of the information contained in the sample Facebook posts came from real accounts on the social media site and the contents of the posts have been proven false.

I hope this clarifies the purpose of the research, and the reason why I could not share all of these details prior to your participation. It is very important that you do not discuss these details with anyone else until the study is complete. The study's efforts will be greatly compromised if participants come into this study knowing that misinformation is the main focus of the research. If you have any questions or concerns, you may contact Amanda Jordan at (817) 272-9419 or amanda.jordan@uta.edu. Thank you again for your participation!