

Satire or Fake News: Social Media Consumers' Socio-Demographics Decide

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ABSTRACT

Ever since the surprising results from the 2016 U.S. presidential race, the subject of Fake News in our worldwide media consumption has grown steadily. On a smaller scale, mainstream media have taken a closer look at the relatively narrow genre of satirical news content. Ed Koltonski of Kent State, defines satirical news as designed specifically to entertain the reader, usually with irony or wit, to critique society or a social figure and invoke change or reform. Using field experiment, survey and focus group methods we sought to determine if media consumers' ability to differentiate between satirical news and fake news is tied to socio-demographic factors. We found that age, education, sex, and political affiliation predict understanding of "fake news" and satire. Furthermore, the ability to identify different types of misinformation when presented with screen shots from social media posts appears to be related to these variables. Focus group comments were also analyzed to gain a richer perspective on how participants interpreted the SMS screen shots. Using our primary research, we seek to determine if there is a correlation between social media consumers understanding of the difference between satirical news versus fake news and their varying socio-demographic factors.

Keywords:

Fake News, Satire, Click-bait

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Introduction

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In America and around the world, media coverage reached a fever pitch regarding the role fake news and satire played in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Fake news has been brought to the forefront of mainstream media concern due to its misuse and mislabeling in the past year. This has directly impacted our chosen area of research, primarily because many Americans confuse the terminologies regarding these sources of misinformation and how they can be weaponized to deceive and influence society [1]. Due to our shifting cultural sources of information, moving from traditional legacy media to the emergent user-generated content, a variety of miscommunications have occurred. These misinterpretations occur frequently in the satirical news segment of our current media mix; this is the focus of our research. It is important to attempt to quantify the factors that contribute to an individual's ability to determine the difference between satire and fake news and continue to study the impact of satire on American politics. In a study regarding entertainment TV and politics, published 11 years ago, the analysis of political satire was noted as an underdeveloped line of research [2]. The subject has been explored slightly more in recent years, there has not been a decrease in the importance of the subject; contrarily a significant increase has occurred due to social media content shares and click-hit revenue incentives.

Review of Literature

Upon examining the question of an individual's ability to recognize satirical content, the review of available literature discussing the ability were sparse. Primarily satirical press content and audience response research was found to fall into two main categories: when satire is confused with fake news content and when satire is confused with credible news content. As expected, due to the proliferation of the "fake news media epidemic" there were multitudes of studies and articles discussing how the U.S. presidential election was affected, how traditional media is losing credibility, the societal results of fake news, and discussions regarding click bait sites and click-hit revenue. Additionally, recent surveys and polls give rise to the evidence that the ability to differentiate and understand fake news terminology is critical to American society.

Satire news content confused with fake news

Despite the recent attempts to educate the public on proper terminology in the fake news environment, many media outlets continue to label pure satire as “fake news”. We found that myriads of online articles discussing the fake news issue, such as “The Guardian’s Guide to Fake News”, sort satire into the fake news pot. *The Guardian* calls it “fake for an arguably legitimate reason” [3] when discussing the confusion surrounding the term. Even the National Tracking Poll by *Morning Consult* [4] decreased clarity when *The Onion* was included in their survey. Nieman Lab’s Laura Hazard Owen [5] brought the discrepancy to light by questioning the poll authors on the purpose of including the popular site on a list of fake news sites and legitimate sources that the respondents selected as credible or not. This is another example of how even a badly worded survey question can alter the public perception. A journalist expressed his dismay with the current political climate in which, as he claims, “turn every public utterance into a manifesto” [6]. This climate encourages social media consumers to take all content headlines at face value and not critically analyze them for nuances of humor, deceit, or bias.

