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Do You Trust Me(dia)?: How Students Perceive and Identify Fake News

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Do You Trust Me(dia)?: How Students Perceive and Identify Fake News

HONORS THESIS

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Abstract

Social media has become an increasingly popular source of news among young adults. However, with the rise of "fake news," credibility comes into question and young adults are left on their own to determine which news is real and which is false. Two focus groups were employed in this study to gain a greater understanding of how college students aged 18-24 determine what news to trust on social media and the factors that impacted those decisions. Young adults in that age group trust news found on social media based on a variety of factors including the person that is sharing the news, the particular social media site it comes from, and the ability to verify the news with other alternative sources.

Introduction

A rich diversity of sources that supply internet users with information has brought opportunities for more complex consumption of news. Nevertheless, due to the exposure to the news and reflections on current events on a variety of platforms, from news websites to blogs and social media, it can be strenuous for consumers, especially young people, to distinguish between false and real information (Marchi, 2012). Such development poses a concern to many media professionals, considering that in an increasingly digital world, social media have become the main source for how most users get their news (Shao, Ciampaglia, Varol, Flammini, & Menczer, 2015). Following this trend, illegitimate news sources or "fake news" are rapidly increasing along with the content they share (Shao et al., 2015). The issue is that with this type of news sources on the rise, people can easily be misled by the information they obtain through social media. Such an occurrence can lead to the distrust of the media.

With the rise of social media, many people have shifted away from more traditional news sources (Turcotte, York, Irving, Scholl, & Pingree, 2015). This has led to skepticism of the news they come across and distrust of news outlets as a whole. As an illustration, a Pew Research Center study showed that 57% of people expect the news they see on social media to be "largely inaccurate" (Matsa & Shearer, 2018). This skepticism also applies to those who prefer to get their news from social media over traditional outlets. It is important to understand how audiences select their news in an era where inaccurate information spreads quickly.

In the age of "fake news," differentiating between legitimate and illegitimate news sources have caused many people to write off real news, especially if it goes against their personal beliefs (Matsa & Shearer, 2018). Acknowledging the importance of understanding how the concept of media trust manifests in a digital media environment, this study aims to determine how internet users decide what news to trust on social media and what influences their perception to qualify a news story posted on social media as "fake news." With this aim, the study will provide an explanation as to why people feel skeptical about using social media as a source for news, yet still prefer it over traditional outlets. Specifically, the study employs focus groups as a method in communication research to assess how one specific demographic group - young adults - perceive and identify fake news. The study findings are valuable not only for the growing academic literature about fake news but also for media industry professionals because it could help them develop a course of action to increase media trust among the public.

Literature Review

Social Media as News Sources

Social media have become a popular source for young news consumers. As one study suggested, as many as 35% of people aged 18-29 cite social media as their main source of news consumption (Shearer, 2018). According to this study, young people are over four times as likely to get their news from social media than their 65+-year-old counterparts. Other studies came to a similar conclusion with the same or younger demographics, emphasizing the importance of social media in obtaining news among young people. For instance, Marchi (2012) investigated news consumption habits among teenagers to find that social media were one of their main news

sources. According to this study, teenagers would also consume news through traditional media channels, but in a non-traditional way. Specifically, they were more likely to stumble upon news on TV or radio than to tune into them at a specific time. Furthermore, the way they consume news online is specific and more complex, as they can go beyond the original story by clicking on hyperlinks to find additional information or read comments other users post. Marchi (2012) also noted that the teenagers perceived opinions and humor in explaining facts as an important component of news.

Another study of 16 young adults in Argentina found that news consumption through social media can be labeled as "incidental news" (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, & Matassi, 2017, p. 1789). Several subjects in this study spoke about their dependence on social media on a daily basis. Based on the study results, young adults are not actively searching for news on their social media platforms and only encountering it amongst the swaths of information on their feeds (Boczkowski et al., 2017). Similarly, Marchi (2012) points out that teenagers "stumble upon" news. The phenomenon of incidental news strengthens the integration of news media consumption and daily social interactions, the study argues (Boczkowski et al., 2017). They also argue that this change in main sources of news consumption may signify a turn toward digital sources displacing traditional ones.

