

The News We Believe

News, disinformation and the audience they (mostly) share

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Executive Summary

How could someone possibly believe that?

Like many journalists and media researchers, I've found myself asking this question about disinformation that has gone viral via social media. Though I've spent years learning how and why disinformation is created, I'd never had the opportunity to explore the motivations of the people who believe and share these stories. That is what led me to conduct this research.

Over the course of six months, from late 2018 through the spring of 2019, I conducted in-depth interviews with nine Americans who were selected for their relationships with both disinformation and mainstream news.

Through these conversations, I found that the media industry isn't facing a disinformation problem as much as an engagement problem. It isn't merely the insidious and convincing nature of disinformation that drives people to consume, believe or share false news, but is also a profound disconnection from the mainstream media and how it works.

This disconnection is the driver behind many of the themes uncovered through this research, which include:

1. Distrust in the power of the media

The people I interviewed were wary of the power of the mainstream media, aided by social media, to shape public opinion. Even those with positive feelings about the news said they did not trust the media's motivations or sense of responsibility in wielding the power to determine "good guys" and "bad guys".

2. The media isn't "one of us"

Many of those interviewed felt the national/regional media did not really care about them or their communities, as reporters only appeared during times of crisis. That said, most of them did not take in locally produced news even if it was available.

3. Difficulty discerning facts and opinions

Most interviewees said they found the media least credible when it was difficult to distinguish between facts and opinion in the reporting. The participants did not object to expressions of opinion in news in and of itself, but they took issue with news that seemed as if it were giving opinion disguised as factual reporting.

4. Information overload from news aggregators and social media

An overabundance of news stories, all of which are fed into news aggregators like Google News, Apple News and Flipboard, as well as social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook made it very difficult for the participants to figure out what to read, where it comes from and whom to believe. This confusion was amplified when pieces (or passages) of analysis were mixed in with factual news items.

5. Digital device “time sucks”

Everyone I spoke with uses digital devices, smartphones in particular, to access the internet. Most said they felt these devices were addictive, and that time spent on them was problematic, often creating problems in their personal lives.

6. The overestimation of disinformation

The participants said they believe that disinformation is a major concern and that propaganda and hoaxes are taking over the internet. Research shows this is not the case, but this exaggerated concern has led to disbelief fatigue among many.

7. Overestimation of media literacy skills

Each participant said they believed that they have an effective process and approach for discerning real news from intentionally false news. Most relied on Google searches to research claims, others trusted their gut. These approaches often can make the problem worse.

8. The creation of “bubbles”

All of the participants had carefully crafted their media and social media experiences. While some of them actively seek out opposing viewpoints, a few knowingly shield themselves from them.

9. The importance of community and lack thereof

The subject of community, both in real life and virtual, came up with most of the participants. Many had lost touch with one community only to find another of like-minded people, while others are still searching for a lasting connection.

10. Negative feelings about social media, especially Facebook

Every participant had used Facebook at one time, but many had recently left or dramatically cut back on their use of the platform. Only a few cited concerns about data privacy, but nearly all were concerned about how interactions on Facebook made them feel.

11. Life-altering events lead to a change of heart about institutions

More than half of the participants blamed some sort of pivotal life event for changing their view of institutions such as media, law enforcement, government, science and education.

Conclusion Summary

- The primary problem facing the news industry as it pertains to the issue of disinformation is its deteriorating relationship with its audience. If the audience doesn't trust the media's motives or processes, it follows that it also wouldn't have faith in such important journalistic practices as fact-checking.
- Though it is easy to assume that those who believe disinformation are unintelligent, incurious or uncaring about the false news they help amplify, I found this not to be the case. The participants I spoke to were educated and exceedingly thoughtful about their media-consumption choices.
- The importance of context as it pertains to news and history cannot be overstated in understanding disinformation. People consume information through their own individual lenses, so one person's news is another's "fake news" — seen this way, all sides can believe they are right, and the opposing side wrong.
- Everyone has their own filters, via conscious choice or applied unwittingly through technology, that dictate what information they will see and what they will believe.

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The News We Believe

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Introduction

Over the course of the last 25 years, the American media has been losing its audience. Newspaper circulation dropped from more than 62 million in 1990 to less than half that in 2017.¹ In this same time period, the internet has become available in more than 75 percent of American homes,² opening the floodgates for the creation and consumption of countless new sources of information.

Some of these, such as ProPublica, The Huffington Post and Slate have become leading news providers, winning top journalism prizes for their work. Others have become the drivers of false and misleading stories that have spread across online communities and social networks, changing the minds of everyday Americans on everything from climate change to vaccinations and the sovereignty of the U.S. government, and upending Americans' trust in the media along the way.

How did the mainstream American media lose its grip on its audience? Why do news consumers believe what they believe? What has changed? What can newsrooms learn from consumers of disinformation? These are the questions I explored as a John S. Knight Fellow at Stanford University, leading me to conduct the research that resulted in this paper.

For six months I have been studying American media consumers and their relationships with the news and providers they rely on every day. I wanted a deeper understanding of individuals who seek out, read and sometimes share purposefully inaccurate stories from non-mainstream news outlets, some of which is colloquially called “fake news.” I will avoid using that phrase in this paper, as it does not adequately describe the problem, and will instead refer to it as “disinformation.”

This research follows more than four years working at Storyful, a social media newsroom that specializes in unearthing, debunking and preventing the spread of false news narratives emerging from non-mainstream news sources, social networks and the “dark web.”³ I have extensive experience in identifying disinformation, understanding the motives of its creators and dissecting the networks through which it travels. What I didn't know was why regular people would believe this disinformation and why they would want to share it more widely.

Through my interviews with nine individuals, I have seen how the media ecosystem itself has helped to shape the decisions that people face in the wake of what they learn (or think they learn) from the news. These interviewees were each selected for their varied and sometimes extreme perspectives on media, disinformation and social media. Of the participants I spoke to, six were found to be sharers of disinformation to one degree or another. Many follow and/or subscribe to mainstream news providers. All are news consumers who would think of themselves as fairly savvy, well educated and able to distinguish disinformation from real news.

These conversations revealed common themes pertinent to the understanding of the disinformation problem and what may need to be done to address its effects.

These themes include:

- Trust (or lack thereof) in the motives and power of mainstream media
- Feeling that the media doesn't care about their communities and lives
- Inability to discern facts and opinions
- Overestimation of their abilities to distinguish news from disinformation
- Overestimation of the reach and amount of disinformation they encounter
- Information overload due to a plethora of choices, aided by aggregators and social media feeds
- Technology overload encouraged by an "always online" culture.
- Creation of "filter bubbles" to isolate them from opposing beliefs
- The influence of community (or a loss of it) on information choices
- A contentious relationship with social media platforms leading many to quit these platforms
- Experience of life-altering events that change their feelings toward institutions in general

I will explore these themes and their relevance as it pertains to the research question later.

Because I have such a small number of participants and the audience for disinformation is large and widespread across the U.S. and the world, I will refrain from generalizing the insights learned in my interviews to the larger population. What I will share are individual case studies on each of the participants, as well as insights gleaned from each interview, with special attention paid to those insights that showed up repeatedly across multiple interviewees.

What I hope the journalism and information sectors can gather from this work is a better understanding of the motivations, challenges and concerns of people who are acting in good faith to inform themselves in an ever-changing world. Too often, these sorts of news consumers are viewed as caricatures or stereotypes of disinformation targets, but in reality, they are just people who are doing their best to navigate this changing ecosystem, often with limited tools and knowledge of how to do so.

This is by no means a comprehensive group of interviewees and there is a lot more work to do to get the views of news consumers across the spectrum of the American experience. I hope this can be a companion piece for future work to be conducted in communities across the U.S. and the world.

Background Research

My research touches on a variety of areas that have been of particular interest to media and neuroscience researchers in recent years. In the months since the 2016 United States presidential election, which was marred by foreign interference and widespread disinformation and has continued to be the subject of intense media coverage, many researchers have taken on the study of how information and disinformation reaches audiences in various forms. Many studies I reviewed focused intensely on disinformation as it pertained to the 2016 election cycle in particular, whereas others took a more in-depth view into particular types of and mediums for disinformation, including conspiracy theories, unverified health news, “deep fake” video technology and the nature of belief itself.

Below, I have included brief summaries of concepts from other studies in this area that provided the background for my own research and the analysis of the interviews I conducted. This is by no means comprehensive, as I could write a lengthy report just on other important research that has been done on disinformation.

A. What is disinformation?

The study of disinformation is important because of its potential to disrupt life at a large scale. Because people think and act based largely on how they are informed, disinformation has a significant downstream impact on health, politics and civic life.⁴

To convey the research findings effectively, we should first review what disinformation entails.

Both disinformation and misinformation involve the spread of false information, but the main difference between the two terms lies in intent. Disinformation is the deliberate spread of biased, false, manipulated or otherwise misleading information, whereas misinformation is not necessarily spread with any intent in mind.⁵

Claire Wardle of First Draft defined seven primary types of disinformation and misinformation as they appear in the news ecosystem.⁶ They are:

Satire or Parody: Intentionally false content created for comedic purposes, but which can and has been believed and shared by unsuspecting news consumers.

False Connection: Colloquially called “clickbait“, these are stories for which the headline and/or images are not related to the actual content, thus creating a “false connection” between the two in the minds of the audience.

Misleading Content: Related to false connection, this content consists of data and other information used to incorrectly frame an issue or story.

False Context: Real news and information that is published without proper context to suggest a false storyline.

Imposter Content: Impersonation of known news and information brands to spread information.

Manipulated Content: Editing or otherwise manipulating real content to convey an alternative story.

Fabricated Content: Entirely false original content.

B. How big of a problem is disinformation?

It is difficult to measure how much of what can be found on the internet is disinformation, as there are new websites and sources spun up every day. How much disinformation is consumed and reshared by those consumers is just as difficult to study, though many have tried.

