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Whalen Symposium Abstract for Judging Consideration

A uses and gratifications analysis of the politics on social media timelines

Social media has increasingly become a place where individuals go to find news as well as share the news they agree with. This study looks to see if college students mold their social media experiences to only see the news and political opinions they agree with. Additionally, it looks to see if they are then motivated to like and share political news with a perceived audience in mind. This audience was defined as whomever a social media user thought was looking at their political posts. The study specifically looked at if this phenomenon exists on Facebook and Twitter. The uses and gratifications (U&G) theory was employed to explain why students seek out the news that they find. U&G is the theory that people seek out certain types of media to fulfill different gratifications. The research question that guided the study asked, "How do people mold their online experience to tailor the political news and opinions that they are seeing, and what are they sharing for their friends and followers to see?" Five hypotheses were then developed to attempt to address the research question that was posed. This research was conducted during the Fall 2016 semester through the Cornell in Washington program. It was decided that a survey through Qualtrics.com was the best approach to address the hypotheses at hand. Initially, a pretest was employed to test the validity of the survey measure. A sample of 90 college students from Ithaca College, Cornell University and SUNY Cortland participated in the online survey. The survey consisted of open-ended and Likert-style questions, and took about 15 minutes for participants to complete. Two methods were used to analyze the data collected. For the open-ended questions, all of the responses were analyzed to find any commonalities in the various responses. The rest of the survey questions were run through several chi-square tests on SPSS. Findings suggest that when a news outlet posts a political article to their social media pages that a college-aged individual may agree with, the user does not normally like or share that post. College students who identified themselves as liberal are more likely to take action to remove conservative Facebook posts and tweets from their timelines. The opposite was true for conservative students. The results showed that conservative students were not likely to take action to remove liberal posts from their timeline. Finally, the more news a college student gets from social media, the more likely they are to share news on Facebook. But, this trend was not reflected with Twitter users. The implications of this study are twofold. First, news outlets could better develop their social media tactics to reach the growing audience of people getting their news from social media. Even if college students don't share news on social media, it was still found that they get news through this forum. Second, this research can help guide social media sites to develop better ways for users to only see the news they want to see. Social media users can have a more pleasant online experience by only looking at the things they agree with.