Fake News

Fake news is a term that has evaded a clear definition. Despite this, we have found ourselves in the era of "fake news," differentiating between legitimate and illegitimate news sources and causing many people to write off real news, especially if it goes against their

personal beliefs (Matsa & Shearer, 2018). Because the definition of "fake news" is so elusive,

scholars have tried to define the term by providing examples. Mould (2018) identified "fake

news" as outlets like The Onion, which he described as fake "through and through," and the

Daily Show, which is described as a "fake news show that airs real stories" (p. 373). Allcott and

Gentzkow (2017) gave fake news an operational definition of "news articles that are

intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers" (p. 213). Even the president of the

United States Donald Trump has his own definition of fake news, as argued by Steve Coll of the

New Yorker who wrote "judging from the President's tweets, his definition of 'fake news' is

credible reporting that he doesn't like" (2017, para 3). Without one concrete definition of fake

news, the phenomenon has been difficult to research (See Appendix B for examples of fake

news).

The effects of fake news have been studied in conjunction with an effectual theory like

the third person effect (TPE) or the illusory truth effect (ITE) that explain how information

affects people (Jang & Kim, 2017; Stefanita, Corbu, & Buturoiu, 2018; Pennycook, Cannon &

Rand, 2018). TPE states that the people are more likely to believe that others, or out-group

members, are more vulnerable and more likely to believe something than themselves, or in-group

members, are. ITE states that repeated exposure to something will result in its perceived

accuracy. Jang and Kim's (2017) study found a positive correlation between TPE and

partisanship. Those in the Democratic party felt that they were less vulnerable than their

Republican counterparts to fake news. There are several behavioral characteristics of TPE like

people who believe themselves to be "cognitively sophisticated" and optimism bias (Stefanita et

al., 2018, p. 8). Similar to the results of the study by Jang and Kim (2017), this study also found

that there was a positive correlation between TPE and out-group members. In that same respect, a study conducted by Pennycook, Cannon, and Gordon (2018) produced findings that showed increased accuracy ratings when viewers had seen fake news headlines before. By being exposed to a fake news headline once, the number of participants who believed the headlines were real doubled.

Social Networks as News Filters

One of the critical elements in identifying prominent news stories is social connections. For instance, Marchi (2012) learned that adults were among those who "filtered" news the teenagers would come across. This trend is especially salient in social media, where teenagers, according to the study, look at what their friends and family members post and then identify the relevance of a story.

News filters can be considered two ways: in terms of algorithms or in terms of exposure. An algorithm can be designed to analyze things like believability and tone in news articles to determine whether or not it can be considered fake news (Rubin, Chen, & Conroy, 2015) or can determine which news articles and posts should appear on a user's timeline (Suciu, 2018). However, news filters in terms of exposure resonate more with the idea of social networks as news filters. One study found that respondents are twice as likely to prefer news links on platforms like Facebook and Twitter that came from friends and family over those that were shared by journalists and news organizations (Hermida et al, 2012). The words that users choose when posting to social media sites, like Facebook, influence their friends to choose the same words (Kramer, 2012).

Even though obtaining news from social networks was common in the pre-digital era as well, the difference is that those networks are nowadays much wider and easily accessible (Marchi, 2012). As an illustration, 21% of respondents in a Pew Research study cited convenience as the reason they most enjoy getting their news from social media (Matsa & Shearer, 2018). Social media has also sped up the timeline for the dissemination of news, with 7% of respondents in the aforementioned study citing speed as the reason they most enjoy getting news from social media.

Media Trust

"Media trust," like "fake news," is a term that has yet to be provided one succinct definition. Kohring and Matthes (2007) concluded that, with all prior studies and factors considered, media trust can be defined as trusting in the selectivity of news organizations rather than trust in objectivity or truth. A Knight Foundation (2016) study revealed that 42% of college students say "they have either a 'great deal' or 'fair amount' of trust in the press to report the news accurately and fairly, while 59% say they do not have much or any trust in the press" (p. 23). Even with a limited trust in mainstream media, over 50% of the students surveyed said they would check a traditional news organization to get accurate information about what is happening in the United States. Despite that, 26% of students said they would "look at posts written by those they follow on social media and 20% who would consult newer, digital-only news sources such as BuzzFeed, Mic or Huffington Post" (Knight Foundation, 2016, p. 24).