Many social news researchers have attempted to pull together lists of online domains that disseminate disinformation, but their efforts are often stymied by the disinformation providers’ ability to generate new websites as soon as one is banned from a social network or added to an advertising blacklist⁸. In addition to being able to adapt quickly, disinformation providers have proven themselves adept at using social media to spread their stories.

This was especially prevalent during the 2016 presidential election in the United States. A BuzzFeed News analysis found that intentionally inaccurate news stories about the election generated more total engagement on Facebook than actual news stories about the election from 19 major news outlets combined.⁹

Despite those high engagement numbers, a European Research Council study on news coverage during the 2016 U.S. presidential election found that disinformation made up a very small part—less than three percent—of the overall available news. Furthermore, it found those small number of stories were most often reaching partisans who had largely

already made up their minds about issues and candidates, and were using these stories to deepen or justify preexisting beliefs.”¹⁰

Nearly three years have passed since the conclusion of the 2016 election. In that time, government bodies, intelligence agencies, social platforms, media and others have continued to study and attempted to combat disinformation ahead of the 2020 presidential election.

Exposure to disinformation remains a concern because it can widen the gap between those with opposing viewpoints while further isolating people that believe inaccurate information.¹¹ It is also difficult to counter, as debunking disinformation does little to stop it from influencing audiences who already believe its message.¹²

C. The audience for disinformation

Researchers have found that older Americans were more likely to share articles from domains known for disinformation. Eleven percent of users older than 65 shared a hoax, while just three percent of users 18 to 29 did. Facebook users ages 65 and older shared more than twice as many intentionally inaccurate articles as the next-oldest age group (45 to 65), and nearly seven times as many intentionally inaccurate articles as the youngest age group (18 to 29). This finding held true even when controlling for other factors such as education and party affiliation.¹³

In a study run by the News/Co Lab at Arizona State University and the Center for Media Engagement at The University of Texas at Austin, researchers found that 57 percent of those with less than a college degree were able to identify an intentionally false headline from a selection of headlines offered to survey participants, compared to 68 percent of those with a college degree or more. The difference is not so great as to draw many conclusions about the role of higher education in identifying false headlines.¹⁴

D. The nature of initial belief

When people encounter new information they tend to believe it, at least initially. Evidence suggests people appear to initially encode all new information as if it were true, and only later will decide it is either true or false.¹⁵

If there are discrepancies between that initial belief and previously-held knowledge or beliefs, doubt can be retroactively applied through a secondary psychological process. This is the basis for False Tagging Theory, a neuroanatomical model of belief and doubt processes. This “false tagging” function, or this process to apply doubt, is a limited resource in the brain and can become heavily taxed when confronted with many decisions or distractions.¹⁶

E. Trust in the media

Audience trust in the mainstream news media has driven a great deal of research in recent years, especially as it pertains to disinformation. Media trust was at an all-time low in the U.S. in 2016, when Gallup found that 32 percent of Americans trusted the media. This was a far cry from the poll's highest year in 1976, when 72 percent of Americans said they trusted the media a "great deal" or "fair amount."¹⁷

Meanwhile, the Edelman Trust Barometer found in 2019 that many people read and engage with the news every day, but that does not translate to trust.

"In 2019, engagement with the news surged by 22 points from the previous year; 40 percent not only consume news once a week or more, but they also routinely amplify it. But people are encountering roadblocks in their quest for facts, with 73 percent worried about fake news being used as a weapon. Trust in search and trust in traditional media are tied at 65 percent, their highest historical levels, while trust in social media as a news source remains low at 43 percent globally."¹⁸

People who do not trust the media are less likely to access accurate information.¹⁹ Trust in and generally positive feelings about the media are important in helping the news consumer determine fact from fiction online. In the ASU/UT study, researchers found that survey participants who associated negative terms with the word "news" were less able to distinguish disinformation from real news or analysis from reporting.²⁰

Trust in the media can become something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Those who distrust media the most are also those most drawn to spreading disinformation, thus manipulating the power of the media and encouraging more distrust.²¹

F. Conspiracy thinking and community validation

There is a subset of information consumers prone to disbelief who are forever seeking the "real story" behind modern and historical events, which leads them to pursue alternative narratives from questionable sources. These alternative explanations and conspiracy theories run the gamut from believing the 1969 moon landing was faked to believing the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 were the work of the U.S government to believing that 2016 presidential candidate Hillary Clinton had a hand in the death of a young Democratic National Committee staffer. Three of my interviewees expressed current or previous beliefs that would fall into this sort of anti-establishment thinking.

These conspiracy theories are attractive to information consumers for a variety of reasons. Psychologist Karen Douglas and her colleagues found that the reasons people believe in conspiracy theories can be grouped into three broad categories: A desire to find

understanding and certainty in an uncertain world, a desire for control and security, and a desire to maintain a positive self-image.²²

People invested in conspiracy theories make a point of seeking more information in order to counter narratives from sources they have deemed untrustworthy, which could include the government, media and other experts. Doing this not only gives them a sense of certainty they may otherwise not have had, but it also helps reaffirm their preexisting beliefs and prejudices.

The study also found that those who engage in conspiracy thinking and its related self-research can find a sense of community they may otherwise be missing in their lives, especially if they feel marginalized from society.

This marginalization can be rooted in a sense that the world is changing around them and that they are powerless to stop it. Social psychology researchers Christopher M. Federico, Allison L. Williams and Joseph A. Vitriol found that some people are influenced into co-opting conspiracy beliefs by a “system identity threat,” or a perception that society’s fundamental values are endangered by social change.^{23, 24}

G. An overestimation of one’s own knowledge

Belief in political conspiracies and other types of disinformation and misinformation is also strongly correlated with the overestimation of one’s own knowledge of the subject matter at hand.

In studying opponents of genetically modified foods, Philip Fernbach and his colleagues found that those with the strongest beliefs about GMOs knew the least about them, though they estimated they knew the most. These individuals were also least likely to be receptive to learning new information about the subject.²⁵

Joseph A. Vitriol and Jesseca K. Marsh found that when people who believed themselves to have a deep understanding of public policy or politics were confronted with information they didn’t know or conflicted with their understanding, they were more likely to endorse conspiracy beliefs.²⁶

Meet the Participants

The nine people interviewed were selected for their particular perspectives on media, disinformation and social media. More background on user selection and criteria is outlined in the methodology.

The participants asked that only their first names be shared in this study, and I have tried to remove further identifying information where possible to maintain their privacy. I met each of them in person, in a place where they felt safe. For a more in-depth view of each participant, please read the case studies at the end of this report.

James, 47, Interviewed at home in Los Altos, CA

James is a white man who lives in his childhood home, where he is caring for his father. He has a college degree and holds a variety of entrepreneurial jobs.

Through my local NextDoor site, the neighborhood-based social network, James self-selected to be a part of a different study I was conducting for a class in the fall of 2018. He is a very active user of the site and often plays a “devil’s advocate” role in discussions on other users’ threads, including those about the neighborhood gossip, politics and conspiracy theories. This willingness to discuss a variety of topics and a demonstrated openness to new information is what prompted me to ask him to participate in this study, and he agreed.

In addition to NextDoor, James uses Facebook to connect with people. He has a Twitter account but he rarely uses it. He takes in a variety of news sources via Apple News on his phone, reads two non-daily local newspapers and seeks out online news when he wants it.

Nicole, 17, interviewed at Mountain View Public Library, Mountain View, CA

Nicole is a Latina teen living with her parents and younger brother in Mountain View. She was about to graduate from high school and decide on a college when we met.

Nicole self-identified for this study via NextDoor, which she primarily uses to seek babysitting jobs. For the purpose of the study, she fit my need to include a typical teenager, though I found her to be more savvy about media and social media than expected for her age.

Nicole is a heavy user of Snapchat to connect with her friends, and she uses Facebook to share news stories with older family members. She doesn’t read a lot of news, but said that a recent civics class really opened her eyes to the media and how to evaluate the veracity of the news.

Doug, 52, interviewed at home outside Ellensburg, Washington

Doug is a white man living with his wife on a farm in the middle of Washington cattle country. He has a college degree and works as an independent investment consultant.

I first made contact with Doug via a shared acquaintance. I wanted to talk with him because he has not used social media aside from WhatsApp. He prefers instead to share his opinions with a small circle of friends that share his controversial beliefs about geopolitics and religion. He has a varied news diet that includes genuine news from around the world, as well as some non-mainstream sites that have been labeled by media analysts as anti-Semitic or disinformation.

Shravani, 48, and Sankumani, 52, interviewed at home in Marlboro Township, NJ

Shravani and her husband, Sankumani, came to the United States from the Assam region of India more than 20 years ago. They have become American citizens and raised their family in New Jersey.

Both Shravani and Sankumani are college educated and work in information technology. They maintain strong ties with India via a variety of WhatsApp groups. I met them through a mutual friend.

They take in a lot of mainstream news such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, NPR, Apple News, CNN and the nightly network news if they are home. They both use WhatsApp heavily. Shravani's use of Facebook is declining.

Will, 38, interviewed in his classroom in San Mateo, CA

Will is a college-educated white man who works as a high school history teacher in San Mateo. Will incorporates what he calls "argumentation development" into his curriculum, where he seeks to teach his students how to sort fact from fiction via research and analysis. I wanted to talk to Will because I was curious how his expertise has affected his own approach to media and disinformation.

Will has many news apps and podcasts on his phone, he listens to NPR via KQED in the car and he subscribes to print magazines such as *The New Yorker* and *The Week*. He uses WhatsApp, LinkedIn and NextDoor on occasion, but recently left Facebook.

I was referred to Will by a professor at Stanford University specializing in information literacy.

Kelsy, 30, interviewed at home in Oxford, MI

Kelsy is a white woman raising her family on the farm where she grew up. She has a college degree and is a stay-at-home mother for her first child.