Satire news content confused with credible news

Perhaps more commonly noted is when individuals, governments, politicians, and even mainstream media are fooled by satire and re-present it as truth. *The Daily Beast* compiled a list of nine times *The Onion* headlines fooled outlets into believing their satirical stories [7]. Those duped into believing, and sharing, the content included China’s state paper, an Iranian state news agency, the New York Times, an ESPN announcer, a Louisiana congressman, U.S. Capitol police, two major Bangladesh publications, Fox Nation, and residents of a Californian town [7]. In the more recent news, *Breitbart*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Drudge Report* were gullible to *The Daily Current* satirical stories [8].

Demographics

In reviewing these articles, a question of who can and cannot detect sarcasm (and satire) or discern fake news arises. A reported study found significant regional variations in sarcasm. The report demonstrated that Northerners were more likely to find sarcasm funny. The survey also showed that males were more likely to describe themselves as sarcastic [9]. Penn State professor, Sophia McClennen, writes in her book *Colbert’s America*, that young people are using the satire of entertainment media as a form of political education and awareness [10].

Exposure

As could be assumed, exposure to the sources of satire increases an individual’s propensity to understand that the content is satirical, and this can be ironic [8]. Sites like *The Onion*, who

have produced satirical articles for 24 years, still depend on the reader’s understanding and ability to detect the subtle demands of critical evaluation of content [9]. While sites like *The Daily Current* were able to scam a significant number of readers into sharing their content as truth, awareness of the site increases, and the numbers of gullible readers decreases [8]. However, with the potentially billions of readers on social media sites, we cannot assume that source exposure alone will significantly alter proliferation of fake news or misunderstanding of satire. In this world of fast-moving sharing and likes, most social media users do not take time to critically analyze articles before reacting and moving on.

Manipulated content

At the heart of most fake news stories and satirical articles is an image. Manipulation of photos is commonplace, though frowned upon in journalistic practices [11]. A research study of the case of the *Los Angeles Times* photographer being dismissed for altering a front-page photo revealed journalist’s deep mistrust of digital manipulation [11]. This trust is certainly not unfounded as myriads of fake pictures inundate consumers daily. Recently, a deliberate fake news visual media manipulation occurred, which had a direct and rapid effect on French society. French newspaper, *Le Monde*, exposed a deliberate deception that circulated throughout the social media climate [13]. A satirical French article was written and shared near 600,000 times on Facebook in less than a year. It is proper to assume that the entire readership was not aware of the satirical nature of the statements regarding M. Macron’s, now President, contempt for shaking a poor man’s hand. Images from a documentary in which M. Macron is wiping his hands after touching an eel were then manipulated and put into the same context as the satirical article, which was validated by social media consumers as true statements. M. Macron met with workers at a factory shortly after the manipulated content went viral, and he had to face many comments and confrontations regarding these fictional statements [13]. This is extreme, but an increasingly common result of satirical content being transformed into fodder for the fake news machines.

Satire and Fake news content affect American media and society

Whether satirical in nature or purely false, fake news content affects society greatly. An exploration of the effects on our society and media is critical.

Election

The presidential race outcome of social media king and reality TV star, Donald Trump being elected to our nation’s highest office came as a surprise to many. Among multiple other determining factors, the fake news epidemic is being given credit for a least a portion of the election results. Online polls, in which respondents display dismal abilities to determine the legitimacy

of significantly false stories (fake news), lend some heavy weight to this supposition [3]. This lack of ability was targeted specifically at Trump supporters to incite their outrage. This focus increased the shares and click-hit revenues of fake news purveyors. President Trump represented the conservative, or Republican, vote in the election and studies have determined a direct correlation between conservative views and the likelihood of being “more likely to fall for false, threatening-seeming information...” [14].