Albright (2017) points to the rise of news organizations using direct platforms like Twitter to interact with their followers and the phenomenon of "following the conversation"

instead of being ahead of it as a way to build, or even repair, the relationship between news organizations and citizens. Similarly, Nah and Chung (2012) point to social media platforms as an online community where trust can be built between professional and citizen journalists and their news audiences.

Yet, according to several studies, media usage has been found to be a factor that impacts the level of trust people have in the media (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018). As a result, these studies have found that continuous exposure to TV news and newspapers increases the level of trust in these media (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018).

Focusing on news stories that spread on social media in identifying what is real and what is fake is important as an increasing number of Americans receive their news online (Shearer, 2018). This is especially pertinent to young people whose news consumption habits, according to Marchi (2012), differ from those native to the traditional media consumers. Not only do users receive news asynchronously, but they are also exposed to the information that is followed by an emotional, opinionated message by those who post it (Albright, 2017; Marchi, 2012). Such practice can alter the perception of a story that a potential consumer has (Albright, 2017). Bearing in mind the importance of understanding how audiences select their news in the era in which inaccurate information spreads quickly, the current study poses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Internet users decide what news to trust on social media?

RQ2: What influences users' perception to qualify a news story posted on social media as "fake news"?

Method

This study utilized qualitative research techniques to collect data. Specifically, the study employed focus groups as a method in communication research because they allow for a wider range of ideas and perspectives to be shared through discussion (Treadwell, 2016). This is especially important as the study examines a relatively new phenomenon in the digital media environment – fake news, so focus groups as a research method allows for concepts that have not been identified in previous research to emerge during data collection.

Two separate focus groups were held between February and March 2019 with people of various demographics, targeted at college students aged 18-24. At least four students who have different majors were recruited in both focus groups in order to gain a wider range of perspectives on the topic. Those majors are: nursing, psychology, history, criminal justice, communications, and global marketing management. The same questions regarding the consumption of news stories on social media were asked in each focus group (See Appendix A). For instance, participants were asked about their overall trust in news media, how social media has influenced their trust in news media, and the factors that help them determine how credible a news source is. In both groups, the moderator facilitated discussion by providing context around some of the questions to clarify what exactly was being asked of participants. Many of the questions were answered with anecdotes or examples as support for what was being said. The study author served as the moderator leading the discussion during each session, while also taking notes on common themes that appeared. The focus groups were video-recorded. After the sessions, the recorded sessions were reviewed for analysis. This process included a question by

question comparison of the responses from both sessions to better understand the common themes.

Results and Discussion

This study found that young adults consume almost all of their news on social media because they are constantly surrounded by it. The young adults in the study unanimously expressed distrust of mainstream media organizations and an increasing trust in alternative news sources. Determining whether or not a news story is "fake news" is dependent upon factors like the person who is sharing the news and the context in which it was posted. However, it turns out that the responsibility for credibility is mostly dependent upon the social media site it comes from. For some social media sites, credibility is dependent on the network itself, while for others, credibility of news is dependent upon the person who shared it. Overall, young adults feel the need to verify all news stories they come across on social media with other alternative sources.

News Trust on Social Media

Information verification and alternative sources

RQ1 asked how Internet users decide what news to trust on social media. The focus group members confirmed that they primarily rely on social media to acquire news. Specifically, most of the participants felt that they are constantly surrounded by news media and consume it every day because of social media, making it their main source of news. An investigation of news consumption among teenagers came to the same conclusion (Marchi, 2012). Consequently, some focus groups participants stated that they don't go out looking for news for two reasons:

feelings that news media contains too much negativity and just being a student. Looking for

news and then following up on initial reports by looking for additional sources seen as too

time-consuming when they have deadlines and other activities to keep up with. The subjects felt

that it was normal for college students not be focused on what's going on in the world beyond

their campus, with some simply calling it "reality." One student majoring in psychology

attributed their knowledge of current news by "stumbling upon it." Several other participants

expressed that they also stumbled upon news. This finding supports studies that have found

evidence of the "incidental news" phenomenon (Boczkowski et al., 2017; Marchi, 2012). Other

news sources beyond social media included Google and more traditional outlets like the *New

York Times*.