In recent years, Kelsy says she has changed her outlook on everything and now holds views on alternative living, vaccines and science that alienate her from many of her friends and family. This alienation has driven her off Facebook, which was her primary source of news aside from YouTube videos and passing interaction with mainstream print and TV sources at her parents' house. This dramatic change is what drove me to talk with her.

She was referred to me by a mutual friend.

Brendan, 37, interviewed at home in Washington, DC

Brendan is a white man who left a life working in the federal government to focus on a variety of jobs that relate to his interests in community organizing and progressive activism.

Brendan is active on social media, Twitter in particular, but also Facebook and Signal, an encrypted messaging service. He takes in a variety of news, especially local news, as it affects his causes and the people he knows.

Brendan was featured in several news stories in the summer of 2018 because he unknowingly interacted with what Facebook deemed to be a fake account being run by operatives seeking to influence the U.S. elections. I wondered how this experience affected his online approach now. I reached out to him via social media and he agreed to participate.

Nora, 70, interviewed at home in Berkeley, CA

Nora is white and works part-time as a nurse when she isn't volunteering in her community. She has a strong activist background, though she has taken a bit of a break in recent years.

Nora is an active user of social media like Facebook and Instagram, and she used to use Twitter. She openly admits she has occasionally fallen for a fake story or two online as she has learned how it all works, which is one reason I wanted to speak with her for this project. She reads a variety of news, ranging from *The New York Times*, delivered daily to her communal house, to *The Guardian*, *The Intercept*, *TruthOut* and *Mother Jones*.

Nora was referred to me by her daughter, whom I met at Stanford University. Several years ago, her daughter was imprisoned in a foreign country, prompting Nora to take on a new role as an advocate and media spokesperson to get her successfully released. Her insights stemming from this involvement in media is another reason I wanted to include her in my research.

Findings and Analysis

From these interviews, I uncovered several common themes and insights that suggest there are a variety of factors that influence the news that people choose to consume, and why they believe it.

1. Distrust in the power of the media

The participants were wary of the power of the mainstream media, aided by social media, to shape public opinion. Even those with positive feelings about the news said they did not trust the media’s motivations or sense of responsibility in wielding the power to determine “good guys” and “bad guys“.

From the literature, I knew that trust and other preexisting feelings about the media (positive or negative) would heavily influence how people decided what news to consume and what they would believe.

Author and communications educator Ruth Palmer analyzed media consumers’ awareness of the power of the media when she interviewed people who had been at the center of news stories about their experiences.²⁷ She wrote:

“Journalists seem powerful to ordinary citizens for several interrelated reasons. The first is that journalists have a much larger audience than most people can reach through their social networks. Journalists can be gatekeepers to publicity and fame. But, most important, they control how people’s stories are told to the public: what is included, how it is framed, and who is cast as the hero or the bad guy. Those decisions can have favorable or destructive consequences for the people they are reporting about—consequences that are magnified online. And yet, journalists seem to dole out those benefits or damages pretty cavalierly.”

Interviewee Nora had to act as a news source and media advocate when her daughter was imprisoned overseas. She saw a way to try to use the power of the media to tell her own story, but even then, she was a small player in a larger game. At shows like *Good Morning America*, *Oprah* and others, she saw how they would prep interviewees like herself, leaving her only a small amount of time to get her message out the way she wanted.

“[The media] controlled our story, it was very difficult for us to have any control,” she said. “If you’re lucky you can get a few things in there that you want people to hear. So now, whenever I see something like that, I know that there’s so much truth behind there that I’m not seeing.”

Both Kelsy and Doug seemed to see people like themselves targeted by the media and amplified by social media as villains. They both cited examples of shame mobs and harassment aimed at those with alternative views like theirs.

For Kelsy, the media attention on vaccines and the subsequent public response in real life and on social networks disturbed her and made her feel like a target.

“It’s gotten to where I don’t want anyone to know [about her son’s vaccination status],” she said. “I read horror stories of people... getting [Child Protective Services] called on them for like different reasons and stuff and I’m not going to put my life out there to be judged by these people.”

Doug warned of the mainstream media’s power to create narratives around people and issues, especially when multiple outlets “pile on” to the same stories.

“You hear one talking point, and everybody starts repeating it and suddenly it becomes true,” he said. “That’s the power of the mainstream media creating a narrative.”

He related an anecdote about the writer Philip Giraldi, who wrote an article in September 2017 for *The American Conservative* titled “America’s Jews Are Driving America’s Wars.” A few days after publication, Giraldi was fired following backlash reported in the media.²⁸ Doug said he saw Giraldi’s case as an example of what could happen to him if he shared his views more widely.

“They changed the story from what he’s written about to [something about] him as a character, as a person,” Doug said. “That’s how the mainstream media silences alternative sources, they go after the character of the individual. And they all gang up, right? CNN, ABC, MSNBC, Fox, they all pile on.”

James also shared this cynical view of the media-crafted narrative using a current news item at the time of our interview, a controversy about the 1944 holiday song, “Baby, It’s Cold Outside.”²⁹ He argued the media inflates the opinions of an offended fringe to change culture.

“In this day and age, everything is political and it’s not going to change,” he said. “Like ‘Baby, It’s Cold Outside,’ there is now this big movement and radio stations have decided not to play it. And I think it’s ridiculous ... So we’re just becoming super sensitive and all it takes is one person to start a movement to convince so many others that this is wrong.”

Interestingly, in the same part of the interview, James also noted a positive aspect of the media’s power to amplify a story, as it applies to the “Me Too” movement. In his view, the surge of women that were comfortable coming forward to report sexual harassment and abuse was because of widespread reporting on the topic.³⁰

Almost every participant questioned the motives of mainstream media in shaping a public narrative, though for different reasons. Doug and Kelsy believed mainstream media uses narratives to suppress alternative viewpoints like theirs, because they do not support the status quo.

As an example, Kelsy cited her belief that the media's coverage of vaccines and health risks was a nefarious attempt to tilt public opinion, including that of her own friends and family, against views like hers.

“So they want everyone to vaccinate their kids, so let's put stories out in the news that there's an outbreak of whatever going on right now and it'll scare people into thinking that everyone needs to go and get vaccinated,” she said. “How hard would it be for the mainstream media to do that? To put these stories out there whether they're true or not? Or even if they are true, to make them into a bigger deal than they really are?”

James, Nicole, Brendan, Will and Shravani viewed the media's motivation as driven by economics – that stories are selected or shaped to lead to more clicks on websites, more TV viewers and more social media hits.

“Media is interested only in telling stories in ways that attract the most attention and not the most resolution,” Brendan said. “They can make more money running these stories that are fluffy and happy and give people good warm fuzzies and keep them glued to the TV. That's less time they have for important stories that might challenge people.”

“Media is interested only in telling stories in ways that attract the most attention and not the most resolution.”

Will said he believes there are a lot of things the mainstream media does well, but he gets frustrated by the tactics they use to sell stories or narratives. He believed that Fox News used Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's name excessively in their coverage to make her into a villain. He said *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* took a similar tactic with using the word “impeach” in headlines to ramp up pageviews.

“I think [the media] are too concerned about selling and trying to curry to a specific demographic or specific mindset,” Will said. “There might be good reason to write that, but there seems to be a sense of, ‘well that'll get clicks’. It turns me off when I see them doing that.”

Nicole does not trust the media to fulfill its role of properly informing the public. She believes they would rather produce news that sells, such as celebrity gossip and other “viral” stories. She believes the media’s choices of what to cover and the tone used to cover it affects her ability to take them seriously as real news producers. To Nicole, this indicates a lack of respect for her as an audience member and for her ability to know what’s really important.

“They would prefer us to read something that a celebrity is doing than what's actually happening,” she said. “So, at times I feel like they're distracting us from what's really going on.”

Consolidated media ownership also contributed to this lack of trust in the power dynamic. Since the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which deregulated the news industry and allowed corporations to own more local newspapers and television stations, the vast majority of U.S. media is owned by a handful of companies.³¹

“All of the mainstream media is owned by the same few people,” Kelsy said. “So if they want something to be put out into the public or if they want people to think a certain thing, how hard would it be?”

Nora lamented that, in her view, the media used to be more trustworthy in the days of her youth. Some of that change she blames on corporate ownership.

“I think it was because of my own innocence that I used to trust media more. I think everybody did,” she said. “The media has changed, it's become very manipulative and much more corporate. I don't trust most of it now.”

2. The media Isn't “one of us”

Many participants felt the national or regional media did not really care about them or their communities, as reporters only appeared during times of crisis. That said, most participants did not take in locally-produced news even if it was available.

Doug had an interesting opinion about journalists that I didn’t expect. He believes journalists see themselves as immune to the short and long-term effects of the events they cover.

“If you live here you will suffer the consequences of what happens, even if you're a journalist reporting on it,” he said. “The forest fire is not going to race around your house and leave it because you are a journalist. They have as much skin in the game as the rest of us and I don't get that feeling from the journalist world that they understand that.”

“[Journalists] have as much skin in the game as the rest of us and I don't get that feeling... that they understand that.”

Brendan also felt disappointed by the coverage decisions of his local media. As a local activist, he follows local news and is often a source for stories about issues he is passionate about—and he often finds the media doesn't work as thoroughly or as diligently as it should. He cited the example of a protest he attended against the police shooting of unarmed motorist Terrence Sterling in Washington, D.C. in 2016.

“It excites me when media sometimes takes notice to [what I am passionate about] and it depresses me when they don't,” he said. “Five hundred people show up for a protest and maybe the local news covered it for two minutes and maybe asked the police chief a question, which she didn't answer. And that's it.”

This feeling was echoed in Palmer's findings. The people involved in the events being covered were so much more invested in that coverage than were the journalists reporting on the stories.