Societal Results

Satire and fake news are clearly shaping the next generation of American citizens. As the technologically savvy generations age, they bring a unique trend in media content. These young people continually seek more engaging sources of news and information, they are enjoying political satire and becoming more politically engaged [10]. Granted, much of political satire exposure comes from television entertainment segments [2]. Many in the media have disagreed with satire increasing political engagement though, using the steadily declining voter turnout each year as evidence [15]. The article “How Satire Failed,” asserts that the American obsession with political satire, such as Colbert, is not shaking people out of their political apathy, “it was a symptom of it” [15]. Beneficially, studies have shown that creative problem solving can be enhanced by exposure to satire. This is assumed to be because decoding sarcasm, which children can do by kindergarten, exercises the brain more than traditional language processing [9]. With numerous studies, such as a recent survey conducted by Pew Research Center, claiming that most Americans say fabricated news stories cause a great deal of confusion [16], satire has been shoved into the spotlight in less than flattering ways, even when innocent of intent to deceive. The research article, “Miley, CNN and The Onion” examined the chaos that ensued from an article written for *The Onion* [17]. While obviously satirical, based on the source, the article invoked extreme confusion because it was mocking an actual CNN headline. A media frenzy ensued, cementing a new differentiation between fake and satire [17].

Media reputation and credibility

Cases like the dispute above create a perfect storm where blurring lines of fake news terminology serve to further divide and confuse. The presidential election had a startling result, which further damages credibility of the journalism profession and media outlets. As non-supporters cried “Fake News!” and blamed social media for the election of President Trump, he appropriated the term to be used as an epithet against journalists or media outlets he didn’t agree with [18]. Already weakened after decades of declining credibility, this could be the nail in the coffin of mainstream media. Thankfully, there are still a significant number of journalists, universities, and agencies that took this as a rallying cry to defend their profession. Our research revealed numerous articles that were created with the

sole intent to educate the reader into understanding the fake news world terminology. The attention that our mainstream online media outlets are giving to the education of these fake news phenomena is heartening, and in doing so they are also attempting to shore up their own credibility.

Clickbait sites

The last significant source of information we reviewed concerning the difference between satire and fake news is the nefarious click-baiting. Obviously, at the forefront of media are the fake news purveyor sites that came into the spotlight during the U.S. election. The Macedonian teenagers becoming wealthy from the U.S. election have become poster children for the fake news economy. *Buzzfeed* even found that fake news stories, during the last three months of the election, generated more shares and engagement than traditional credible reports [3]. Not surprisingly then, is the form of satire that has emerged to cash in on the revenue stream. Clickbait is defined as “articles that feature headlines designed to get people to click on them,” [1]. Traditional satirical headlines such as can be found in *The Onion*, typically contain an element of humor. If the reader doesn’t get the joke from the headline alone, sarcasm is displayed through the article. Still more, the website displays some type of notice to the reader that the content is satirical if all else fails. However, this form of an article does not churn out the thousands in revenue, at least not as much as enraging fake news. Therefore, a new type of satire has been created, the decidedly unfunny type. An example of this is the site *The Daily Curreant*. When it first came on the scene the non-humorous headlines and articles deceived many into thinking they were credible, or fake, but rarely satirical. *Daily Curreant* has found a style that has “all the believability of the latter (real news), but all of the libel protections of the former (*The Onion*)” [8]. One popular satirical purveyor - *The Borowitz Report* from *The New Yorker*, has taken steps to avoid this exact scenario to remain ethically sound. The *NewYorker.com* editor, Nicolas Thompson, approved and implemented adjustments to their algorithms so that when content was shared, a hanging tagline “not the news” will always remain [19].

These articles of interest lead us to develop an area of primary research to examine fake news and satire identifying abilities within the average American social media user.

Research Question

Do socio-demographic factors affect social media users’ abilities to differentiate between satirical news and fake news?

Methodology

Participants and Sample Selection

Methodology for the collection of data for this study included a survey and focus groups. The participants were quizzed to determine their knowledge regarding differences between satire and fake news stories. Furthermore, the survey questioned

participants regarding their perceived ability to recognize fake and satirical news sites. This was compared with the participants' actual ability to recognize these sites through the survey questions. The digital survey was distributed through the social media channels of students in Audience Research, for an online convenience sample. The survey was also submitted to several national list servers for circulation. No personally identifying data was collected from the online survey participants. Focus Group participants were selected by invitation (local media professionals and alumni working within the Communications field) and recruitment (incoming Maestro Program freshmen and various University Core undergraduate classes).

