

Part III: Final Research Paper

How Can Media Influence Us?

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Media Influence

Whether it be in the form of cable news, social media, video games, or music, what we read, see, hear, and interact with has the ability to impact our world views, personal opinions, and mental health. Over the course of the last four years, you've without a doubt heard the term "Fake News" shouted from rooftops and throughout streets alike, but what does this truly mean? Perhaps it simply means that the source of media one is referring to is not true, that the sources have not been verified, and that the claims made are preposterous. Or perhaps it means the media one is referring to is one that while giving valid sources and providing truthful arguments, is one that goes about the process in a dubious way.

It goes without saying that media, whatever the form, has the capability of leaving a lasting impact on those tuning in. Over the years, media has advanced beyond the point of comparison to its once infantile beginnings, and with that has achieved the ability to reach a far larger audience than ever considered. Because of this, one has to wonder if using the same outreach methods once used in the days of paper news is truly necessary. Despite the changing times and vast improvements in technology, forms of media still stick to the shock and awe approach when reporting information. A method that while outdated, may be leading to a permanent development in how younger generations perceive and acknowledge presented media.

Objectives

From the early development of news media, the goal has always been to achieve maximum outreach. In the days of paper news this meant plastering the entire front page in large bolded fonts. In similar approach this meant that television news outlets had to attach

“BREAKING NEWS” to every story of somewhat importance. Whatever form of media one is entranced in will always have one constant variable that stays with all forms. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan sums this idea up best by stating, “the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1964). This means that if someone is reading the same story on multiple forms of media, the story is often shifted into the format provided by said medium. For example: on TV, the segment is often shorter, with less detail provided. However, on social media, the same story could be blown into thousands of comments and stories, making it seem far larger. “Each medium has a special way of representing ideas that emphasize particular ways of thinking and de-emphasize others” (Kay, 1994). This way of viewing media in general can present the notion of how different forms of media separate their ideas. While a video game tells a specific story, it can do so by emphasizing the wrong ideas, and de-emphasizing ideas that would provide better context and information, but ultimately make the story less interesting. The same could be said about music, where ideas presented often highlight certain ideals while leaving others out, a notion that has caused some music theorists to believe that “some musical structures correspond to moral features” (Jowett, 1908). “Overall, the further research of media influence is one that is as critical as technology continues to expand and evolve, especially due to the many ways that media messages and technologies can countlessly affect us (UMN, 2010).” The objective of this paper is to explore how different forms of media influence the individual in different ways. In addition, this paper seeks to explore the long-term effects of media on its viewers.