In response to RQ1, my research has found that young adults decide what news to trust

after doing their own research and confirming information through other sources, including

alternative sources. Despite not always putting forth an effort to seek out news, it was

unanimously agreed that it was important to do additional research for all news. With so many

different news sources at their disposal, the young adults shared the ideas that they should not

trust the first news source they see on social media and that it would be in their best interest to

backup any new information by corroborating the initial story with reports from other

organizations. News media was perceived as being motivated by money and being biased toward

political parties on an organizational level. When asked about how their feelings regarding

general news media, one participant mentioned that they didn't trust corporate news media, and

offered up CNN and Fox News as examples. Mainstream news organizations like the

aforementioned two were regarded as working with business interests in mind instead of citizen

interests. A study by the Knight Foundation (2014) found that distrust of mainstream news

organizations was present in over 50% of the students they surveyed. These perceptions have

left young adults more likely to turn to and trust alternative news sources.

When asked how their trust or distrust has grown for news media in the past five years,

several participants specifically credited alternative media sources for the growth of their trust in

media. Others, however, have had a growth in distrust in the last five years because of the mass

amounts of news media available and the prevalence of news organizations publicly discrediting

each other. As a 21-year-old female pointed out, "It's harder to believe what's being put out

there because you never really know what's factual." Another participant, a 20-year-old male

majoring in criminal justice, stated that he has a negative perception of several news outlets in

the United States: "Specifically, corporate media, I have a very negative view [of]. Fox News,

CNN, MSNBC — I won't listen to that for actual news. I'll listen to it [when] ... they have the

debates on [and] speeches by presidential candidates… A lot of young people do want to be

informed, but they're so jaded by how biased all the news sources around them are." These

findings support the Pew Research Center study that found that over 50% of people expect the

news they find on social media to mostly be inaccurate (Matsa & Shearer, 2018).

Social media and traditional mediums aren't the only ways that young adults are

consuming news. Participants attributed some of their news consumption to entertainment media

like television shows and streaming services like Netflix and Hulu. Both companies have

produced original docu-series and documentaries about news events in an effort to make the

news "appealing," as many participants put it. Television shows have specific episodes that are

centered around causes in order to share a message and to raise viewers' awareness about issues. For example, a recent episode of *Grey's Anatomy* was centered around the opioid epidemic.

Bias affects credibility of news

With respect to RQ1 which examined how Internet users decide what news to trust on social media, this study also learned that young adults find it difficult to believe in stories they come across online. As a 20-year-old male participant stressed, "It's hard to find news media that you can trust these days." Several factors were identified that influence young adults' perception of news credibility. Some of these factors included the perceived presence of bias, the ability to corroborate a story, social media literacy, and even the context in which a news story was shared on social media.

Participants unanimously agreed that bias, both on an organizational and individual level, was the factor that influenced their perception of news credibility the most. On the basis of individual news articles, perceived credibility was dependent on the presentation of an opposing argument. If it were to come across as an article or outlet pushing a certain agenda, readers would immediately become skeptical of any information that was included. Specifically on social media, the person who shares the news content has an impact on how young adult consumers perceive the credibility of news media. "If a celebrity that's known for lying and [posting] clickbait [says] something, I'm less likely to believe it," a 21-year-old female stated.

Social media literacy was a common factor for young adult readers when determining whether or not a news source was credible. Almost every response began with participants stating that they were aware that they should be wary of everything they read or see from any news source. Because they've grown up in a digital era and are aware that anyone has the ability

to post anything on the Internet and call it "fact," most young adults have taken to not accepting anything at face value.

The generational gap was regarded by young adults as the justification for low social media literacy in their older counterparts. Older family members who are not as familiar with social media and the presence of satirical news organizations are less likely to be perceived as credible when they share anything. Some participants shared anecdotes about older family members sharing articles from satirical news site The Onion with captions indicating they believed the stories to be true. However, the generational gap may not be entirely to blame. Some participants did not know The Onion was a satirical site until they attended the focus group because they are not active users of certain social media sites. Participants who were active on Twitter were more likely to know about more satirical sites and notice the indicators for them at a faster rate than those who weren't.

On social media, participants used context as a way to determine the credibility of the news being shares. They check the time that an article is shared as compared to the time the article was originally published to use context as a marker for credibility. For example, if an article from 2014 was shared on social media in 2018, participants were more likely to be skeptical of the news they were receiving.

Social Media Determines News "Fakeness"

RQ2 focused on what influences users' perception to qualify a news story posted on social media as "fake news." To answer this question, the researcher wanted to gain an understanding of the participants' social media habits. The questions asked (see Appendix A) are

focused on users' perception of news shared on social media site and the factors that influence their perception.

