

Viral Lies in the 2016 Presidential Election: a content analysis of 2016's widespread "fake news"
articles

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1:

- Introduction... 3
- Literature review... 5
 - Different forms of information
 - Confirmation bias in online environments
 - Divergent political participants
 - Algorithms as non-policy solutions to fake news and misinformation
 - The necessity of media literacy courses
 - Systems that allow misinformation to propagate and thrive
- Justification... 15

Chapter 2:

- Research Questions... 17
- Methodology... 17
- Results... 20
 - Common writing methods in both left- and right-leaning articles
 - Commonalities in left-leaning articles
 - Commonalities in right-leaning articles

Chapter 3:

- Limitations... 31
- Discussion and Conclusions... 31
 - Informing coders, educators, and political actors
- Suggestions for further research... 34
- Bibliography... 35
- Appendices... 38
 - Coding guide
 - Articles studied

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Scrolling through social media feeds and the depths of the internet often reveal interesting photos with links to stories containing outrageous claims that are often comical, but one would hope the general populace would find the stories clearly implausible when they come across such material. Indeed, claims that Fidel Castro and Margaret Trudeau had an affair and Canada's Prime Minister is, in fact, a member of the Castro family are humorous in the infeasibility of the claim (Kasprak, 2016). Yet what happens when the article's subject is no longer a seemingly harmless white lie involving the family affairs of members of the political elite? What is the effect of fake news stories that claim President Barack Obama encouraged illegal voting practices or Muslims attacked Christmas trees out of hostility toward Christianity (Palma, 2016; LaCapria 2016)? Mass hysteria and distrust in the electoral system because of purported claims of voter fraud could be the effect. Mass distrust and misunderstanding of an entire religion could be the effect. Intertwined and interspersed in the depths of the Facebook pages, Twitter feeds, and websites that produce and promote false stories are much more insidious claims with dangerous ramifications.

One of the most widely shared stories on Facebook during the 2016 presidential election that were based on falsities included claims that WikiLeaks "confirms Hillary Clinton sold weapons to ISIS" ("WikiLeaks Confirms Hillary," 2016). The story, which was published on *The Political Insider*, a website that publishes almost exclusively false information, included a viral video of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange explaining the importance of releasing stolen files and his own opinion of the U.S. Department of State's operations. The critical problem with this widely-shared story is much more than the false claim of Clinton or the U.S. government selling

weapons to ISIS. The story's author intermingled inaccuracies, allegations, and uncorroborated claims with facts and actual happenings. WikiLeaks' staffers did indeed hack into multiple government and political party servers and later uploaded the stolen files to its website for the world to view. Assange's video discussed Libya, the origins of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and the ramifications of the United States arming ISIS opposition forces. In addition, an Amnesty International report found that ISIS fighters were indeed using American weapons, but this occurred as a result of U.S.-backed military forces improperly securing their military stocks ("Iraq: 'Islamic State,'" 2015). ISIS members stole the American weapons; Clinton and the U.S. Department of State did not directly sell weapons to ISIS. The story's author blatantly manipulated widely-known facts about the WikiLeaks hacked files and paired it with falsities, making knowledge of the nuances of American foreign policy necessary to decrypt the truths, partial-truths, and outright lies contained therein. Many false stories that circulate online and on social media use the same tactics, pairing fact, fiction, partial-truths, and incorrect interpretations.

In addition, several other factors further add to the difficulty, inability, or refusal to discern these false stories that proliferate online. Confirmation bias, fake news websites that look strikingly similar to traditional news web pages, and an increasing distrust of traditional news outlets with established editorial standards and fact-checking practices are further confounding an already confusing and deeply rooted problem with the internet.

The purpose of this study is to perform a content analysis of news articles based on or containing the inclusion of false information and find commonalities therein. The depths of the internet and its available information are seemingly infinite, with news, ideas, items for sale, music, literature, culture, and calls to action popping up on online forums or websites in one part

of the world and spreading with lightening speed, ricocheting from one online platform to the next. The dissemination of false information comes with the territory of the internet, particularly when democratic societies' ideals of free speech rights collide with an open forum in which everyone can have a voice and hide behind a veil of anonymity and the screens they look into daily. It is futile and short-sighted to claim fake news stories can be eliminated entirely, but the importance of mitigating the effects of viral news articles that contain false information is of the utmost importance to creating a well-informed populace that has the ability to make responsible decisions based on facts. Understanding the way in which these inaccurate stories are written and presented is a part of the first steps to tackling the much larger problem of internet misinformation.

Literature Review

The body of research and knowledge surrounding fake news websites, their proliferation, and how and why a story spreads is relatively modest. Only a few academic studies touch on the fake news stories themselves in an online setting, but it is usually a brief mention used to explain the importance of looking at the more nuanced factors that contribute to widespread false narratives. Much of the available literature related to this topic takes a deep dive into confirmation biases and the different categories of information, and for the purposes of this study, I will start with the different categories, as it will help explain the nuances of varying types of statements included in false news articles.

Different forms of information

Kumar and Geethakumari outline the different forms of information as misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda in their study that looks to detect misinformation in online social

networks using psychology (Kumar & Geethakumari, 2014). Using Oxford's dictionary, they define misinformation as "false or inaccurate information, especially that which is deliberately intended to deceive," while disinformation is defined as "false information that is intended to mislead, especially propaganda issued by a government organization to a rival power or the media" (Kumar & Geethakumari, 2014). In addition, propaganda itself is defined as "information, especially of biased or misleading nature" that is used to "promote a political cause or point of view" (Kumar & Geethakumari, 2014). Although these definitions sound similar, each word's subtleties describe different pieces of information one would find when reading an article, be it a traditionally reported article based on fact or a story that includes purposeful falsities. These nuances can come into play when considering what medium and from whom the message originated, for whom it was intended, and the goal of the message overall. Yet Kumar and Geethakumari state the all of these variations of information "involve the propagation of false information with the intention and capability to mislead at least some of the recipients" (2014).

Don Fallis further expounds on the features of disinformation and breaks it into several points that address the varieties of disinformation (Fallis, 2009). Fallis argues disinformation is often information that was "carefully planned" and the product of technically "sophisticated deceit," but does not always come directly from the individual who intends to deceive, and is often in the form of "written or verbal communication" (2009). Fallis' last two features of disinformation include that it is often disseminated "very widely" and usually has a targeted victim of deception that is "a person or a group of people" (2009). Fallis also gives examples of actions that fit each of these features of disinformation that range from former President Bill Clinton telling the American people, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss

Lewinsky,” to a fraudulent press release published by major news outlets claiming the CEO of Emulex Corporation had resigned (2009). Delineating the differences in misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda, while further defining disinformation’s typical characteristics will aid in the understanding of how and for whom the fake news articles are constructed.