News Media

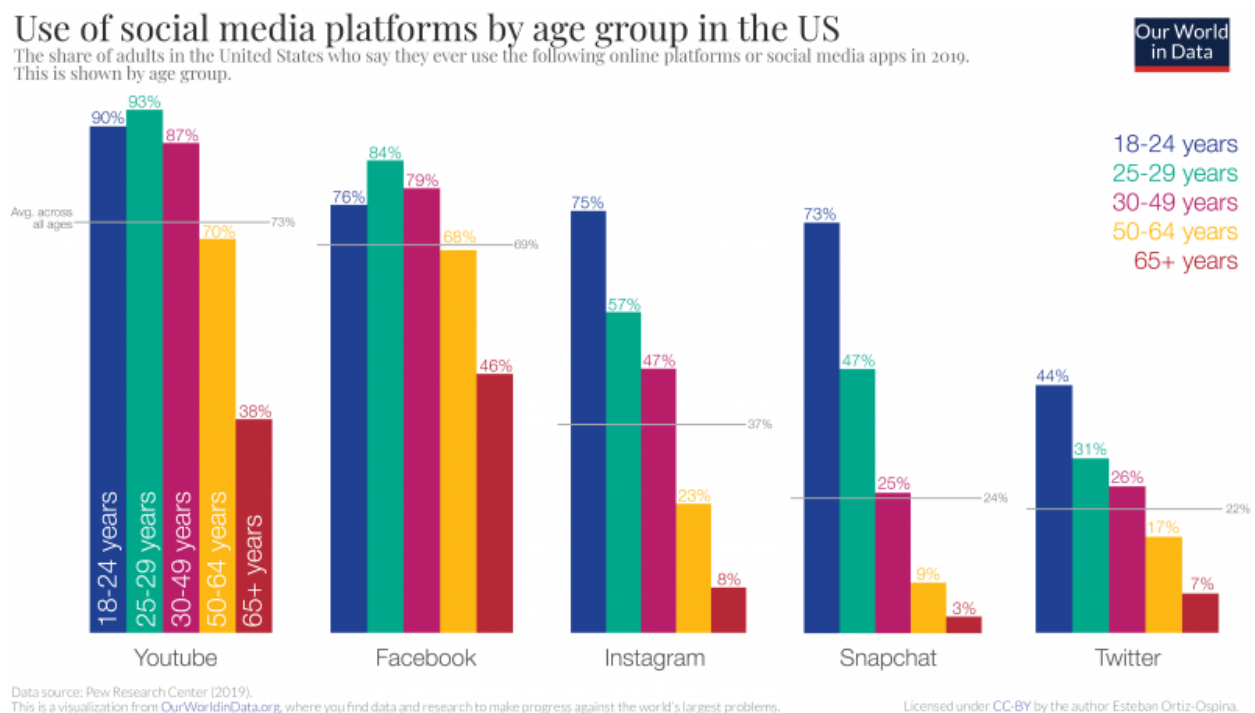
Nowadays in the modern age of news media, stories have the capabilities of reaching more consumers than ever before because of advancements in technology. While the spread of information is usually a positive, it is often perceived as a negative in the 2020 era of news. America as a whole seems to constantly be on the brink of civil war between news outlets, each clashing for viewers, sponsorships, and recognition. When competition peaks, however, is a race to provide hot gossip, breaking news, and supported opinions in an effort to attract the most views. Each channel nowadays that transmits the news in America seems to be made for a certain group of people, all of which have opposing views and opinions about the world. When presenting their stories to their viewers in an effort to appease them, channels will often gloss over, exaggerate, or fabricate details so that no story is told the same way. This can often lead to the same story being told differently by channels with opposing views and opinions. Viewers of these channels could therefore be influenced by the change of detail, or simply by the anchor's own opinions, especially in shaping opinions about other countries (Kapuściński, 2016).

Often coming across as opinionated and biased, a large percentage of people through the years have said that they overall “have lost faith in the news.” “Thirty percent of said people expect said change to be permanent” (Ingram, 2018). Of this group of people who have lost faith in the news, a prominent figure is the President of the United States, who routinely attacks news outlets for spreading “fake news,” even going as far as to call the media the “enemy of the people” in March of 2020 (Wemple, 2020).

Social Media

Social media as a medium is possibly the largest form of media in America and has skyrocketed, especially in the last five years. In 2005 it was reported that an estimated 5% of

Americans had used social media, compared to 2019 where an estimated 70%+ Americans have reported to have at least registered (Allen, 2019). The outreach of social media provides a platform that is accessible by almost everyone and allows not only for a personal experience but a professional one as well in the sharing and receiving of information. This accessibility has caused a concern among researchers and parents alike as an estimated 81% of teenagers are on social media, a trend that has caused teens to “replace face-to-face social interactions with social media” (Allen, 2019). As supported by data from ourworldindata.com, age ranges of 18-24 are the most active on multiple forms of social media (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019)



Through the use of social media researchers have noted that extended use will prove detrimental in the developing brain's overall mental state, promoting feelings of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and even in some instances suicidal thoughts among users (Robinson, Smith, 2020). Though compared to the subjective nature of news media influence, social media has the capability of influencing users in a different way on a more psychological level.

In similar fashion to news media, social media has the capability to misinform users just as much as news outlets do. Especially on Twitter, when searching for information, users often have to look through hundreds of comments filled with opinions, bias, and vulgarity to find a point even worth taking into consideration. With thousands of users spreading information, it is entirely possible that one user could post blatantly incorrect information, and in instances when a comment section resembles bloodthirsty wolves more than a discussion, it is possible for the commenters to take that misinformation and run with it. “One of the problems, however, is that anybody can share anything, including material that may not be accurate. In some cases, real harm is done when people spread inflammatory, unverified or outright false information” (Force, 2016).