Reliability of Data

We elected to use a convenience sample to gather our data. To obtain the participants for our online survey and focus groups, we attempted to minimally control the volunteer sample. However, even with the screener question and age requirement, technically the sample is still classified as an unqualified volunteer sample due to non-random selection. Due to this classification, we are unable to determine a precise amount of sampling error. If a researcher were to continue exploring this area, results from our study could be used as a preliminary starting point to eliminate potential survey problems before a probability sampling was selected and conducted [20].

Variables

Our Dependent Variable for this research study is a social media users' ability to differentiate between satirical news and fake news sites and articles. Our Independent Variables are social media consumers' sociological and demographic factors. These factors include gender, age, level of education completed, and American political party affiliation.

Procedure

A digital survey was created and hosted on Google Forms. The survey included screenshots of satirical, fake news, biased, and credible headlines with captioned pictures to gauge the respondent's definition of briefly viewed social media content. We included several questions designed to benchmark the respondent's personal views and definitions of news terms. We ended the survey with a variety of socioeconomic and demographic questions to compare with our dependent variable. Additionally, multiple focus groups were conducted throughout 2017. The participants completed a hardcopy version of the survey and they were asked to view the 27 screenshots. The screenshots were timed at 7 seconds for viewing and 5 seconds to select the category they felt each represented. The participants were then engaged in dialogue regarding their category selections.

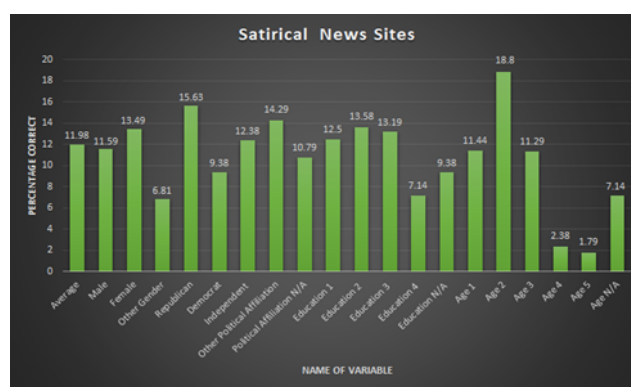
Incorporation of multiple questions provided a large amount of data. However, the length of the survey was reported to be a hindrance by some participants. Survey response fatigue is a problem that we should avoid in our future research. Response

fatigue could possibly be attributed to a portion of the responses becoming repetitive and some participant's display of low scores near the end of the survey.

Results

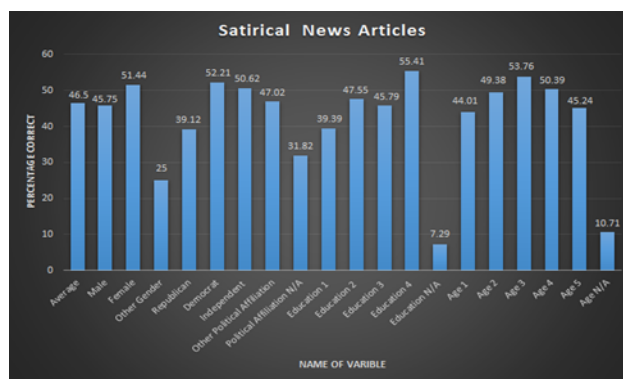
Satirical News Sites

- The percentage of those correctly identifying Satirical News websites in the survey (N= 382) was 11.98%
- Highest correct response rate was from those in the Age 2 category (22-32) with 18.8% correct and those who identified as Republicans at 15.63% correct
- Lowest percentages correct came to the Age 4 category (46-60) with 2.38% correct and Age 5 category (60+) with 1.79% correct