Confirmation bias in online environments

Confirmation bias and its ramifications further exacerbate the potency of false news stories in online platforms, particularly when those platforms or social media websites have software that show readers and web surfers more of what they want to see. Knobloch-Westerwick, Johnson, and Westerwick define confirmation bias as individuals preferring attitude-consistent messages over attitude-discrepant messages (2015). This tendency is both natural and understandable, yet a troublesome flaw in democratic societies. Indeed, Knobloch-Westerwick, Johnson, and Westerwick state an ideal democracy is made up of citizens who “seek diverse information and exposure to opposing views on public affairs to form their opinion as a basis for their political participation” (2015). Knobloch-Westerwick, Johnson, and Westerwick’s research studied confirmation bias in online searches before an election and “found a strong bias in selective exposure toward attitude-consistent online search results,” but individuals in the study did not avoid attitude-discrepant messages entirely, although participants did spend 64 percent more time with material that contained messages with which they agree (2015). Moreover, the study found that confirmation bias “is particularly pronounced among individuals that attach high importance to the topics” they searched for online (Knobloch-Westerwick, Johnson, & Westerwick, 2015). In essence, when searching out political information on candidates running for office, individuals preferred to read information that matched their own personal beliefs, and the desire to read articles that corroborated their already

held views increased if they found that particular topic salient. This innate inclination to search out and read material that one already agrees with can explain not only the certain coded language used on partisan fake news articles, but also why individuals may be further driven to the websites that post these stories.

Bennett and Iyengar affirm that many practice this selective exposure or confirmation bias, and they can and do use the information they seek out or read from a politically-congruent source, “whether true or false,” to “ornament their opinions” (2008). These individuals will “gravitate” to information from their favored sources, while disregarding “sources or arguments from the opposing side” (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). Yet again, this may explain why fake news websites that create articles with particular political leanings will use partisan ideology that speaks to a certain political base.

Divergent political participants

The level of susceptibility to false information changes based on multiple factors, ranging from typical political participation to the frequency with which one typically uses the internet. Hochschild and Einstein argue individuals fit into one of three different categories that define how those individuals would see political information, both accurate and false (2014). They state inactive informed citizens have an inherent disparity between knowledge and behavior, and this creates dissonance and instability, which means they “can sometimes be persuaded into political or policy support that is factually appropriate” (2014). In quite the opposite category, the active misinformed have political activity and knowledge of incorrect facts that become “mutually reinforcing through the mechanism of group membership,” as the conversations and sharing of beliefs and actions “renders attitudes far more stable” (Hochschild & Einstein, 2014). This, Hochschild and Einstein state, makes active misinformed individuals difficult to sway into the

last, ideal category, labeled active informed (2014). Yet, despite the clear dangers “to democratic politics” that can stem from active misinformed individuals, Hochschild and Einstein also argue persuasion is usually a waste of time (2014). In the realm of receiving, understanding, and using political knowledge, particularly as it pertains to the plethora of both correct and false information online and the ability or willingness to differentiate between the two, these three categories will help explain why some may be more likely to fall prey to false news articles online or even share them despite knowing of the potential falsities.

Bennett and Iyengar describe another set political participants, as they pertain to searching out personally ideologically-similar news outlets and information, which aligns quite well with Hochschild and Einstein’s three categories. “People who feel strongly about the correctness of their cause or policy preferences are more likely to seek out information they believe is consistent with their preferences” (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). Much like Hochschild and Einstein’s “active misinformed” individuals who tend to feel quite strongly about their views and are often highly partisan, those who are highly partisan in general will also seek out information that aligns with their personal beliefs. All of these categories will help further inform and explain the language fake news articles use and the reasons for particular word choices.

Algorithms as non-policy solutions to fake news and misinformation

In recent years, particularly as the knowledge of Facebook’s sharing and article discovery algorithms have been made widely known, corresponding studies investigating and testing different algorithms for websites and other social media platforms, such as Twitter, could be found in different academic journals in increasing numbers. These academic papers researching and creating new algorithms are particularly important, as social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter create quicker ways for information to be shared. For example, Facebook’s share

feature includes a “Share Instantly” button, and Twitter’s share feature includes a “Retweet” button, both of which only take two button clicks for an individual to share any piece of information instantly. As it relates to the study of fake news and misinformation spreading rapidly in social media environments in particular, Kumar and Geethakumari propose an algorithm that would detect the deliberate spread of false information, giving the social media user the ability to decide what to share (2014). In their particular algorithm, Kumar and Geethakumari used an interesting formula to find accounts and users tweeting misinformation. The sources “spreading information” that were being heavily retweeted by a “limited proportion of users who” had already retweeted that same source at least once were flagged (2014). They argue, “This points towards collusion between the users and deliberate attempts being made to spread misinformation” (Kumar & Geethakumari, 2014). To put it simply, if a particular account on Twitter were tweeting false facts or links to false news articles, many, if not most, Twitter users would be able to detect the falsities and would not share the false tweet. Kumar and Geethakumari argued and proved through the study of retweet patterns that favoritism “in the retweeting behavior is most often due to questions of credibility” (2014). From this conclusion, they were able to begin to further research and come up with an algorithm that would identify the original account that tweeted out misinformation (Kumar & Geethakumari, 2014). It would then evolve a methodology that would rate the credibility of the account based on the acceptance of tweets by those who received it and eventually present the credibility of the source and the general acceptance of the tweet to help the user evaluate the information before choosing to share it further (Kumar & Geethakumari, 2014). Individuals could utilize the algorithm “in the form of a browser plug-in or a Twitter app” (Kumar & Geethakumari, 2014). The average

Twitter user would be able to install either of these deliverables and could refer to this information when confronting any tweet in question.

