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HERE'S MORE EVIDENCE FACEBOOK IS HARMING DEMOCRACY

A second study links use of the social media platform with lower political knowledge.

TOM JACOBS · AUG 14, 2018

Facebook has turned out to be the perfect platform to spread both Russian propaganda and good old American hate speech. While the social media giant and its competitors have, under public pressure, taken some steps to limit the damage, new research suggests Mark Zuckerberg's lucrative creation may be harming the American political process in a different way: by perpetuating ignorance.

It reports users of the social media site are, on average, less informed about politics than non-users.

"On balance, the overall impact of social media on political knowledge appears to be negative," write University of Wisconsin–Madison scholars Sangwon Lee and Michael Xenos. "Political social media use does not have a significant effect on political knowledge, while general social media use has a modestly negative effect."

The results echo those of a separate study released in May, which used different data but came to similar conclusions. It found "increased use of Facebook for both news consumption and news sharing purposes was associated with lower political knowledge levels."

The new research, published in the journal *Computers in Human Behavior*, featured data from two studies: one conducted during the final days of the 2012 election, which featured 1,149 Americans; and a second conducted during the 2016 campaign, which featured 750 people who were contacted both before and after election day.

"In both studies, we asked a series of factual knowledge questions about respondents' awareness of issues during the presidential election, and their more general knowledge of the U.S. political system and institutional rules," the researchers write.

The 2012 study featured six questions on general political knowledge ("Which party is generally more supportive of reducing the size and scope of the federal government?") and 14 that related to issues specifically discussed in that year's campaign.

Participants in the 2016 study were similarly asked questions reflecting general knowledge of politics, and specific issues raised in the campaign. When contacted a second time, shortly after the election, they were asked about issues and events that had occurred since they were initially contacted in September.

In both surveys, participants reported their Facebook use on a seven-point scale from "never" to "daily." They were also asked whether they had used the platform, or another social media outlet, to post political stories for others to read, post their own political comments, or "like" politics-related posts.

"We found no evidence suggesting that political Facebook use was significantly related to political knowledge," the researchers report. Worse, "general Facebook use had a modest negative relation to political knowledge."

They continue: "Given how pervasive general Facebook use is, this suggests the overall impact of Facebook on political knowledge was negative."

What's driving this effect? Lee and Xenos point to several possibilities. "First, Facebook may distract its users from learning politics," they write. Who has time to check out [washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com) when there are so many cat videos to play?

More insidiously, glancing at politics-related posts on your news feed may give users the false perception that they're knowledgeable about the subject.

"What may be happening is that users gain only a little knowledge from Facebook, because most of them skim the political content rather than devoting much cognitive processing to it," the researchers write. "Perhaps even worse, this misunderstanding may discourage users from seeking news elsewhere, or from paying attention to the news in general."

So Facebook appears to discourage users from acquiring real information, while spreading fake news. That's not a combination that will elicit a whole lot of "likes."