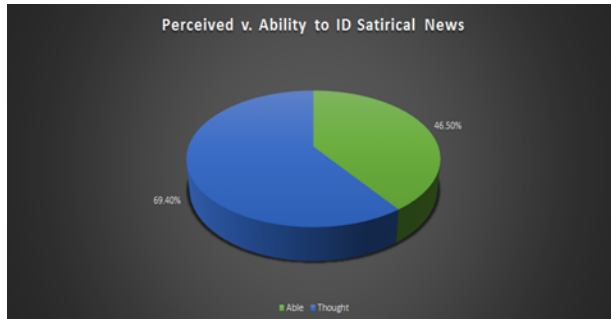
Satirical News Articles

- The overall average percentage of correctly identified satirical news articles in the survey is 46.5%
- Highest correct responses came from the following demographic groups: Females 51.44% correct, Democrats 52.21%, Independents 50.62%, Education 4 (graduate degree) 55.41%, and Age 3 (33-45) 53.76% correct
- Lowest percentages came from Other Gender at 25% correct, Education level n/a at 7.29%, and Age n/a at 10.71% correct



Real v. Perceived Ability

- Overall, 46.50% were able to correctly ID Satirical News examples
- Overall 69.40% thought they were able to ID Satirical News



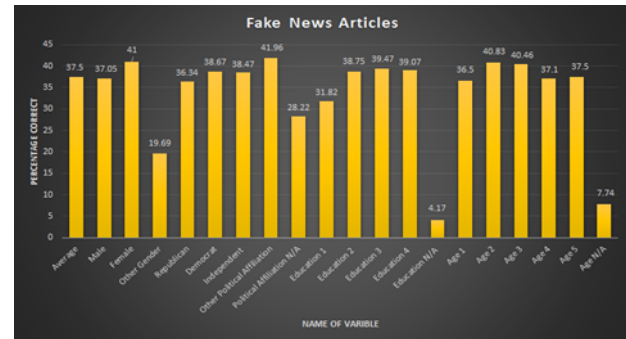
Fake News Sites

- The overall average of those able to identify Fake News websites was 11.95% correct.
- Highest percentages came from Education 1 (high school degree) with 19.69% correct, Females 16.07%, Age 3 (33-45) 16.67% correct
- Lowest percentages came from Age n/a at 2.38%, and Republicans at 8.79%



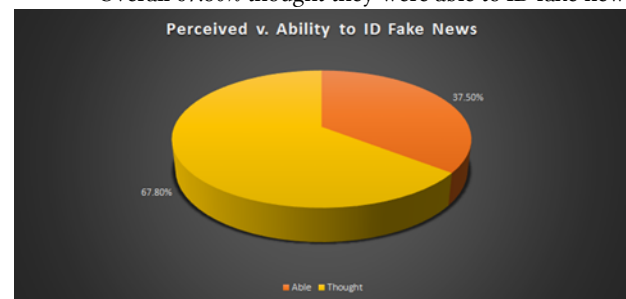
Fake News Articles

- The percentage of correct response when asked to identify Fake News articles was 37.5%
- Highest percentages came from Other Political Affiliation at 41.96% correct, Females at 41%, Age 2 (23-32) at 40.83%, and Age 3 (33-45) at 40.46% correct.



Real v. Perceived Ability

- Overall, 37.50% were able to correctly ID Fake News examples
- Overall 67.80% thought they were able to ID fake news



Conclusions

In conclusion, several preconceived notions were validated by the above results; details supported our research suppositions and provided new material for further study.