Bode and Vraga suggest their own kind of algorithm, but one that would combat one of Facebook's most controversial features (2015). Facebook, among other social networking sites, "looks at the things you like" and "tries to extrapolate" (Pariser, 2011). These algorithms created by the websites then show users more content that it thinks they will like, creating a unique universe of "information for each of us" (Pariser, 2011). If one reads articles and content coming from more conservative websites, Facebook will continue to show that user more and more content that aligns with right-leaning views, just as someone who frequently searches for and shares information about the Democratic Party will be shown more content that sides with that user's personally held beliefs. Bode and Vraga call this filtering "opaque" and cite it as a reason for empirically studying social media and the reinforcement and correction of misinformation (2015). Their evidence suggests that attitude change can be achieved in regard to misperceptions "by virtue of exposure to corrective information within social media" (Bode & Vraga, 2015). Despite the gloom and doom many scholars and writers see in Facebook's curation algorithm and others like it, Bode and Vraga argue their findings suggest a "positive implication of social media curation" in that it can "serve to correct" misinformation (2015). Their study involved showing individuals web pages that appear similar to Facebook, complete with an article to read and two "related links" that mimic Facebook's curation algorithm, but the suggested links in Bode and Vraga's study gave participants information that would combat or agree with a participant's previously held view on GMOs and vaccines (2015). Their results showed that although participants "denigrated the value of the related stories when they disagreed with their beliefs, those holding misperceptions on the GMO issue still adjusted their attitudes after reading

debunking news stories” (Bode & Vraga, 2015). The participants may not have liked the correct information, but they admitted to updating their attitudes. Bode and Vraga revealed a “meaningful way that social media can act to correct misinformation,” and suggested a similar kind of algorithm be put in place that would combat misinformation (2015). The importance of algorithms in online platforms like Facebook and Twitter where falsities can spread to hundreds of thousands in mere minutes can not be overstated, and as larger scale studies are performed, the ability to push for industry-wide change can occur with much more clout.

The necessity of media literacy courses

The idea of media literacy courses taught on a widespread level has been tossed around for years, and as the consequences and effects of social media are becoming more evident in its ability to spread information at lightning speeds, more scholars, teachers, and professionals alike are calling for these kinds of classes. Hammer argues “the corporate mass media” has been “elevated to the leading hegemonic source” of education in the USA” and students themselves spend “escalating” amounts of time “engaged with multiple forms of media” (2011). She suggests educators advocate for media literacy courses and says “many experts argue” for these courses as “a part of required curricula within all elementary, secondary, and post-secondary educational institutions” (Hammer, 2011). Similarly, Martinson suggested “we are entering a new media age” in his originally published article in 2004, even before Facebook and Twitter’s effects on the spread of information and the way it would affect political discourse were known, (2004). He suggested “politics will be practiced at a global rather than national-state level,” and he could not have been more right, as social media and other websites that connect different corners of the globe grow in both popularity and power (Martinson, 2004). Martinson argued a “commitment to aiding the development of a media-literate population must become a central

priority” and stated “if budget and other academic or curriculum restraints make it impossible to develop” this kind of media literacy course,” it must be “built consciously and specifically into existing curriculum” (Martinson, 2004). Despite the six-year difference in publication, both Hammer and Martinson believe students need to know how to criticize and analyze media messages and meanings (Hammer, 2011; Martinson, 2004). Whether Martinson could have imagined a political environment in which false information spreads at a dangerously swift pace, he knew that being able to understand media messages was important. Particularly now that media encompass many different forms, including traditional forms of media, newly-minted hyper partisan outlets, and websites that solely publish false and inflammatory articles and the way in which all can push their content to millions in a matter of minutes, this ability to criticize and understand messages, where they come from, and if they are reported accurately is of the utmost importance to a well-informed populace.

Systems that allow misinformation to propagate and thrive

The environment in which the United States is currently in, in terms of politics, legislation, and media, is an ample breeding ground for misinformation to thrive. An important mechanism by which misinformation is allowed to breed often comes from politicians themselves. As Hochschild and Einstein argue, politicians’ incentives for encouraging informed political activity may not be as strong as many would think. In fact, “encouraging people to stay misinformed and politically active is often easier and produces larger payoffs compared to encouraging them to obtain correct factual knowledge” (2014). Another study further expounds on the reasons why politicians may see advantages in keeping some of their constituents actively misinformed. The authors found that when analyzing social fact provision in different forms of communication from politicians to their constituents, the consistency in levels of social fact

provision suggests “elites try occasionally, but infrequently to “nudge citizens into the active use of knowledge” (Hochschild & Einstein, 2015). In fact, Hochschild and Einstein argue “more often, they seek partisan or policy gains by starting where citizens are and trying to galvanize them politically” (2015). Given the authors used multiple-term politicians, such as former Presidents George W. Bush and President Barack Obama and their political communication as test subjects, it is clear this method of only occasionally trying to push your constituents into the active knowledge category is successful.

Moreover, another factor that makes identifying and stopping the spread of misinformation difficult is the regulatory structures of major democracies, such as the United States (Southwell & Thorson, 2015). These structures “tend to focus on post hoc detection” of misinformation (Southwell & Thorson, 2015). The reason of course being that democracies take seriously the right to free speech, free flow of information, and as much as is practicable, the free flow of business. This explains why the Federal Drug Administration implemented the “Bad Ad” program that allows people to report advertising that appears to be in violation of FDA guidelines (Southwell & Thorson, 2015). It would be considered a prior restraint of sorts to allow government agencies to put a licensing system in place to check on different bodies that publish information, be that advertisers or news publishers, which is, of course, unconstitutional in the United States under general circumstances.

This last factor, which very well may play one of the biggest roles in the communication and spreading of misinformation, is the diversified information environment in which it is economically sensible for news outlets to cater to the political preferences of its viewers (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). Bennett and Iyengar argue given media consumers’ “perceptions of hostile bias in the mainstream media environment, partisans of both sides have begun to explore

alternative sources of news” (2008). Fox News has continued to lead cable ratings, further suggesting that in a competitive market, “politically slanted news programming allows a news organization to create a niche for itself” (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). There is much financial incentive to publish content that is agreeable with just one part of the political spectrum, from increased advertising dollars to more subscriptions. People are searching out content that aligns with their personal views, as their options expand and as they continue to see the most watched and read, traditional publications as aggressive and hostile to their own views.

A combination of confirmation bias, social media websites that automatically choose content that already aligns with individuals’ preferences, active misinformed political participants, a media that cater to the active misinformed individuals, and politicians that have incentive to exploit those pieces of misinformation for political gain is dangerous a combination for democracy and fertile breeding ground for the further spread and exploitation of misinformation. Yet there are clear solutions that could be implemented if the resources were available, such as different social media algorithms, and sensible antidotes, such as media literacy courses.