“Journalists quickly move on to the next story,” Palmer wrote. “Subjects stay on the ground to clean up the rubble and bury the dead—and manage the impact of the news coverage on their lives.”

Several studies have determined that local news reporting is the most trusted of all U.S. media types.³² Local reporters live in the community, and their coverage reflects this. Local news has been the hardest hit in the collapse of media around the United States³³, so it would stand to reason that there would be an overall loss in trust if it were to disappear.

A 2018 Pew Research Center survey found that news consumers valued a local connection. More than 80 percent of the respondents indicated it was at least somewhat important to them that a journalist be personally involved in the community.³⁴

Though that study reported that 73 percent of Americans follow local news at least somewhat closely, very few of the participants I spoke to thought highly of the local news available in their areas and most did not regularly consume it. There are several ways to interpret this. It could be that my study's participants consume more local news than they reported to me, or that my particular group cares less about the goings on of their communities than other news consumers.

James occasionally reads the [Los Altos Town Crier](#), a community news outlet, though he

sees their coverage more as a diversion than anything of substance. He also subscribes to the *Mercury News* in San Jose two days a week, but noted it rarely covers his area anymore.

“I will look at the *Town Crier* for the wackiness,” James said. “There's really nothing important that happens in Los Altos. But I want to know what people are bitching and moaning about and why.”

He relies on NextDoor for most of his information about local events, as he wants to know not only what's happening, but also what others in the area have to say about it. Still, as involved as James is on NextDoor, he did not know the names of the mayor or anyone in his city government.

Will has a diverse news diet, which helps him in the classroom, but he does not regularly take in local news aside from occasionally listening to his local NPR station or picking up the *San Mateo Daily Journal*.

“That's not to say there can't be something really helpful for me in the *San Francisco Chronicle*,” he said. “I just don't have the time to go to that site and sift through their advertisements and some of their more fluffy pieces. So I make that calculated sacrifice to not get more local news in order to make sure I'm strong on the big news of the day. I'd be more likely to do a Google search for local news.”

Doug couldn't care less about what happens in his community, as he doesn't see himself as a part of it. He isn't from the area, and he bought his farm to make a profit. He was surprised to find one day that Ellensburg, the town he lives closest to, now has an in-store tax on plastic bags. He figured that was probably discussed in the newspaper or on the radio, but he wouldn't know because he does not take in local media.

“I'm not from here and I didn't grow up here,” Doug said. “I'm not interested in the micro level because things that happen here don't affect the world. I don't even know who the mayor of this town is.”

Brendan and Shravani both said they were more likely to find out local news through neighborhood listservs, personal contacts and virtual groups.

Shravani follows the Facebook page of Marlboro Township, and she is in a couple of resident groups on Facebook as well. She laughs about the local characters who post there often, but is often annoyed at the rumors and the in-fighting that happens there instead of substantive local discussions.

“Somebody says the most innocuous thing and somebody will say ‘the Russians are here’ and then off they go on a tangent and it's 80 comments of fighting before you know it,” she lamented.

Nicole, too, said she was passionate about a few things happening in her neighborhood, but she did not read about local news on any outlet other than NextDoor. In school she would read the *San Francisco Chronicle* or *Mercury News*, but she said neither covered her community very much.

The 2018 Pew Research Center study found that roughly half of U.S. adults said their local news primarily covered an area other than where they live, such as a nearby city. Those who had a local provider covering their area were more likely to be confident in that media outlet.

Nora does not subscribe to a local newspaper because there isn't a daily in print that covers her area in Berkeley anymore. She used to read the East Bay Express, the local alt-weekly, but the publication cut nearly all of its editorial staff in January 2019.³⁵ She does regularly read and have trust in Berkeleyside, an independent digital news outlet that covers the community well, in her opinion.

“You can look on [Berkeleyside] and somebody will almost immediately post what happens around here,” she said. “One of our housemates saw a car hit a bike last year and she tweeted it to Berkeleyside. You can tweet to them and they get back to you. They’ll show up.”

3. Difficulty discerning facts and opinions

Most interviewees said they found the media least credible when it was difficult to distinguish between facts and opinion in the reporting. The most interesting element of this was that the participants did not object to expressions of opinion in news in and of itself, but they took issue with news that seemed as if it were giving opinion disguised as factual reporting.

In a 2018 survey by the American Press Institute, 42 percent of respondents said the reporting they see is more like commentary than news, and 63 percent said news is most useful when it mostly reports facts with some background or analysis.³⁶

“There’s too much independent conjecture and bias in the news,” Doug said. “I don’t have a problem when someone tells me their opinion. I have a problem when they try to promote it off as fact.”

Shravani had similar issues with opinions masquerading as reporting. Shravani doesn’t watch CNN much anymore, though her husband still does. She prefers “calmer” news, with less focus on analysis.

“So CNN doesn’t have pure news, I always feel like they have opinion during news time,” Shravani said. “I don’t like to go into the analysis too much. I would rather read in *The New York Times* or NPR to get the story.”

Nicole said she did not find news reports to be credible if they were using too much opinion.

“I feel like if they give out evidence and facts, that's when you know it's real,” she said. “And when it's something more like personal statements, that's important, but knowing the actual facts of something, I think that's what makes a true article.”

Kelsy said she was most put off by news that seems as if it is trying to dictate how the audience is supposed to feel about a given event. She said she finds these efforts very obvious and that they seem a bit like brainwashing.

“I feel like they're not really just reporting the news anymore, they're telling you how you should think about the news,” she said. “This happened and this is how you should feel about it. You should be scared or you should be outraged or you should be sad or you should be mad. It's like, well, why don't you just say what happened?”

“I feel like they're not really just reporting the news anymore, they're telling you how you should think about the news.”

Doug said if he found that a news outlet was suddenly reporting opinions as fact, he would eliminate it from his news diet because he could no longer trust it.

“I don't want to spend my time reading through, with my filter on, to find out what actually happened,” Doug said. “Because when it comes to an event that I'm not familiar with, I'm not comfortable relying on his report now, because I have too much evidence of crap that he's reported.”

Nicole also said that in reviewing incoming information, she is on the lookout for facts and evidence, not opinions. She believes analysis by experts is important to help understand the news, but if there's too much analysis and not enough basic reporting of the original facts of the story, news consumers won't know where one ends and the other begins.

This difficulty in sorting fact from opinion in the news goes beyond this participant group. A 2018 Pew Research Center study found that Americans have widely varying degrees of ability to distinguish opinions from facts in news coverage. Those who fared best were people that were more comfortable using the internet and digital devices, the politically engaged and those who indicated trust in national news sources.³⁶

The study also found that Republicans and Democrats are more likely to classify a news statement as factual if it favors their side—whether it is factual or not. This influence is especially interesting when considering the political beliefs of some of the people I interviewed, given, for example, Shravani and Sankumani’s strong Democratic leanings and Doug’s libertarian interests.

4. Information overload from news aggregators and social media

An overabundance of information sources, all of which are fed into news aggregators like Google News, Apple News and Flipboard as well as social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, made it very difficult for the participants to figure out what to read, where it comes from and whom to believe. This confusion was amplified when pieces (or passages) of analysis were mixed in with factual news items.

There has been considerable study of the influence of information overload on how people think. Information overload can occur when a person is presented with more information than they have the time or cognitive ability to process it—an overloaded circuit, so to speak.³⁷

Those who are cross-checking their news for accuracy, as many participants have indicated they do, may believe that more information is better. In reality, that may not be the case. Information overload can worsen one’s ability to make decisions, while giving the person unfounded confidence in the decisions they made.³⁸

“When you see so many different websites and so many different journals and newspapers and articles, and then on cable TV stations, when something major happens and [the commentators give] their own interpretation of the story—you don’t know who to listen to,” James said.

A related issue may be that the tools needed to manage this informational overload have not yet been developed.³⁹ Digital news aggregators and social media platforms supply the information, but they can make it difficult to figure out where the information is coming from.^{40, 41}

Though most mainstream news outlets label their stories for content type, social networks and news aggregator tools break news stories away from their points of origin and thus remove any labels that might have been applied. This “ambient journalism” results in a stream of information that mixes facts, opinions, real news and disinformation.⁴²

Sankumani said that while it can be helpful that aggregators such as Apple News can collect a multitude of views from many different outlets, it also makes it even more difficult to determine what kind of information you are seeing or what outlet produced it.

He said he often doesn't know exactly which outlet published the story he is reading in the app unless he clicks on an extra link to load that outlet's website.

This phenomenon somewhat explains how Sankumani, an educated news consumer and Democrat, would come to encounter and believe a later debunked story that the Hillary Clinton presidential campaign had a hand in the death of Democratic National Committee staffer Seth Rich, who had allegedly had a role in leaking private emails.⁴³ He saw it in his news aggregator app, which he assumed contained only credible sources, so he initially believed the story must be true.

James also experienced confusion due to Apple News. He said he was regularly getting news alerts about all sorts of stories from a number of news outlets, but he was not always sure why he was getting these alerts or what outlets they came from.

"I get alerts from different news channels, I don't even I don't even know who, to be honest," he said. "I get it from ABC, NBC, Los Angeles Times, USA Today, CNN – and Wired. I will occasionally get one from Fox News, for some reason."

I did not expect news aggregation apps to generate confusion for habitual news consumers and users of digital applications. It appears that users like James and Sankumani were too willing to trust these third-party tools. These apps' lack of traditional content labeling may be inadvertently causing a decrease in media trust overall.

Nora said she is still figuring out her system for determining what news is trustworthy online. She tries to base her trust on what she knew of the media before the internet, but she sometimes has difficulty applying this standard in the digital age because the source isn't always clear.

"I try to look at the source and if it's something where I don't know what it is, I don't look at it and I don't necessarily trust it," she said. "Sometimes I have no idea [what the source is]. I feel like I don't have any way of knowing if it is true, even if I like what they're saying."