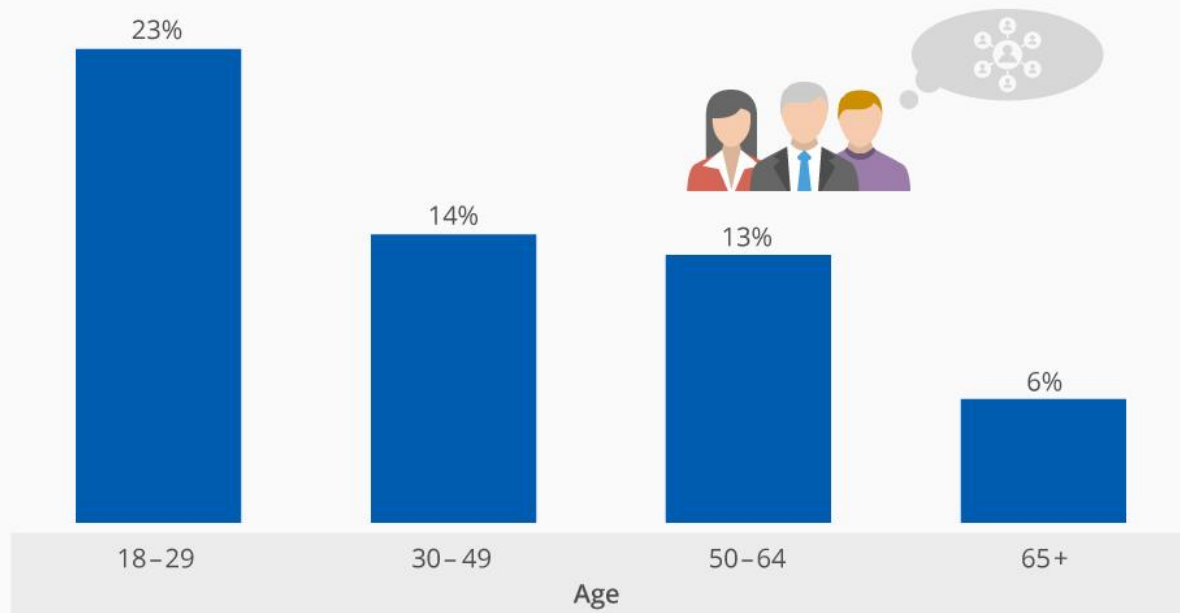
This mindset of “anyone can share anything” leads to the majority of what became known as “fake news.” Where a group of people start spreading gossip, turning false information to a rumor, and spreading the rumor like wildfire similar to a middle school social hierarchy. Unsuspecting users looking for information about a current event on the ‘trending’ tab are in the crosshairs of misinformation, and if not careful could be tricked into believing it is real, or in some extreme cases, can be influenced by the thousands of supporting comments into joining in spreading that information.

Media Influencers

In comparing the projected audience of cable news with the projected user demographic of social media, a difference can most definitely be noted. While cable news is skewed on average more toward an adult audience, social media, as shown in the figure below, is primarily used in large part by teenagers and young adults (Wagner, Richter, 2018).

Social Media Influences Younger Americans More

Respondents who changed their opinion through social media content



n=4,594 U.S. adults between May 29 and June 11, 2018

@StatistaCharts Source: Pew Research

statista

Due to this, the presence of “social media influencers” is worthwhile to mention as their ability to influence is just as strong as the apps themselves influencing. Media influencers are users with a large following on a social media app such as Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, or even YouTube. In using their large following, which is sometimes in the hundreds of thousands to even millions, they will partner with large companies to promote their product to said audience. This relationship is perhaps one that is dangerous as more and more influencers are beginning to target their audience with brand sponsored posts. These posts can influence younger followers who would believe anything their favorite influencers says into purchasing whatever is shared. The most notable app for this is Instagram where in 2017 “the app saw a whopping 12.9 million

brand sponsored influencers posts, a number expected to double in 2018, creating an estimated market size of nearly \$1.7 billion” (Fastenau, 2018).

Influencers boil down to a simple relationship between the content creator and the follower. Unlike following a celebrity on Twitter or a music artist on Instagram, these creators normally have a more down to earth personality that allows fans to connect more with them opposed to the feeling that they’re just following them. This allows the influencer to not only appeal to a broader audience, but to appeal to a much younger, and more impressionable demographic. This emphasizes the negative effects of social media influence and brings to light how social media incorporates the retail market. Instead of just missing out because you’re not at the beach with your friends, you’re missing out because you don’t have the latest and greatest product that your favorite influencer is promoting.