Justification

The field of communication, and academia in general, should better understand the premise of a fake news article, which includes why they are written, the typical political participants who share the misinformation, the motivation to do so, and the terminology, deception, and underlying messages that are typically used in such stories. Scholars and professionals alike have begun to study many of these facets of the spread of false information.

Yet in my research, I did not find a content analysis that broke down and explained the common themes one can find in the viral fake news stories that so often clog social media feeds.

Many of these websites and social media profiles that produce fake news articles mix widely known truths with falsities, purposely misinterpret an event or something someone in a high place of power and influence said, or doctor photos or documents to lead individuals to think something different happened. There are other ways that fake news aggregators catch the public's attention and hold it, and they are doing it in a meticulous fashion, using well-known phrases, the hotly debated ideologically contentious issues, websites that appear to be professional, and other attention grabbing techniques.

Studying the language used in fake news articles is necessary to take the proper action to combat the dangers associated with rapidly disseminated misinformation. A critical understanding of this language can help further inform arguments for media literacy courses in schools, provide information for educators interested in teaching such a course, contribute knowledge that could help form a new algorithm for suggested articles under false news articles, improve existing algorithms, or inform news professionals of the kind of language and rhetoric being used if he or she is writing to correct information surrounding a particular topic that had been muddled by misinformation.

CHAPTER 2

Research questions

The objective of this study was to assess the language and writing techniques used in different fake news articles that “went viral” on Facebook. In particular, I looked for instances of redundancy in verbiage as it pertains to politically charged ideological terms, underlying themes, similarities to traditional, factually-based news reporting, key differences from traditional, factually-based news reporting, and common stylistic choices.

R1: Do the articles frequently use the same phrases or words?

R2: Do the articles frequently use politically charged ideological terms?

R3: Is there a frequently implied underlying theme?

R4: Is the writing style similar to traditional, factually-based news reporting or Associated Press style?

R5: Outside of the purposeful inclusion of false information, in what other ways do the articles diverge from traditional, factually-based news reporting?

Methodology

Key Terms

Politically charged ideological terms - words or phrases that are widely known to be used by a political party or ideological group that are typically said with high levels of condescension or pride by members of the party or group.

For example, the phrase “nasty woman” was used as a rallying cry and for humor by Hillary Clinton supporters during the 2016 general election (Gray, 2016). The phrase “basket of

deplorables” was used in the same way for Donald Trump supporters during the 2016 general election (Holan, 2016).

Inverted pyramid style - used in journalism and writing training to illustrate the way a news story is constructed. Utilizing this style involves writing the most important piece of information at the very beginning of the news article, and telling the rest of the story with the second most important, the third, and so on (McKane, 2006).

Associated Press style - Journalistic writing style that many newspapers, magazines, and public relations offices use that includes consistent guidelines for writing in terms of grammar, spelling, punctuation, and language use (“Associated Press Style,” 2015).

News peg - a dominant news story, ritual event, or long-anticipated development that people are interested in, care about or affect them in some way (Welsh, 2013).

Selecting fake news articles

In choosing fake news articles to analyze, I selected 20 stories that were posted on partisan Facebook pages during both the primaries and general election, limiting my date range to August 1, 2015 to November 8, 2016. The 20 articles were comprised of ten articles posted by right-leaning Facebook pages and ten articles posted by left-leaning Facebook pages.

In this specific time period, leaders who run social media giants, such as Facebook’s chief executive, have admitted the plethora of fake news stories proliferating online is a dangerous predicament affecting our democracy (Isaac, 2016). In addition, presidential elections and corresponding primaries bring to light and emphasize almost every facet of the political spectrum, energizing citizens and starting political and policy-related conversations, which leads to increased interest in different policy-related information. This gives fake news websites and

social media profiles ample opportunity to capitalize on energized, passionate, and disgruntled citizens. I chose articles that were shared on Facebook, using the criterion follow:

1. Posted by a news outlet Facebook page with more than 1 million likes
2. The post must have been shared by other Facebook users more than 500 times
3. The post must contain and/or be based off of falsities or misconstrued facts

I chose to pull from Facebook because it has algorithms that suggest articles and stories that align with a user's predetermined political leanings that played a huge roll in the growing conversation surrounding fake news. To demonstrate the kind of fake news articles that garner the most attention, I chose stories that were posted by news outlets with Facebook pages with more than 1 million likes. Moreover, I chose articles that have been shared at least 500 times; whatever the subject matter of the article that was shared, it interested a large group of Facebook users. Wendy Gatlin, the social media manager at WRAL, an NBC affiliate local TV news station in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina, provided a formula for calculating a post that distinctly picks up steam on Facebook. Citing marketing company Hubspot, Gatlin said a page with 1 million likes would likely be seen by about 20,000 people, and potentially more (Bernazzani, 2017). Moreover, using the key number 500 for the amount of times a post was shared can equate to a reach of more than 169,000, considering the average Facebook user has about 338 friends who could see the shared post (Smith, 2014). This reach number of 169,000 people is much greater than the original reach of about 20,000 for just those liking the original Facebook page, signifying a post shared at least 500 times by a page with more than 1 million likes is distinctly interesting enough to get over its initial 20,000 reach threshold.

Analyzing phase

After choosing the articles to study, I utilized the following steps in my analysis of each fake news article and its headline:

1. Identified the subject matter or news peg
2. Determined the article's ideology, based off of the language used to describe the events and/or individuals referenced in the article
3. Identified key purported information points and facts
4. Assessed the key information points and facts for accuracy
5. Identified frequently used phrases and words
6. Identified politically charged ideological phrases and words
7. Determined the underlying theme the article is attempting to connect to
8. Identified frequently used stylistic choices
9. Identified article features that diverge from traditional, factually-based news articles
10. Identified article features that are similar to traditional, factually-based news articles
11. Determined the article's attribution throughout

After following the aforementioned steps utilizing a coding guide, I aggregated the findings using bullet pointed lists (see Appendix A). For each step, I condensed the common findings among the articles to explain the main methods used to write the stories and each's common components.