Brendan noted that moderation policies have a significant impact on the voices and information that appear on social media (and other digital) platforms, often to the detriment of those who have a smaller base of followers or are less adept at presenting their perspective. Organized troll campaigns and individuals with large followings on Twitter, Facebook and other networks use their size and influence to attack and silence those with opposing views.

There are numerous studies that support the idea that minority and other underrepresented voices are buried, bullied away or removed by moderators from social networks, making them less likely to be encountered by other users of those platforms.^{44, 45, 46}

5. Digital device “time sucks”

All participants I spoke to use digital devices, smartphones in particular, to access the internet. Most said they felt these devices were addictive, and that time spent on them was problematic, often creating problems in their personal lives.

In my intake questionnaire and interviews, I included a focus on digital device and internet usage to get an idea of which devices the participants use, how often they use them and how long and at what intervals do they use them throughout the day. I asked these questions because desktop and mobile devices are increasingly how Americans are getting their news,⁴⁷ and studies have shown that overuse of digital devices can affect decision making.⁴⁸

All of my participants reported using their smartphone as their primary device for consuming information outside of school and work hours. More than half of them reported a sense of loss of control over the time they spend on their phones each day. Shravani, James, Kelsy and Nicole cited stress and unhealthy life habits driven by an “always on” digital culture.

Nicole, who moves from device to device throughout her school days, often has a difficult time powering down. She moves from school to home, where she gets back on the computer to do her homework. Then she’s back on her phone, texting and Snapchatting with friends, or watching a show on Netflix. Often, she said, she won’t realize how long she’s been online until it’s past time for her to go to bed.

“I just want to learn how to be more balanced with how many hours I stay on the media,” Nicole said. “Because sometimes, you’re on too much and it’s easy to get distracted by everything.”

Shravani also wishes for balance in her life in terms of time spent on her phone. The time she spends consuming media and social media on her phone has taken time away from activities she used to enjoy, like reading books.

“It sucks time out of your day so quickly,” Shravani said. “You don’t realize that you’re sitting on the phone for an hour; it flies by and you don’t realize.”

According to some studies, this feeling of “out of control” use has led not only to lower productivity and capacity to make decisions, but to depression and other emotional problems as well.^{49, 50} The rise in prominence of smartphones around the world has often contributed to problematic levels of use in some people—an inability to control the time spent on the device can have negative social impacts and lead to other problems like memory loss, poor concentration, trouble sleeping and difficulty concentrating.⁵¹

James noted that the combination of device over-use and information overload has

affected him emotionally, especially when the news itself is depressing.

“I just need to turn it off sometimes,” James said. “I need to stay educated and aware of everything that's happening, but I just don't want to see every single thing that's happening, because I can't stomach it..”

While most of my participants were over 40, those that are younger (including teenagers) and have been on digital and mobile devices for much of their lives may face even larger effects regarding the development of how they receive and process information.

Kelsy was very aware of the ways that digital devices had dominated her time and attention, and she had taken steps to lessen her reliance on them. She and her husband now share a phone, which they only use to contact whichever one of them is out of the house. Otherwise, she has limited her device usage because she was bothered by how it affected her communication with her husband.

“People would be on their devices and you'll just both be sitting in the room staring into a device not talking to each other, and it bothers me,” Kelsy said. “So we've been consciously trying to make it so if we're in a room together, we're not going to use our devices because it's just not nice to the other person.”

Nicole said she is concerned about the effects that device usage and etiquette have had on her classmates.

“I feel like now with social media...we are connected in many ways, but in other ways, we're not,” Nicole said. “A lot of people don't sit down, like me and you right now, and have a genuine conversation, you know? You don't feel what that other person feels like when you're actually talking to someone face to face, so I feel like just learning to have a balance between how much you use social media and how much you actually communicate with people in person is super important.”

Nicole said she looks to her parents, teachers and other adults to help teach moderation to teens and children. But how can adults be expected to teach these skills adequately when they suffer from some of the same issues?

6. The overestimation of disinformation

Each of the participants said they believe disinformation is a major concern and that propaganda and hoaxes are taking over the internet. Research shows this is not the case, but this exaggerated concern is problematic.

According to a Gallup/Knight Foundation survey from March 2018, Americans believe that 39 percent of the news they get from television, newspapers or radio is

disinformation. They also believe that nearly two-thirds of the news they see on social media is disinformation.⁵²

Some of this may derive from different understandings of what disinformation even is. I asked each participant for their thoughts on this.

“The whole fake news thing is real,” Nora said. “Everybody jumped on it and went their own way with it. Manipulation of our news by outside sources and hackers and all that stuff is real.”

Shravani sees a lot of disinformation via the WhatsApp groups she belongs to that are based in India. She cited instances where unsubstantiated rumors of child kidnappings in India led to innocents being killed by violent mobs.⁵³ She considered this an extreme version of the same things she sees from friends and colleagues in New Jersey, where someone she knows pushed stories claiming that Muslims have brought Sharia law to the U.S.

“So if he can believe it, he has two master's degrees and seen the world, then somebody in India will believe anything that's on WhatsApp,” Shravani said. “That's the dangerous part; once these social media platforms democratized information so much, it's now very easy for crazy stuff to boil up and become out of control.”

Both Doug and Kelsy seem to view “fake news” as propaganda that is disseminated by the government or the mainstream media.

“To me, it is news that is put out there to change people's opinions or make people think a certain way,” Kelsy said.

Doug's explanation closely aligns with Kelsy's. “It is a purposeful lie to form a specific opinion—and that opinion is in favor of what they want you to support,” he said.

Kelsy and her father have different media habits and see the issue in different ways. “He thinks everything online is fake news pretty much, and I try to explain to him things on TV are fake news too. It's hard to tell what you should trust.”

Brendan, meanwhile, believes that disinformation can come from well-meaning places. For instance, he unknowingly exposed his friends in the D.C. activist community to a Facebook group later revealed as inauthentic, all because he wanted to help plan an event.

“Some of the worst disinformation is when somebody who's considered credible and legitimate and trustworthy gets bad information, like what happened to me,” he said. “I exposed my friends, who trust me, to fake accounts. I felt so bad about that.”

Brendan also sees disinformation at play in the relationship between the police, the media and the audience. He feels that the D.C. police force paints groups like Black Lives

Matter as mere protesters that are not actually involved in their communities, and that media amplifies this view. Brendan said these mischaracterizations make it difficult to showcase BLM's other work in the area.

The concern that disinformation is a more widespread problem than research shows it to be⁵⁴ can lead to a sense that no content can be trusted. According to media literacy researcher Michael Caulfield, *trust compression* describes the tendency of people to view information sources with varying levels of credibility as “moderately or severely compromised.” In this state, consumers assume everything is “fake news.”⁵⁵

Nora was passionate in her belief that media itself, coupled with social media and disinformation, fueled Donald Trump's rise to power.

“Obviously [the media] manipulated people in this country to the extent that we elected somebody who's a terrible monster,” she said. “It's the media who elected him, because they reach the people that are his base.”

From my reading and research, I believe these views of analysis-centric media and overblown fear about disinformation could be related. News coverage of disinformation, bots, trolls, hacks and every other sort of online scam has been heavy since the 2016 election. The notion that disinformation swayed the election's final results has been repeated enough times in analysis-driven media reports to have become nearly solidified as fact, despite inconclusive findings from numerous, often conflicting, studies on the subject.

7. Overestimation of media literacy skills

Another common factor in all of my interviews was a belief among participants that they had an effective process and approach for discerning real news from intentionally false news. Most relied on Google searches to research claims, others trusted their gut. These approaches often can make the problem worse.

James, Sankumani and Shravani are big proponents of using Google to determine whether a story is real or not. They do this by searching for the names and information included in a story. If they find that other news or popular sites are reporting the same thing, they determine it must be true.

Nicole also noted the value of finding corroborating media citations as part of her discernment process. She said she learned a process in school that is drawn from the work of professional fact-checkers and includes looking for publish dates on stories to see if they align with the facts, as well as looking at whether or not the story has quotes from sources.

Kelsy said she trusts her own skepticism to help her figure out what is real information

and what is not.

“I feel like I have like an internal compass,” she said. “Like, does this make sense to me? Does this seem like somebody is trying to push something? Who wrote this? Is this somebody who has a reason to like want you to think a certain way or is this person just putting information out there because they want the information be out there or are they trying to sway somebody's opinion in some way?”

Doug said he felt his process of determining the quality of news was unending and grueling. He said he is constantly reviewing the outlets he relies on for consistency and accuracy—at least to what fits his worldview.

“If you know that's a lie, you look elsewhere for information,” Doug explained. “If I can't trust one story of yours, how can I have confidence I can trust two or three?”

Post-publication fact-checking is often deployed by media outlets and social media platforms as a way to combat disinformation coming from questionable news outlets, public figures and online rumors. (This is distinct from traditional fact-checking, which deploys journalists to check facts of stories before they are published.)

Facebook and Instagram use fact-checkers certified by the International Fact-Checking Network to identify false news stories and review them for accuracy. According to Facebook's site, stories rated as false are ranked lower in users' News Feeds and repeat offenders will have their distribution reduced.

All of this review process occurs after the stories have already been distributed, so some damage has already been done before this fact-checking process ever starts. Even if they see a story has been rated as false, news consumers may not trust the fact-checkers. In fact, these efforts at debunking disinformation can cause people to “double down” on these beliefs.⁵⁶

“So we should just trust Snopes here? Like they're going to tell you if it's fake news or not? I'll tell myself it's fake news.”

Kelsy said she did not understand why she was supposed to believe a fact-checker in the first place.

“Right, so we should just trust Snopes here? Like they're going to tell you if it's fake news or not? I'll tell myself it's fake news,” she said.