Every participant under study had a presence on at least one social networking site. During discussions, they were able to pinpoint the five main sites they get their news from: Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and YouTube. For the purpose of this study, the researcher focused on the first four. The discussion produced this main takeaway: Participants' decision to label a news story posted on social media as "fake news" or not was largely impacted by the site they were on at the time.

When describing their experience with social media, a 21-year-old global marketing management major explained how often she would stumble upon news on these platforms saying, "I go through every social media that I have and it'll just pop up. Even when you're not looking for it. There's news that happens … every second of every day. Anytime that you go on your phone, there's going to be a new report." Teenagers and young adults have long made the claim that they stumble upon news because of social media and some researchers have even coined the term "incidental news" to describe it (Boczkowski et al., 2017; Marchi, 2012).

In response to RQ2, this study found that the social media platform itself impacts news credibility for young adults. They are more likely to trust news on Twitter over news on Facebook, while they are more likely to trust news on Facebook over news on Snapchat and Instagram. In 2018, 33% of people aged 18-29 consumed news from Twitter (Matsa & Shearer, 2018). Despite Twitter being identified as the easiest site to create a "confirmation bubble" in — meaning one can easily surround themselves with only people who have the same beliefs as them — it was deemed the number one news source for several participants. Those who had Twitter

accounts were more likely to believe the news they received there more than the news shared

anywhere else. One study found that 15% of millennials were reasonably able to believe the

news they saw on Twitter, leading the pack over Facebook and Instagram (Kamphuis, 2018). On

Twitter, credentials are readily available through their biography that would usually list their

education, where they're from, and where they work, which were significant factors that help

users determine credibility. One participant regarded the ability to quickly and easily determine

the background of the original poster as the reason they preferred to get their news from Twitter

over any social media site.

Facebook was regarded as the second most credible social media source by those who

were active on Twitter and as the most credible social media source by those who weren't.

Second to Twitter, 12% of respondents in the same aforementioned study were able to

reasonably believe the news they found on Facebook (Kamphuis, 2018). Despite this, all

participants in this study that mentioned Facebook presented it with a degree of skepticism.

Many noted the site as a place where extreme values are present so it makes it harder for them to

believe the news found there. Facebook was seen as a secondary, and less credible, source for

news by participants because it is a place where they have family members, specifically older

ones, in their network. Therefore, the identification of "fake news" on Facebook has less to do

with the site itself and more to do with the person who shared the content.

Almost all participants agreed that they were least likely to believe news that came from

Snapchat or Instagram. They regarded the sites as locations for mostly gossip news and not hard

news. Accounts like "The Shade Room," on Instagram, a popular location for the latest in

celebrity news, were mentioned as inauthentic news sources. In a study of millennials, people

aged 16-34, in the Netherlands concluded that only 7% of respondents had a reasonable trust in news they found on Instagram (Kamphuis, 2018). Despite the presence of some hard news reporting in "Discoverable" stories on Snapchat created by companies like NBC and Insider, the high volume of gossip and entertainment stories overpowers that.

Social media has had a split impact on news trust for participants in this study. Some say social media has increased their trust for news media. Since most social media sites are free and open to anyone, young adults feel that those who are spreading information (like citizen journalists) don't have anything to gain in the way that corporate news organizations do. Some say social media has made them more distrusting of news media because there are so many kinds of sources out there. Because of their distrust for news media, they feel a greater obligation to fact-check news articles. Those that didn't think social media had any impact on their trust or distrust for news credited social media as a tool that made news more accessible.

Conclusions

Growing up in a digital world has left students consuming news through social media with a dose of skepticism. In addition to providing connections with family and friends, social media has become a main news source for young people (March, 2012). Social media has provided a platform for anyone's voice to be heard, leaving students tasked with the challenge of determining what news to trust. When identifying fake news on social media, young adults are more likely to disregard news stories from sites like Instagram and Snapchat more than they would from Twitter and Facebook. Regardless of the site they get their news from, young adults feel the need to confirm the information they see on social media through other sources.

Therefore alternative sources have become an integral part of the verification process because they are regarded as more trustworthy than mainstream sources.