Results

Common writing methods in left- and right-leaning articles

All of the articles analyzed, both left- and right-leaning, were written in a similar fashion, utilizing six methods that would likely elicit reactions from readers or those scrolling through

their Facebook feeds, while also attempting to maintain an air of legitimacy. The methods include 1) Basing stories off of real news events, but writing and advertising the story in a way that misconstrues, exaggerates, or jumps to unfounded or unsourced conclusions based off of the news event. 2) Writing about politically or ideologically charged topics, but excluding depth on related policy and ideological positions. 3) Using provocative words and phrases that would likely resonate with or elicit reactions from readers. 4) Utilizing a combination of traditional AP style and news writing conventions along with divergences from these standards. 5) Writing about the opposing political view and its party in a negative way. 6) Explaining the problematic distance between the manner in which a headline was written and the facts presented.

The articles I analyzed are listed in Appendix B.

Misconstruing, exaggerating, or making unfounded or unsourced conclusions based off of real news events

The articles' news pegs were mostly based on current events that one would see while browsing mainstream news applications, websites, or while watching television news. The authors then misconstrue, exaggerate, or make unfounded or unsourced conclusions based off of the news event, creating their own spin on the story that makes the event appear to be much worse, more far reaching, or controversial. For example, an article shared by Facebook page Right Wing News stated Slovakia banned all Muslims from entering the country in August 2015. In fact, Slovak leaders said the country would not take Syrian refugees who were Muslims ("Migrants crisis: Slovakia," 2015). This ban on Muslim entry does not include other classifications of immigration or tourism ("Migrants crisis: Slovakia," 2015). The article's author misconstrued the controversial event by stating the country's leaders wanted to ban all Muslims from entering the country, playing on the then growing fear that Muslim refugees are potentially dangerous. In another case, Facebook page Proud Democrat stated Trump taught elementary

children how to be racist, and the school's administrators chose to cancel the children's mock elections as a result. Indeed, an elementary school in New York canceled its mock presidential election after teachers and staff stated their students were making negative comments about minorities (Tan, 2016). However, there is no evidence to support the claim that Trump himself went to the school to teach the children racist rhetoric, as the headline implies. Again, the author capitalizes on a widely publicized event and adds his or her own twist that will likely get the attention of social media users who felt strongly about the language used throughout Trump's presidential campaign.

Writing about politically or ideologically charged topics without policy and ideological depth

The authors utilized controversial news events publicized in the mainstream media and other politically-relevant topics when composing their articles. These topics ranged from North Carolina's much-debated House Bill Two and a London Mayor's response to Trump's proposed Muslim travel ban to Barack Obama's place of birth and Bernie Sanders' disillusionment with the Democratic Party. Despite the political relevance of the central subject matter, the articles' authors rarely included longer discussions of the policy or ideology related to the news event. In an article posted by Facebook page Mr. Conservative, the author stated Michelle Obama submitted to and supports Sharia Law because she accepted a gift from a Brunei leader. The article's author does not mention relevant policy regarding limits to what United States leaders can accept from foreign representatives or include an ideological discussion or summary of Sharia Law itself. Traditional news reporting typically includes explanations of basic policy or ideological concepts used in the story along with the different views surrounding it. This exclusion of explanation and depth was common in almost all analyzed articles.

Using provocative words and phrases that may resonate with or elicit reactions in readers

Either the articles or its headlines all contained some kind of provocative words or phrases that would likely garner some kind of reaction to the subject matter, ranging from anger, annoyance, or sardonic humor to solidarity, agreement, or pity. For example, an article shared by Facebook page Conservative 101 stated Bernie Sanders quit the Democratic Party entirely. Throughout the article the author included words to describe both Clinton and the Democratic Party in negative ways that could resonate with people holding conservative views. The author used the phrases, “he is leaving the craven Democratic Party,” and “deeply unpopular Hillary Clinton.” Both phrases capitalized on sentiments Republican Party members often repeated in their campaign messaging, potentially agreeing with the reader’s own biases. In another instance, Facebook page Liberal Nation shared an article that said Trump called himself braver than military veterans. The article’s author included sarcastic phrases such as “he doesn’t want to come across as self-deprecating at all,” and another phrase referring to Trump’s frequent use of the word huge when the author writes, “He’s yuge!” In both cases, the author utilized the sarcasm and satire often seen in late night programming during the presidential campaign that sought to tease Trump’s mannerisms.

Utilizing AP style and news writing conventions, while simultaneously diverging from both methods of journalistic writing

It was evident the authors of the articles were aware of and attempting to emulate the ways in which journalists reporting for traditional news organizations typically write stories. This awareness is apparent in the widespread use of the AP style method of excluding serial commas in lists and the typically shorter, concise, and broken-up paragraphs seen in articles written by traditional news outlet journalists. In the aforementioned article pertaining to Sanders leaving the Democratic Party, the author excluded the serial comma in two instances. The author wrote the sentence, “This was made abundantly clear after Wikileaks released more than 20,000

clandestine DNC emails between Hillary, Debbie and friends detailing how they were going to snatch the nomination away from Bernie at all costs.” The article also included the sentence, “He had some choice words for Hillary, the deposed Debbie and the rest of the DNC on his way out.” Other articles utilized this AP style rule throughout.

Facebook page Opposition Report shared a story stating North Carolina’s GOP members stole disaster relief funds to pay attorney fees, and in this article we find one example that shows the use of shorter, often one-sentence paragraphs used by traditional journalists:

If a hurricane slams North Carolina later this year, you can blame Governor Pat McCrory when the state runs out of disaster relief funds to help those in need.

That’s because McCrory and his Republican allies in the state legislature are literally taking \$500,000 out of North Carolina’s disaster relief fund to pay for the legal defense of the discriminatory law known as HB2.

Though not all articles strictly adhered to this rule, it was a common occurrence that differs from other methods of writing, suggesting authors were aware of traditional news conventions.

Yet despite this frequent use of similar news writing techniques, there are also many divergences those techniques. An aggregated list of all deviations are shown below.