The fact that all of the participants believed themselves to be effective at debunking disinformation even though most of them have at one point or another believed or shared disinformation suggests that they may be overestimating their abilities. Considering the massive amount of research on disinformation, combined with each participant's belief in themselves as educated news consumers, it is probable that they are experiencing a sort of Dunning-Kruger effect in assessing their skills in this area.⁵⁷ That is, they overestimate their knowledge without realizing it.

If all of these consumers believe they know the difference between disinformation and real information, they may be less inclined to believe information that counters what they perceive as accurate, especially if it does not appear to align with their own fact-checking processes.

Using self-guided searches on Google to support or debunk information, as many participants said they do, is not likely to present a reliable and unbiased view of the subject. According to Tali Sharot,⁵⁸ there is a technology-induced confirmation bias that can kick in when people search for information online. The availability of infinite information online means users can usually find whatever they want to find.

That is, people search for the information they *want* to find in order to have “data” to support pre-existing beliefs. Furthermore, they also have a cognitive bias in how they interpret the data they do find. Even if the results are not conclusive, people are inclined to take in only the new information that they already believe.

The methods of historical thinking, argument formation and source evaluation that Will teaches in his classroom⁵⁹ are better approaches for analyzing the reliability of news and information. But these methods are not yet widespread among news consumers.

Even as an expert in this field, Will himself relies on Google searches in fact-checking. He said the key is in being conscious of how the search engine works and choosing the right path.

“I feel like I know how to use Google wisely and sift through its results appropriately,” Will said. “I can refine my searches so I make them more tailored to what I'm looking for so I don't get gamed. I teach students to look closely at the URL and the snippet, to take on those couple additional decisions that help you from going down the wrong hole.”

8. The creation of “bubbles”

All of the participants had carefully crafted their media and social media experiences. While some of them actively seek opposing viewpoints, a few knowingly shield themselves from them.

In his 2011 book The Filter Bubble, Eli Pariser warned of an internet experience in which people are not likely to encounter views that challenge their way of thinking. Dubbed “filter bubbles,” these informational cocoons were not actively created by users, but by an increasingly personalized online experience built by algorithms to be optimally pleasing to the viewer.⁶⁰

Some of my interviewees actively and consciously curated their own filter bubbles as well.

Shravani used to see Facebook as a place to catch up with friends of all kinds, but that changed after the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

“I unfollowed some of my friends because I just couldn't take their posts,” she said. “All of a sudden were getting too much into arguing about politics.”

Now that she has built what she called her “political cocoon” to shut out those with opposing viewpoints, she said Facebook has gotten boring, safe and a lot quieter. She feels a little guilty for making that happen and said she will likely re-follow those friends eventually. Her husband, Sankumani, said he had a similar experience.

Nora also has no interest in reading views or news from the other side of the political aisle. She said she isn't friends with anyone holding views in opposition to her own, nor would she want to be.

“I'm not one of these people who can be objective about reading what the Right's putting out there,” Nora said. “I know some people who follow what those people are saying, but I would never look at that or follow it for that information. Because I don't really consider that stuff to be true. It's white supremacist, racist stuff. Why would I want to look at that if I wasn't that kind of person?”

Despite her best efforts, Nora still gets content she doesn't want in her feed, usually social media posts from President Trump and his administration. She said she is constantly trying to figure out how that sort of thing ends up in her Facebook feed.

By tuning out both mainstream news and most social media of late, Kelsy has also knowingly created a bubble for herself—and she isn't bothered by that. She said that she doesn't know what is going on in the world unless someone informs her directly.

“I'm happy like in my little blissful ignorance bubble,” she said. “It's great to not be so lost in being super passionate about things, arguing for or against stuff. That's not where I'm at anymore.”

Still, multiple studies of online news consumption consistently found that exposure to a diverse range of political views and news outlets was higher via social media networks

than it was for those getting their news offline.^{61, 62}

That said, social networks are what users make of them, and people tend to make them ideologically segregated, much like Shravani and Nora do. A 2015 study found that the median share of friends with opposite ideologies was only 20 percent for liberals and 18 percent for conservatives. And no matter who their friends were, they were still far more likely to read and share links that were aligned with their own worldviews.⁶³

It may be that in the earlier days of social media, people were more likely to have reasoned political debates with friends and strangers who did not share their ideology. Perhaps the amped up rhetoric of the 2016 U.S. election drove people into their corners, as Shravani suggested. It could also be that individuals with strong ideological viewpoints to the left or right were always more likely than others to craft their own filter bubbles.

While Will, the media literacy teacher, has a varied news diet, he, like others, said his relationships on social media have suffered due to politics, particularly during the 2016 election cycle. He did not opt to remove those friendships, but he has significantly cut back on his own use of Facebook, in part because of these political tensions.

“I didn't shun all of my conservative friends [on Facebook], as I know I wanted to be conscious of their perspective, but I'd find myself trying to respond, but then just deleting them because it's just not worth it,” he said. “I would never change their minds. So I had to decide this was not the platform to engage in that.”

9. The importance of community and lack thereof

The subject of community, both in real life and virtual, came up with most of the participants. Many had lost touch with one community only to find another of like-minded people, while others are still searching for a lasting connection.

More than any other aspect of my study, I was interested in finding out how the relationships people have with one another can shape their sense of the world and, by extension, the news they believe about it.

When they feel uncertain about the veracity of a claim, news consumers will turn to their communities for validation. If the claim is inaccurate but the people in one's community nonetheless believe it, the network reinforces belief in the claim, making it more difficult to debunk.⁶⁴ In other words, you are only as reliable as those you associate with regarding the news you choose to amplify.

Doug knows his worldview makes him an outsider. He said he has few friends who really know him. “Nobody knows the real Doug” is something he said often in our interview.

“I lost a few acquaintances along the way,” he said. “I didn't care, because it was just the power of the [media] narrative that convinced them I was crazy.”

Doug had been isolated from information and people for so long before he got online, finding these websites and this community must have been like an oasis in his otherwise dry world. He has since had to create his own community of like-minded thinkers via WhatsApp and a topical newsletter, as he doesn't have anyone in his day-to-day life that shares his views.

“My interest [in the newsletter] was based on my philosophy that the only chance for change is within your own network of people,” he said. “I didn't want my guys to be deceived, manipulated to fall into these traps.”

Kelsy has lost most of her real-life community because of her alternative lifestyle and parenting methods. When she quit Facebook, she lost her online community as well. She longs to find a community she can relate to, but has struggled to find that community in rural Michigan.

“I would love to find a tribe of people who think like I think – people who are more on my page,” Kelsy said. “I'm sure there are people around here who are a little bit weird like me, but it's just hard to find.”

Doug and Kelsy have created bubbles for themselves in a way that resembles the formation of conspiracy theorist communities. Studies have found that those who engage in conspiracy thinking and do their own extensive research into these kinds of ideas may do so because they feel marginalized and are seeking a sense of community they do not have elsewhere in their lives.⁶⁵

Several of the participants were in the midst of a period of change regarding their communities.

James feels marginalized from his community because he has a different history and political beliefs from his neighbors. His city, Los Altos, has gotten richer, and he resents that change. He believes the worst about his neighbors, the city government and the police, so he isolates himself from it all.

James has, however, created a social life for himself on NextDoor. There, he can talk politics with like-minded people or get into arguments in a controlled setting with those that have opposing viewpoints. He writes essays, explores theories and plays devil's advocate in every argument. His online friends, in many ways, are his primary friends.

Due to some significant trauma Brendan experienced while counter-protesting the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017, he has taken a break from front-line organizing work. He's found his behind-the-scenes roles to be a bit isolating.

“It's been difficult not doing that piece of the work because it really is one of the real true ways that I feel like legitimacy happens,” he said. “It comes from personal accountable relationships where you know the people have your back because they show up on the streets for the cause and show up for you.”

Meanwhile Brendan had been forced out of his longtime church due to his activism, and he started to step away from connecting on social media – so he has been even more isolated.

“Honestly, I'm not really interested in trying to connect with somebody who's a capitalist or works for the government still or is uncomfortable talking about race or whatever,” he said. “I've learned from this experience to be a lot more mindful of where I spend my time. I haven't been able to establish a deep accountable relationship with new people in awhile.”

Shravani has a multitude of friends and family back in India and she feels she left part of her identity there. She has been in the U.S. for a long time, and she knows it has changed her. She said she feels less open than she was in India, a bit more guarded. She said she has more difficulty making friends now compared to back then.

“As you get further removed from your Indian background, you tend to value your own space more and that's universal,” Shravani said. “We first-generation immigrants tend to stick together; we stick to friends from our past. It's hard to make friends when you are older.”

She keeps that network close using a multitude of WhatsApp groups, which serve not only as a conduit for information, but also a tie to her past. Shravani has a harder time connecting with her local community, she said, because people just don't socialize in her neighborhood outside of a “hello” once in awhile. She does connect socially in her area on Meetup.com, where she finds people to go hiking with on weekends, which has slowly started to expand her social circle.

“You can get all the information in the world, but if you're not bouncing enough ideas off other people who are not necessarily always agreeing with what you're saying... you're not going to be able to get the full picture at all.”

Nora and Nicole had the strongest sense of a local community.

As a teenager, Nicole is in a phase of life where her virtual and real-life connections are

one and the same. She texts and Snapchats with a variety of friends whom she also usually sees every day at school. She isn't sure what will happen when they all graduate and go their separate ways, but she expects they will keep up the virtual aspect of their relationships.

Nora, living in a large group house in an activist community, never feels alone. She believes this makes her a more well-rounded person and consumer of information, as the community keeps her grounded.

“You know, I'm so lucky that I live in a wonderful community of radical people who talk and think, and I'm always in conversation with people,” she said. “You can get all the information in the world, but if you're not bouncing enough ideas off other people who are not necessarily always agreeing with what you're saying... you're not going to be able to get the full picture at all.”