Interactive Media

Video games and interactive media in general have served as an enjoyable pastime among adults for years, but what diversifies their influence on mental health from excessive use of social media? While social media provides a glimpse into the greater world, interactive media provides a break from the world, and in short has been proven to be beneficial overall to mood, mental health, and social relationships. That’s not to say that excessive consumption of interactive media is only a good thing, as many studies have, similarly to social media, found that in excess interactive media can prove detrimental overall to the average consumer. For one, excessive consumption can lead to “maladaptive coping strategies” in which users will often

look for that escape from reality far too often. This can also lead to depression, low self-esteem, and an overall negative impact to mental health (HealthyGamer, 2020). “Video games are not evil by nature. They do not necessarily cause anxiety or depression. However, video game addiction can certainly make these issues worse” (HealthyGamer, 2020).

Through the telling of stories, interactive media plays a similar roll to film and television in that the story they tell, when based on real events, must be accurate. While often times video games will base their stories off of real live events, some of the details are changed in order to still make the overall experience unique. Often times these details are presented in a way that allows the truth to still seem evident, but in some instances the story presented can influence the uneducated into believing a false truth. The far most recent example comes from developer Infinity Ward’s 2019 title “Modern Warfare,” in which during a portion of the game taking place in the fictional country of Urzikstan displays the virtual equivalent to the real-world incident known as the “Highway of Death.” The real-world example of said incident occurred on February 26th, 1991, where US forces bombed a highway connecting Basra to Kuwait. The incident has been called the “bloodiest event in modern war” and has been described as a “massacre” from others, the truth however is that the highly controversial attack lasted for ten hours and claimed the lives of thousands of Iraqis (Rogoway, 2016). The virtual equivalent however told players that the Russians had launched the attack, and that the US military had nothing to do with the “Highway of Death,” a controversial decision that led to the game being banned from Russian shelves with some media outlets calling it “an unequivocal attack against Russia.” Those who had not known of the instance could assume the game’s truth to be real, especially based off of the game claiming to be “influenced by real events” (Whalen, 2019).

Music

When comparing music to different mediums the main outlier that is presented is the absence of negative mental effects that would normally be caused by social and interactive media especially. The long-lasting effects of listening to music are mostly positive with the exception of some short-term effects. That being said while the psychological effects seem positive, listeners are still at risk of negative influence from the artists themselves, the decisive factor being that these effects all depend on the user. It depends on what you listen to, but overall all types will work the same way. In short, music makes people “feel happy” and can aid against depression and anxiety as well as helping provide the listener an escape if needed. Music as a concept also has the potential of uniting individuals which can also work to positively influence social constructs (Crouse, 2015).

Aside from the mental benefits of listening to music, a lot of bad can come from being influenced by popular culture, and music as a whole. In the age where accessibility is at a high, it is entirely too easy for young teens to latch onto artists whose overall themes are not always positive. “Popular music” over time has transitioned and a lot of the time the lyrics have become more explicit. Nowadays if a child in middle school shuffled the popular music playlists provided by most major music apps, they’re likely to hear songs about topics such as drugs, sex, and even violence (Pediatrics, 2009).

Conclusion

Media, no matter the medium, is capable of influencing users, viewers, and listeners both physically and mentally no matter the platform. Many similarities can be drawn between

different forms of media and how they are capable of influencing their audience. From news media and television, social media, interactive media, and music, these mediums are capable of providing both positive and negative effects to mental health as well as the potential in influencing how we perceive the world around us. While most forms of media provide an escape, and in the short-term can provide mental health benefits, over time they can lead to anxiety or depression. Some mediums are tricky to navigate, and often times, if not careful, can misinform audiences with bias, opinions, or even “fake news.” It’s entirely too easy for young adults and teens to be sucked into some of these mediums, with social media and video games in extreme cases leading to addictions that lead to negative mental effects. Overall, like most things in life, media is a two-sided coin. While there are many positive benefits, all mediums have negative effects that have the potential of influencing audiences in negative ways.

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