- Direct or collective address (you, yours, us, we, ours)
- Quotations without immediate attribution
- Lack of legitimate attribution for purported facts and conclusions
- Capitalization of words for dramatic effect (“Hillary Takes Them Off TERROR Watch List;” “Trump Just Said He Is MORE Brave Than Military Veterans”)
- Acronyms without initial explanation
- First names in referencing subjects in an article (“Two groups Hillary claims to champion”)

- Biased or exaggerated descriptions of people, ideas, places, and organizations
- Inclusion of actionable statements (“Let us know your thoughts in the comments section;” “Share this story on Facebook and Twitter;” “Share this story if you want Michelle Obama OUT of the White House!”)
- Providing partisan commentary and reactions after or before statements of fact

Writing about the opposing political view and its party in a negative way

Almost all articles were written in a way that disparages or discredits members of the opposing ideological viewpoint or the viewpoint itself. This includes direct and implied statements of character and nature. For example, the aforementioned article about Trump stating he was more brave than military veterans used this sentence: “Honestly, that’s quite an insult and it really downplays the bravery and courage and service of Medal of Honor folks.” In this instance, the article was shared by a left-leaning Facebook page and implies Trump, who is a member of the opposing political viewpoint in this case, does not respect military veterans or their sacrifices. Similarly, in an article shared by Facebook page Conservative 101, the author states an old photo proves Obama was born in Kenya, and in this story the author includes direct character statements about Clinton. “Hillary Clinton is evil and manipulative and would be extremely destructive for our country if she ever won the presidency.” The article was shared by a right-leaning Facebook page and writes negatively about Clinton, a member of the opposing political viewpoint in this story.

Explanation of the problematic distance between the story’s headline and the facts presented

At some point in most of the analyzed articles, authors explain why he or she initially framed the story in the manner they chose in the headline or the news peg. If an author

misconstrued, exaggerated, or made an unfounded conclusion based off of a real news event, the story often has a statement that illustrates how his or her conclusion or original statement fits with the news event. An example of this is contained within a previously mentioned story in which the headline reads, “Michelle Obama Just Submitted To Shariah Law In A DISGUSTING Way.” In the article shared by the Facebook page Mr. Conservative, the author correctly reports that a Brunei leader gave Michelle Obama jewelry worth roughly \$70,000 (“Brunei queen gave,” 2014). The author then explains how the acceptance of the jewelry would lead one to conclude Michelle Obama submitted to Sharia Law, as the headline states.

“According to American News, an oil-rich sovereign state whose leader, Hassanal Bolkiah, has violently forced Islamic Shariah law upon the country. The leader is known for stoning anyone who stands up against him, but this clearly doesn’t matter to Michelle. Instead, she is happily willing to accept expensive presents from him, thereby supporting his push for Shariah law.”

The author explains this purported relationship by stating a person who accepts a gift from a leader who supports a certain ideology means that person must also support the leader’s ideology. Another example of this disconnect explanation in the analyzed articles is present in a story shared by Facebook page Opposition Report that states Laura Bush “slam[ed]” the GOP and would “rather vote for Hillary.” The news peg of the article is based off of statements Bush made while attending a conference that fueled speculation that she may support Clinton, but she in no way directly endorsed the candidate or spoke negatively of the GOP (Chan, 2016). The author of the article explains this disconnect in the following manner:

“At the annual Women in the World summit held in New York, Bush revealed that she would like the next POTUS to be someone who will work to improve the lives of women in Afghanistan – basically eliminating misogynist Republican frontrunner Donald Trump right off the bat.”

The author explained its headline and the purported relationship by stating that because Bush wanted the next president to support women and, in the author’s opinion, Trump does not support women, Bush therefore supports Clinton.

Left-leaning articles

When examined in relation to one another, the articles shared by left-leaning Facebook pages show two common elements. 1) Reference to traditional news outlets including *CNN*, *ABC News*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*, which the right-leaning articles almost exclusively excluded. 2) Writing about the rights for marginalized or minority groups and those rights' potential impediment.

Reference to traditional news outlets

As stated earlier, authors of these articles base their writing around real news events, and both left- and right-leaning articles used different methods for sourcing those events. Articles shared by left-leaning Facebook pages often referenced mainstream news outlets, including *CNN*, *ABC News*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*. For example, an article shared by Facebook page Opposition Report stated London Mayor Sadiq Khan told Trump to, "GO F*CK HIMSELF," in response to Trump's statements about his Muslim ban's exceptions including people like Khan. The authors cited a *New York Times's* reporter that asked Trump a question related to his proposed ban. In another example, Facebook page Liberal Nation shared an article that states Howard Stern himself released audio of Trump from their time together on Stern's show. The author cited the *CNN* KFile review that reported the widely-publicized story. In both cases, along with the other left-leaning articles that include citation of mainstream news outlets, the entire story or one of the main facts presented is based around reporting done by another mainstream news outlet or outlets.

Fretting the rights for marginalized or minority groups and those rights' potential impediment

A common theme throughout the articles shared by left-leaning Facebook pages was the inclusion of statements that show concern for and disdain of rights of marginalized groups being

impeded. This came almost solely in the form of negatively describing Trump, the Republican Party, its members, or the actions of any of the above in ways that suggest these subjects want to or have impeded the rights of marginalized groups. In the previously mentioned article stating North Carolina's GOP members stole disaster relief funds to pay attorney fees, the author described the contested House Bill Two passed by the North Carolina legislature and focused on its effects on LGBT people.

"HB2 allows business owners to discriminate against LGBT people and bans transgender people from using the bathroom that corresponds with their gender identity."

In a similar instance, the author of the previously mentioned story about Khan's response to Trump's Muslim ban exceptions wrote in the article multiple instances of outrage at the ban's ramifications for Muslims. The author called the ban "fascist," called the president's rhetoric "anti-muslim," and ended the article with a statement arguing American leaders can not institute the ban Trump suggested.

"Muslims already live, work, visit, and vote in America. Banning an entire religion out of fear and ignorance is exactly the wrong approach."

The other articles showing this common element of worry for marginalized or minority rights included topics related to women's health and safety, welfare recipients, poorer Americans, and military members and veterans.

Right-leaning articles

When examined in relation to one another, the articles shared by right-leaning Facebook pages show two common elements that left-leaning pages mostly excluded. 1) Encouraging reader action as it relates to the story and its contents. 2) References to Islam or Muslims as problematic.

Reader encouragement to take action related to the story and its contents

Authors of articles shared by right-leaning Facebook pages often utilized phrases that encourage readers to post their comments in response to the article or to share the article on Facebook or other social media platforms. This is exemplified in the previously discussed article about Michelle Obama receiving gifts from Brunei leaders. At the story's end, the author writes, "SHARE this story if you want Michelle Obama OUT of the White House!" The author encourages the reader to share the article if they feel strongly about the story's contents and conclusions. Another example shows an author of an article shared by a right-leaning Facebook page asking its readers to respond in the comments section of the web page the Facebook post directly linked to. In an article shared by Facebook page Mr. Conservative that argues Clinton is trying to hide her husband's purported son with a black woman, the author writes, "What do you think about this? Let us know your thoughts in the comments section." Again, the author attempts to elicit actions from the reader, but this time in the form of a commented response.