10. Negative feelings about social media, especially Facebook

Every participant had used Facebook at one time, but many had recently left or dramatically cut back on their use of the platform. Only a few cited concerns about data privacy, but nearly all were concerned about how interactions on Facebook made them feel.

Of the nine participants, three had left Facebook before the time of our conversation, and two others were talking about leaving the platform. Two participants used Facebook only rarely and two others were regular users who indicated no plans to change their habits.

Kelsy's non-traditional beliefs about medicine, science and education drove a wedge between her and many of her friends. She quit Facebook about a month before our conversation because she was tired of having to defend herself so often against criticism coming from people that were, in her view, labeling and judging her unfairly. She felt that some of the criticism derived from news coverage about parents who do not vaccinate their children.

“I didn't even want to share anything anymore because I don't want to argue with people about my beliefs and your beliefs and why yours are better or mine are better,” Kelsy said. “So I just got frustrated with it and I deleted it off my phone. I need a break. It's been about a month now and I honestly just feel better without it.”

Will had not regularly used Facebook for six months to a year before our conversation. He said he did not have any one particular reason for quitting, but felt it was not worth the time he put into it or how it made him feel.

“Facebook became a time suck,” he said. “What I was getting out of it wasn't worth the time it took.”

Aside from the political divisions and the overabundance of information, Will often found himself put off by how others used Facebook.

“I'd regularly feel annoyance about my friends sharing pictures of their kids and giving a sense of 'look of my perfect life'. You know it's not real, they're just putting up a facade.”

Brendan had the most contentious relationship with Facebook. He had used the platform for connecting and organizing for years, but now that it charges money for certain audience-growth techniques, which he believes has muffled the voices of those who can't afford to pay, he is considering leaving.

“It's giving the guy with money the ability to get more money, these paid megaphones are drowning out our ability to organize,” he said. “I blame Facebook and all social media that has that model of pay to promote. I blame them for Charlottesville.”

Brendan said he has seen the darker side of the same platforms that were hotbeds of activity for activists in their earliest days. Now he sees Facebook, and to a lesser extent Twitter, as providing the tools, through paid promotion, to let extremists target and recruit people who have killed his friends.

Brendan also said he felt betrayed by Facebook after the platform deleted his group's event to mark the anniversary of the Charlottesville attack only 10 days before it was set to happen, without warning and without any sort of credit to help rebuild the gathered interest.

“When I created an account back in 2005, they had an agreement with me that they're going to handle that information well and not do things that were detrimental to me or people around me and they violated that agreement,” he said. “They just were not sympathetic to our cause because we didn't pay them money.”

Shravani still uses Facebook, but after removing people and topics that stress her out, she doesn't find it as interesting.

“It's so boring now, it's always the same people posting,” she said.

Nora also uses Facebook, but she isn't sure how much longer she will. She likes that it can be a place for her to virtually connect and support friends, but sometimes it gets to be too much. She currently has a somewhat manic relationship with it – on some days she checks it repeatedly and at all hours, but on others she can't look at it at all and needs to take a break.

“I take vacations from it; I go off for a few days and I go back,” she said. “I think that’s what I’m going to do very soon, because of the anxiety it produces in me. Maybe I’ll only go on Instagram, and not as often. I’m definitely going to wean myself off it.”

11. Life-altering events lead to a change of heart about institutions

More than half of the participants cited some sort of pivotal life event as the thing that had changed their view of institutions such as media, law enforcement, government, science and education.

I found it very interesting that so many of my participants had cited major events in their lives that had led to a change in how they saw the world. The extent to which these events shifted their worldview varied from person to person, but it made me wonder how often this might happen in a larger population.

Here’s a brief overview of each participant’s experience:

- James said he was robbed by a neighbor, a person he knew well. He reported this to the police with evidence, but, he said, nothing came of it. He said that since then he no longer trusted the police in his city and would not report crimes in the future because he didn’t think the police would protect him.
- Nicole did not go into specifics, but she said her family had experienced encounters with the police that left her less inclined to report a crime or to trust the police.
- Doug’s experience in the military in Mogadishu, and the subsequent media coverage of what happened there, permanently altered his view of the media and the government at large. He said he experienced a disconnect between his lived experience and the story told to everyone else, and it made him question everything he knew.
- The experience of assimilation into American culture shifted the world views of Shravani and Sankumani in ways big and small. They said they became different people than they had been in India, and it made them more wary as they established their lives as Americans.
- Kelsy said she that even though she frequently changes her mind about things, the dramatic change of heart she had in graduate school, turning away from her pursuit of a teaching degree in science, seemed to set her up to question everything she believed before.
- Brendan had two major experiences shift the way he saw the world. The first was when he realized he couldn’t keep working for the Pentagon, and took up the life of an activist. The other happened during the August 2017 white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, VA, when a driver intentionally drove through a crowd of people, hitting some of his friends and fellow counterprotesters. This event traumatized him greatly and pushed him out of frontline activism.

- Nora’s life experience was changed dramatically when she had to shift from being an activist to an advocate when her daughter was imprisoned overseas. She said she had to learn quickly how to work with the media to gather support for her cause, and in the process saw the ugly side of a business she had once trusted.

12. Other interesting insights

Below are other insights I found interesting from the interviews, though I was not sure how they might fit into the larger analysis of the participants’ relationship with media.

- A. Only two participants—Shravani and Sankumani, who are married and live together—had a cable television subscription. All other participants had either cut the cord or had never had access to cable television.
- B. Aside from Shravani, Sankumani and Brendan, nobody watched television news of any kind.
- C. All but one mentioned *The New York Times* as a publication that they read or had read recently.
- D. All participants reported that they used some version of a video-streaming service such as Netflix, Hulu or Amazon Prime.
- E. All participants used smartphones as their primary means of accessing the internet.
- F. All participants used peer-to-peer messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Snapchat or Signal to communicate with groups and individuals.
- G. Four people—Doug, Will, Brendan and Nora—discussed their interest in history as told from an alternative or a variety of perspectives. Three specifically mentioned Howard Zinn’s book [A People’s History of the United States](#) as a favorite.

Conclusions

Many people within the government and technology sectors are now working to disincentivize the creation of disinformation and limit its spread across social networks. These efforts are not likely to succeed in isolation, as there are enormous challenges to shutting down disinformation at its source, including the ease with which perpetrators can create new sites and accounts to replace those that are removed, not to mention the challenges presented by government protection of state-sponsored actors and the murky legal territory surrounding the protection of free speech.

This is why the fight against disinformation has to be focused mainly on its audience. If media consumers could be inoculated against disinformation, they would no longer play a key role in helping it spread from the darkest corners of the internet to everyday conversations. To accomplish this, media consumers need more than access to real news that they can trust to serve as a benchmark for truth – they also need better skills to critically evaluate information.

How much of that is their fault, and how much of it is the fault of the media itself?

Over the course of conducting and analyzing these interviews, I have concluded that the primary issue the journalism industry should focus on when it comes to disinformation is one of engagement. It wasn't merely the insidious and convincing nature of disinformation that drove some of these participants to consume, believe or share false news – it was, more importantly, a profound disconnection with the mainstream media and how it works today.

Some of that disconnection is derived from outside forces, particularly those in a position of power who seek to undermine the role of the Fourth Estate by casting aspersions on its motives for their own gain. But as an industry, the media can't look away from its own role in creating this distance with the audience. There are news outlets that intentionally mislead the audience for page views, profit and politics. There are many more that are trying to be reliable sources of information but still fall far short.

Haphazard reporting, weak sourcing, sloppy mistakes, exaggerations, bias and lax ethical standards are among the many reasons consumers have said they might not trust the media. These are issues we can fix in our own houses and call out for reform in others.

Most participants were consumers of mainstream media as well as disinformation sources, and some of the biggest complaints they had were with the former, not the latter. If we do not want to keep driving this audience away, we need to revise the decisions we make about how we choose what to cover, the tone we take in covering stories and the methods employed to “sell” those stories to the audience. This should be a wake-up call to the news industry.

In talking about this project with journalists and technologists, I heard a lot of assumptions about disinformation consumers. It was said that they were unintelligent, incurious, or that maybe they didn't care about the stories they were helping to amplify to the world. I did not find evidence to support those assumptions.

I can't draw any grand conclusions from these collections of interviews, but I do feel confident asserting that the audience for disinformation is not a monolith any more than is the audience for journalism.

The people I spoke to were educated, smart, caring and deeply concerned about their place in the media ecosystem. I do hope you'll take the time to dig further into their case studies and get a better idea of who they are.

Despite their best efforts, they had difficulty not only figuring out which outlets published the news they consumed, but also distinguishing news from opinion, ignoring the hype to focus on what was really important and evaluating the veracity of the news with a critical eye. How much of that is their fault, and how much of it is the fault of the media itself?

All of the participants put a great deal of effort into deciding where to put their attention and their time, but sometimes they nonetheless made bad choices. Sometimes this happened by accident, but other times it was their individual approaches to trying to make smart decisions that led them to disinformation.

Take the case of Will and Doug. Doug was the participant most consumed by disinformation; Will, as the teacher of media literacy, was the least. Where these two almost perfectly align is in the time, care and amount of research they invest in evaluating their sources. They both employ rigorous tests to ensure they are trusting the right information sources, but they come to radically different conclusions. It isn't intelligence or an output of effort that separates them; it is that their belief systems – particularly about the trustworthiness of media – lead them to see the world in vastly different ways.

Aside from learning more about these people, this work has fundamentally changed me and how I approach my own understanding of the world.

My conversations with Doug, Brendan and Will, in particular, have made me seriously consider how much I really know and understand about the world through the lens of history. Like many American schoolchildren, I was taught a version of history that was heavy on names, dates and anecdotes, but light on context and stories from those who didn't ultimately win. Through talking to this group of people, I learned that I need to seek out the voices and stories that were missing from the version of history I was taught in order to get a fuller picture of what really happened.