Age

Examination of correlation of mean score (data from scores of correctly identified screenshots and site names) with age, a curvilinear relationship was revealed. Highest scores came from age groups two and three, older Millennials and Generation X respectively, across screenshot ID questions. This supports our theory of exposure increasing awareness, with these age groups scoring high on-site identification questions as well, indicating their awareness level. Younger and older generations tended to score lower in these areas, signifying either their online time is spent elsewhere than news or they receive their news from different sources than online and social media. Interestingly, focus group participants confirmed this theory, with the incoming freshmen showing little confidence in support of their screenshot category selections unless they had prior knowledge of the incident in question or source exposure. Most participants from these groups had little to no awareness of even credible news sources, much less nuanced fake or satirical news sites (notwithstanding the mainstream site *The Onion*). Seasoned media professionals listed the source as the first place they looked when determining the screenshot category, in most cases these professionals fell into the age two and three brackets with freshman falling into age one bracket. A female, age bracket 1

participant, displayed lack of understanding of satirical content definitions when viewing a post from smithsonianmagazine.com regarding Mt. Everest. She classified it as satire, because “it seems like click bait.” Conversely, age bracket three male participant displayed significant knowledge when asked for a definition, “satire is humor used to expose absurdities in people or human nature or politics.”

Education

As expected, the higher the education level completed (reported) correlated with a higher score in identification categories, with two interesting discrepancies to this correlation. Identification of satirical news sites by name showed the Graduate Degree category significantly lower than all other levels. Identification of fake news sites by name showed the high school graduate category with significantly higher scores than all other levels. Focus group participants from the incoming freshmen groups supported this result when discussing fake news topics in general. Though the participants were not questioned specifically regarding the sites they were asked to categorize, comments were made during the discussion of the screenshots regarding typically known “fake” or “propaganda” sites. We, as researchers were not able to determine any reason for the graduate level respondents having less awareness of satirical news sites but can suppose that traditional legacy media has a greater influence on this category than more popular press items such as satire and social media.

Political Affiliation

Reported American political party affiliation did not have as much of a differentiating score as some of the existing research has shown, at least in our small sample. Overall, Republicans did score lower on the correct identification of satirical and fake news screenshots, but the difference was not significant, except slightly in the satirical category. This category displayed a gap of 52% correct for Democrats with Republicans scoring 39% correct. Perhaps more interesting was the low scores across all categories for the no reported affiliation level. This may, in fact, represent an overall lower commitment to fact-checking and political involvement, with further research needed to support this theory. There were outlier scores from the “Other” category as well, that should be disregarded in this study due to low numbers. Focus group comments from two female participants displayed a disparity within their opinions of humor in satire. Specifically, a self-identified Democrat remarked about a satirical article that she “didn’t think it was so funny,” while a self-identified non-affiliated participant found it “funny, so that’s why I said satire.” This screenshot displayed satire regarding testing of SNAP program participants for traces of shellfish in their bloodstream.

Gender

The last demographic that we examined was gender. In each scored category, reported females scored higher than males and the average. Our focus groups of students, whether current or

incoming tended to have a higher female to male ratio, reflecting the enrollment of our University. Our media professional group had a higher male to female ratio, reflecting the professional ratio of the communications industry. The online survey was a very close ratio of male to female respondents, with very few withholding the information or selecting a different gender. An interesting note from our student focus groups was the dramatically different willingness to participate in the discussions, with the male respondents being more vocal and active than most females. No existing studies were found for us to examine these results further or suggest reasons for the score discrepancy.

As an undergraduate audience research project, this report seeks to contribute to the growing international discussion of misinformation. Our collected data can be utilized and interpreted in a multitude of ways to support existing and new research questions. It is without question that this area of research will only continue to grow in importance and significance.

Further Research

As mentioned previously, replication of this study with a properly selected non-probability population could aid in validating the data. A hypothesis from earlier research, including this study, could then be analyzed and accepted or rejected. In addition, the literature review revealed several documented regional variations in sarcasm. A study cited in the article, “The Science of Sarcasm? Yeah, Right” states that male Northerners were more likely to think sarcasm is funny [9]. The researchers would add additional geographic and socio-economic questions to further studies to validate these results.

With our survey being conducting online and primarily quantitative in nature, the researchers are interested in continuing to explore this topic with a different methodology. Additional focus groups or intensive interviewed would provide more qualitative data for examination. By combining more substantially validated data from a different population selected to represent the independent variables studied, we feel this would result in additional areas of study.

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