References to Islam or Muslims as problematic

Several of the articles shared by right-leaning Facebook pages included descriptions of immigrants, Muslims, and refugees as groups that are dangerous. In the aforementioned article that claimed Slovak leaders intended to ban Muslims from entering the country, the author wrote, "After all, who wants to import terrorists and people who so hate Western-styled government that they will agitate to destroy it?" In this example, the author refers to Muslims immigrating from Middle Eastern countries as terrorists and people desiring to destroy western-styled government. Yet again referencing the article in which Michelle Obama accepts gifts from a Brunei leader, the author implies the support for Sharia Law, or Islamic Law, is inherently negative when the author writes Michelle Obama submitted to "Shariah Law In A

DISGUSTING Way.” In both instances the authors spoke of Islam or those who practice it as problematic or negative.

CHAPTER 3

Limitations

This research is limited by three factors. First, the articles were not chosen randomly and cannot be used to make generalizations about most articles shared by partisan Facebook pages that often post stories including falsities or misinformation. The articles chosen were posted during a highly publicized, polarized, and controversial election season. Stories published and posted by these Facebook pages I included in my study could have looked differently during non-election time periods. Third, my own interpretations of what constitutes misconstrued or false could differ from another's analysis, and the articles chosen for this study based off of my perceptions of what is false could look very different had someone else chosen them in the same manner.

Discussion and Conclusions

I found most articles shared by the Facebook pages that posted stories that included or were based off of falsities or misconstrued information frequently utilized six methods that would likely elicit responses from readers. These writing techniques have potentially far reaching effects on consumption of news and information. Basing stories off of real news events but misconstruing the facts of the events, utilizing a combination of traditional AP style and news writing conventions along with divergences from these standards, and explaining the problematic distance between the manner in which a headline was written and the facts presented can all contribute to why a reader may trust an information source that propagates false or misleading news. If the reader does an independent search of a news event reported by a questionable information source, he or she may find a traditional outlet reporting on the event

and use that as proof of the questionable article's legitimacy. This potential research confirmation, combined with similarities to traditional reporting and explanations for why the questionable article's false or misconstrued claims were presented in the dubious manner may lead a reader to accept the false or misconstrued claims.

Writing about politically or ideologically charged topics, but excluding depth on related policy and ideological positions, using provocative words and phrases that would likely resonate with or elicit reactions from readers, and writing about the opposing political view and its party in a negative way can keep a reader interested in questionable content because of their on own biases. Salient topics written in a way that is provocative and speaks to the biases of someone holding an ideological view may also lead a reader to accept false or misconstrued claims. Consider Knobloch-Westerwick, Johnson, and Westerwick's definition of confirmation bias that states individuals prefer attitude-consistent messages (2015). The author of articles containing false or misconstrued facts can include attitude-consistent messages by utilizing the aforementioned combination of methods or one of the methods by itself. A reader would then be more likely to accept the the article because, as Bennett and Iyengar affirm, many practice selective exposure and use the information they find to "ornament their opinions" (2008).

When a reader or consumer of information has a method by which to explain why an article presented a real news event in a false or misconstrued way, while also consuming information written in a way that speaks to their inherent ideology, they are likely to believe what they read. Any creator of false or misleading articles could utilize this combination to deceive readers into believing what he or she has written.

Partisanship and widely-discussed topics by ideological elites may provide an explanation for the differences that arose in the right- and left- leaning articles. The right-leaning

articles depicted Islam and Muslims in a problematic way, which coincides with Trump's controversial campaign promises to ban Muslims until a better vetting process could be created (Stein, 2017). Likewise, the left-leaning articles spoke worriedly about the impediment of rights of groups such as Muslims and LGBT people, which coincides with Clinton's counter talking points to Trump's proposed travel ban and North Carolina's controversial House Bill Two (Megerian, 2016; Morrilland and Harrison, 2016).

Informing coders, educators, and political actors

These results can inform those creating algorithms to combat the spread of false or misconstrued information, those structuring or advocating for media literacy courses, and politicians and other political elites. First, those engineering these corrective algorithms must know Facebook, among other social networking sites, "looks at the things you like" and "tries to extrapolate," giving people more of the same kind of content they have shown preference for (Pariser, 2011). But these engineers must then also know how these fake news articles that end up being suggested for many Facebook users are written and skirt the truth as they look for ways to differentiate between more reliable partisan media and all out fake-news aggregators.

Secondly, educators structuring media literacy courses and those advocating for their further establishment can use my findings as an example. Hammer and Martinson argued students need to know how to criticize and analyze the media they come in contact with (Hammer, 2011; Martinson, 2004). Knowing the ways in which some fake news aggregators and authors create their stories is necessary in discussing how to choose reliable sources of information. Students of a media literacy course could be made aware of the signs of what has been included in some fake news articles that were previously spread. In addition, women and

men pushing for media literacy courses at a wider level can point to my results in explaining what some fake news writers have done in creating deceptive articles containing falsities.

Finally, studies have shown politicians may see advantages in keeping some of their constituents actively misinformed and information regulatory structures in the United States can contribute to the spread of misinformation and falsities. Knowledge of the systematic and almost formulaic process by which some fake news articles are written can be used to inform politicians of the negative effects of misconstruing facts to constituents and those in the government structures that focus on “post hoc detection” of misinformation (Southwell & Thorson, 2015).

Suggestions for further research

Further research to build on this study would certainly involve a random sample of articles from time periods during and outside of presidential elections. More research is necessary to determine if indeed the combination of the observed writing techniques used in the left- and right-leaning articles make a reader more likely to accept false or misconstrued information compared with the utilization of one or only a few of the methods. In addition, those desiring to conduct a study similar to my own can use my coding guide as basis for expanding or replicating my research.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Coding guide

Coding categories (symbol/phrase):

News peg (peg)

Article's central ideology (ideology)

Key purported facts (PF)

Frequently used words and phrases (FWP)

Politically charged ideological words and phrases (PWF)

Underlying theme (theme)

Frequently used stylistic choices in writing (style)

Traditional reporting divergence (div)