This study contributes to the conversation about how students interact with news through social networks, finding that students prefer to get their news from social media because it is convenient; certain social networks influence how credible students perceive the news from that network to be; language and advertising placements are used as indicators for the credibility of a certain news source; and social media has had both a positive and negative impact on students' trust of news media.

Limitations

This study represents the views of a limited set of college students (N=10) for the purpose of better understanding how students perceive and identify fake news through social media. This effort is limited to the participants of the focus group and is not necessarily representative of all college students. This study was also limited in scope due to time constraints. Because this research was gathered by conducting focus groups, the opinions represented were limited to students who did not have scheduling conflicts with the dates and times they were held. Future studies should utilize more focus groups across universities to gain a broader range of perspectives.

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Appendix A

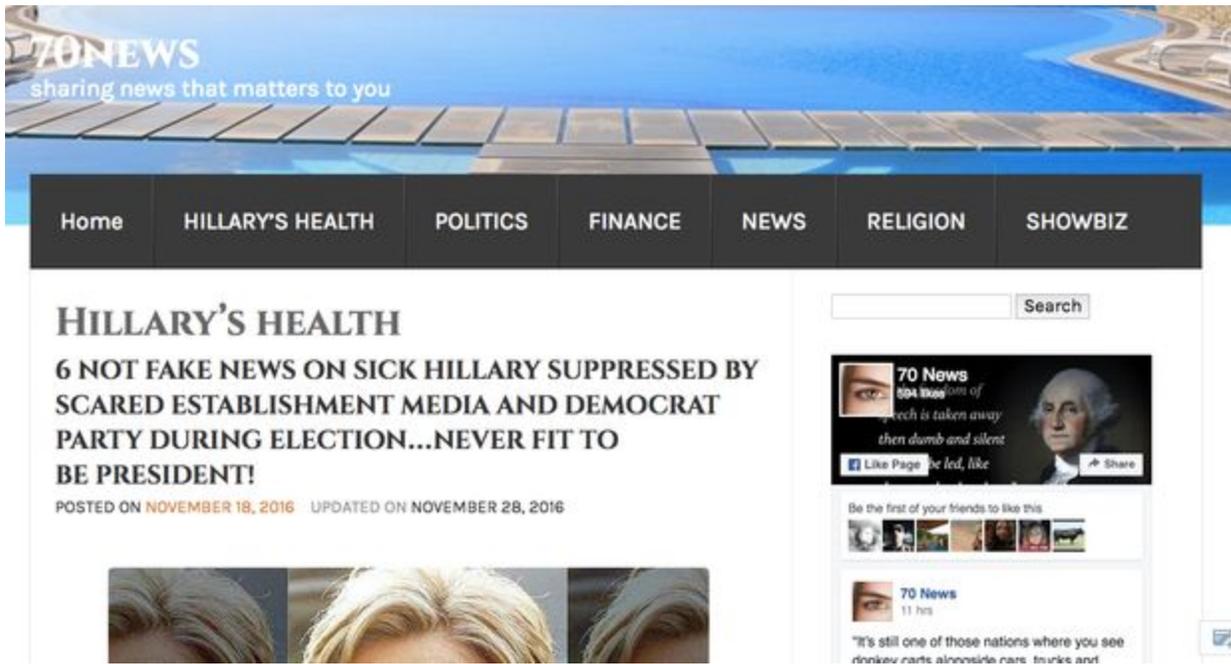**Questions Asked During Focus Group Sessions**

RQ1: How Internet users decide what news to trust on social media?

- How often do you consume news?
- What are your thoughts on the media?
- Where do you get your news from?
- How do you determine what news to believe?
    - What makes a story "credible" to you?
- Are there any factors that influence how credible you find a news source?
- Has your trust or distrust of media grown in the past 5 years?
    - Why or why not?

RQ2: What influences users' perception to qualify a news story posted on social media as "fake news"?

- How would you describe the difference between "real news" and "fake news"?
- How often do you get your news from social media outlets?
- Do certain social media platforms (like Facebook, Twitter, or Snapchat) impact your view of news credibility?
- What do you usually notice about the news that is shared on social media?
- What problems do you face when deciding what news to trust on social media?
- On a scale from 1-10, 1 being not at all and 10 being the most, how much do you trust the news you see on social media?
- How has social media impacted your trust or distrust for news?
- Does the OP influence your perception of news that is shared on social media?

Appendix B

Screenshot Examples of "Fake News"