Appendix B: Articles studied

1. COINCIDENCE? Algeria Makes Donation To Clinton Foundation – Hillary Takes Them Off TERROR Watch List
 - a. Link: <http://rightwingnews.com/top-news/coincidence-algeria-makes-donation-clinton-foundation-hillary-takes-off-terror-watch-list/>
 - b. Facebook page: Right Wing News
2. Slovakia Banning All Middle Eastern Muslims, But Allowing Middle Eastern Christians to Immigrate
 - a. Link: <http://rightwingnews.com/culture/slovakia-banning-all-middle-eastern-muslims-but-allowing-middle-eastern-christians-to-immigrate/>
 - b. Facebook page: Right Wing News

3. Michelle Obama Just Submitted To Shariah Law In A DISGUSTING Way
 - a. Link: <https://www.mrcblog.com/2016/07/michelle-obama-just-submitted-to-shariah-law-in-a-disgusting-way/>
 - b. Facebook page: Mr. Conservative
4. Bill Clinton's Black Son Goes On Live TV – Reveals MASSIVE Secret Hillary Is Trying To Hide
 - a. Link: <https://www.mrcblog.com/2016/10/bill-clintons-black-son-goes-on-live-tv-reveals-massive-secret-hillary-is-trying-to-hide/>
 - b. Facebook page: Mr. Conservative
5. BREAKING: Bernie QUITs Democratic Party After Full Email Leak, Blasts Crooked Hillary On Way Out With THIS
 - a. Link: <http://conservative101.com/breaking-bernie-quits-democratic-party-after-full-email-leak-blasts-crooked-hillary-on-way-out-with-this/>
 - b. Facebook page: Conservative 101
6. This Presidential Candidate PROVES That Obama Was Born In Kenya With Photo Obama's Been Hiding
 - a. Link: <http://conservative101.com/this-presidential-candidate-proves-that-obama-was-born-in-kenya-with-photo-obamas-been-hiding/>
 - b. Facebook page: Conservative 101
7. The View To Be Cancelled After Host Makes Disgusting Comment About Bill Clinton Rape Victims [VIDEO]
 - a. Link: <http://americannews.com/the-view-to-be-cancelled-after-host-makes-disgusting-comment-about-bill-clinton-rape-victims-video/>

- b. Facebook page: Proud To Be Conservative
- 8. BREAKING: Obama Makes Terrifying Martial Law Announcement... Your Worst Nightmare Just Came True [VIDEO]
 - a. Link: <http://americannews.com/breaking-obama-makes-terrifying-martial-law-announcement-your-worst-nightmare-just-came-true-video/>
 - b. Facebook page: Proud To Be Conservative
- 9. Dems, Repubs Both Shocked When They Learn Why Obama Just Gave Mexico \$75 Million
 - a. Link: http://conservativetribune.com/dems-repubs-shocked-mexico/?utm_source=Facebook&utm_medium=RightWingNews&utm_content=2016-09-17&utm_campaign=manualpost
 - b. Facebook page: Right Wing News
- 10. Supreme Court Justice John Roberts Signs Off On Obama's Removal For Treason... His Career Is Over - American News - Breaking News, Political News and Updates
 - a. Link: <http://americannews.com/supreme-court-justice-john-roberts-signs-off-on-obamas-removal-for-treason-his-career-is-over/>
 - b. Facebook page: Proud To Be Conservative
- 11. Fox News Bans Mark Cuban After He Said This During An Interview, This Took Some Real Courage!
 - a. Link: <http://liberalsociety.com/fox-news-bans-mark-cuban-after-he-said-this-during-an-interview-this-took-some-real-courage/>
 - b. Facebook page: Liberal Nation

12. BREAKING: Howard Stern Releases New Audio Of Donald Trump Making More Sick
Comments About Women

- a. Link: <http://liberalsociety.com/breaking-howard-stern-releases-new-audio-of-donald-trump-making-more-sick-comments-about-women/>
- b. Facebook page: Liberal Nation

13. MISSISSIPPI GOP JUST SCREWED THEIR ENTIRE STATE OUT OF HAVING
PRE-MARITAL SEX

- a. Link: <http://www.ifyouonlynews.com/politics/mississippi-gop-just-screwed-their-entire-state-out-of-having-pre-marital-sex/>
- b. Facebook page: Opposition Report

14. NORTH CAROLINA GOP GOVERNOR STEALS DISASTER RELIEF FUNDS TO
PAY LEGAL DEFENSE OF ANTI-LGBT LAW

- a. Link: <http://oppositionreport.com/north-carolina-gop-governor-steals-disaster-relief-funds-to-pay-legal-defense-of-anti-lgbt-law/>
- b. Facebook page: Opposition Report

15. Trump Surrogate Calls For Taking Away Voting Rights From Women And Welfare
Recipients

- a. Link: <http://proudemocrat.com/trump-surrogate-calls-for-taking-away-voting-rights-from-women-and-welfare-recipients/#>
- b. Facebook page: Proud Democrat

16. Trump Teaches Elementary Kids How To Be Racist; School Forced To Cancel Mock
Elections (VIDEO)

- a. Link: <http://proudemocrat.com/1-trump-teaches-elementary-kids-how-to-be-racist-school-forced-to-cancel-mock-elections-image/>

- b. Facebook page: Proud Democrat

17. Trump Just Said He Is MORE Brave Than Military Veterans...The Reaction Of The Vets In The Audience Was Intense!

- a. Link: <http://liberalsociety.com/trump-just-said-he-is-more-brave-than-military-veterans-the-reaction-of-the-vets-in-the-audience-was-intense/>

- b. Facebook page: Liberal Nation

18. BREAKING: 13 Year Old Girl Trump Raped Releases Video, Makes Shocking Accusation, Trump Is So F*cked

- a. Link: <http://liberalsociety.com/breaking-13-year-old-girl-trump-raped-releases-video-makes-shocking-accusation-trump-is-so-fcked/>

- b. Facebook page: Liberal Nation

19. Laura Bush SLAMS The GOP, Says She'd Rather Vote For Hillary Than A Republican < Opposition Report

- a. Link: <http://oppositionreport.com/laura-bush-slams-the-gop-says-shed-rather-vote-for-hillary-than-a-republican/>

- b. Facebook page: Opposition Report

20. TRUMP SAYS HE'D CONSIDER MUSLIM BAN EXCEPTION FOR LONDON MAYOR, MAYOR TELLS HIM TO GO F*CK HIMSELF

- a. Link: <http://www.ifyouonlynews.com/politics/trump-says-hed-consider-muslim-ban-exception-for-london-mayor-mayor-tells-him-to-go-fck-himself/>

- b. Facebook page: Opposition Report