James and Kelsy's open-mindedness about every theory may seem dangerous in the context of disinformation. But much of what we think we know about the world is not concrete fact, so perhaps their open-mindedness shouldn't be dismissed. So much of my understanding of the world today comes through the lens of media creators who might not share my views, but whom I have nonetheless trusted to tell me which side to take because "they're the media." Now I can look at my own industry with a more critical eye

and see that there is more context than the headlines, news alerts and social media posts can readily convey.

I am hopeful this sort of study can be a helpful addition to the canon of qualitative work that has already been done on the subject of disinformation, media and community engagement. These interviews give context and depth to the work of those who came before me in this field, and I hope it will be useful for those who come after.

Participant Case Studies

James, 47, Los Altos, CA

James has lived in Los Altos most of his life. He has had a series of jobs in varied career fields, though he currently works part-time with a tech startup focused on mobile technology and also picks up work as a handyman. He lives with his father in the home originally owned by his grandparents, in a community that is rapidly changing as property values rise due to the Silicon Valley technology industry. James does not like how the new wealth in the area has changed his neighborhood.

“People are very entitled here,” he lamented. “They think because you own a million-dollar house, so you can do anything. It’s all changed.”

I first met James while conducting a class study in the fall of 2018 on the website NextDoor. NextDoor is a social networking site for neighborhoods that was started in San Francisco in 2010.⁶⁶ I published a post to my neighborhood site for NextDoor users who wanted to give feedback on the website. James was one of the first to respond to my request. On the day of our interview, I met him at his modest home in Los Altos.

In our conversation about NextDoor, James spoke a lot about his neighborhood, the real one around him and the virtual one online. With the former, he kept his distance in a sort of self-imposed exile. With the latter, he was active, outgoing and a frequent voice in the community.

On NextDoor James often played the role of devil’s advocate. In one memorable exchange shared with me during our initial interview for the first study, James defended a woman asking about “chemtrails” in the sky over Silicon Valley. (According to an oft-debated conspiracy theory, “chemtrails” are the condensation trails left in the sky by high-flying aircraft and are said to be a plot by the government to spray chemicals on American communities.⁶⁷) Community members quickly piled on to the post, calling the original poster names and insulting her intelligence. James, while not directly giving credence to the existence of chemtrails, surmised that everyone involved hadn’t given the

question due diligence. He suggested that the critics find facts and post links to credible sources to support their arguments, rather than resort to personal attacks.

One might think he was just defending a neighbor, but in recounting the story, James was almost gleeful at the memory of confounding people's arguments with his questions. He does this a lot in our interview, too, expressing an open-mindedness about a lot of theories that lie outside the mainstream, including conspiracy theories that claim the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 were not entirely what they seemed. He is noncommittal about a lot of these theories.

“Am I going to say they're ridiculous? No. Because I would hate to be wrong,” he said. “Oh my God. I would feel horrible if I said, ‘Oh my, you're crazy’ for believing something different. If they believe that the Earth is flat, OK fine. No one's gonna be happy unless they actually prove it for themselves.”

“Am I going to say [conspiracy theories] are ridiculous? No. Because I would hate to be wrong.”

His openness to what even he calls “alternative” facts has led him to waver on some things he used to believe. From NextDoor and Facebook conversations, he has taken it upon himself to research new theories and he has, in his words, “gone down the rabbit hole,” only to come out with a new opinion.

“I've gone on YouTube and I've watched video after video after video and after awhile, you start believing it,” he said. “It's hard to have a conversation with someone with a different opinion or a different perspective but when they start changing your mind a little bit, it can be frustrating, but it can also be kind of exciting.”

James is a voracious consumer of information and, much like in his online activity, he extols the importance of seeing “the other side” via his news diet. Through Apple News, he receives alerts from many mainstream news sources, though Wired is his favorite. James will also read alerts and stories from Fox News, though he doesn't really like the way they operate.

“Out of morbid curiosity, I look at Fox News,” he said. “It's important to know what different viewpoints there are in the world. I don't need to follow it, but it's just kind of nice to know how people are thinking. So that you know if you ever run into someone who has such an extreme viewpoint, you know maybe how to talk them down.”

Though he seems open to some alternative theories associated with disinformation that circulate online, James says he is worried about the spread of “fake news” and he wishes someone would do something about it. He doesn’t necessarily think that the government should be in control of media, but he wishes there were some guidelines.

“I wish there was a way of controlling what sites are allowed to post,” he said. “You can say anything you want online and people will think it’s a fact and that’s dangerous because they won’t take the time to fact check or research it themselves.”

James’ politics are progressive, but his worldview reflects a melancholy bordering on anger about the state of his community and society at large. He rails against an overly politically correct society, but also wants people to care more about the injustices he sees in the world. Though he no longer feels a part of his local community, he also wants to change it. He said he even considered running for city council. But a few minutes later, he said he did not know the name of the current mayor in Los Altos.

In a way, James seems very nostalgic for the past. He thinks social media has, in many ways, made it easier for people to connect, but he misses more personal interactions like calling people on the phone and talking with his friends and neighbors in person.

“If I want to know about someone or what’s going on in their life, I’ll still text them or I’ll call,” he said. “I don’t want to read about it on Facebook. I’d rather hear it from them directly.”

James has recently experienced situations that have made him mistrust “the system” —from fighting and losing a wrongful termination lawsuit with a former employer to feeling abandoned by his local police force when he was most in need of their help—and now he said he feels like nobody has his back.

“I want to say I can feel like I can hold my own, but why do I have to?”

Nicole, 17, Mountain View, CA

Nicole is a Latin American teenager growing up in Mountain View and in her senior year at Los Altos High School. I met her in the teen room of the Mountain View Public Library, where she said she often does her homework.

Nicole lives with her parents and 15-year-old brother. Her older sister, 21, is her closest confidante and lives on her own. Nicole has lived all of her life in the area, but she’s eager to see more of the country and the world.

Nicole appeared a bit shy and bookish at first, and her answers were short in the beginning of our interview. Over the course of our conversation, she opened up quite a bit and revealed herself to be warm, funny and very self-aware for a teenager.

Nicole was at a transition point as she figured out her next steps in life. She had been very active in dancing, gymnastics and volunteering after school earlier in her high school career, but now was taking a break from such things for her last year. She is “definitely going to college,” but she isn’t sure where.

When I asked her what she wanted to study in college, Nicole laughed and said, “Are you ready for this?” She proceeded to tell me about her interest in studying business, medicine and communications. She said she might do a mixture of those things, and that she expects that to shift as she learns more.

In addition to going to school, Nicole works as a babysitter. She offers her services on the local NextDoor site, which is where I found her. She will often post in the afternoons to indicate she is available for anyone needing a last-minute sitter in the evening or over the weekend. She said she gets a lot of business this way.

She doesn’t use NextDoor much outside of babysitting, though she said she does like reading about what’s going on in the area and occasionally likes keeping tabs on “neighborhood drama.”

Her real social life happens on Snapchat, where she is sending messages back and forth with friends all day. She’ll use Facebook occasionally, but she mostly considers it a platform for older people.

Nicole uses technology a lot—sometimes, she acknowledges, a bit too much. Aside from class, where she can’t be on her phone, she spends her days on one device or another: the phone to text and Snap with friends, her laptop for school work, then back to the phone for evening chatter and Netflix. She admits she occasionally has a tough time getting to bed at a decent hour because she lost track of time online and didn’t wind down.

Though she says she knows she uses technology too much, Nicole is frustrated with her classmates’ overuse of it at times. She wants more intervention from adults to get her generation to connect more offline.

“You don’t feel what that other person feels when you’re actually talking to someone face to face, so I feel like just learning to have a balance between how much you use social media and how much you actually communicate with people in person is super important,” she said. “They need to teach us, my generation and the younger ones, to have that balance.”

Nicole is pretty savvy for her age when it comes to understanding media literacy practices. She very much enjoyed her civics class last year, she said, because the teacher

told them how to evaluate good sources of information and discussed the news in ways she hadn't heard before.

She'll occasionally get news from Snapchat, whose "Discover" area features articles from mainstream media sites. She said she wished the mainstream media would create more educational and less celebrity-focused news there, as that would make it more likely for other young people to read it.

I found this especially interesting because of the efforts made by many mainstream news outlets to reach users like Nicole via teen-friendly apps like Snapchat Discover. In recent months, it has been reported that many of those publishers were pulling out of Snapchat,⁶⁸ while others have shifted to create the kind of celebrity and viral-focused teen content⁶⁹ that Nicole found so off-putting. This seems to be a content targeting strategy that was either not done well, or was killed too early.

For instance, she read in her civics class about how aerospace and defense technology company Lockheed Martin, which has a facility in nearby Sunnyvale, had a hand in building missiles used by Saudi Arabia in its war against Yemen. Nicole was frustrated that more people in her school and community didn't know about this from local news, and she was planning a protest about it.

For a very civic-minded teenager, I found it interesting that Nicole visibly bristled when I asked her if she'd call the police if she or her friends were in trouble. She said she had a few experiences with the police being called to her home when she was growing up and now she avoids them at all costs. She said it would have to be very serious for her to seek their help in anything.

Doug, 52, Ellensburg, WA

Doug lives with his wife in the middle of Washington cattle country, surrounded by farms, mountains and open land. He works as an independent investment consultant, which he usually does from home. He would be the first to tell you that nobody really knows him, because he keeps a lot to himself.

Doug holds beliefs about geopolitics and religion that he fully understands are outside the mainstream. He believes that if his clients, friends or neighbors knew the full extent of his obsessions, he would lose them. If he were to take his beliefs to social media, he believes he would be branded as a racist, a conspiracy theorist, an anti-Semite. So, he keeps to himself and a small group of like-minded individuals, whom he keeps in touch with via WhatsApp and an email newsletter he composes when he feels inspired to share.

I first made contact with Doug via a shared business contact. He introduced us via email and Doug responded enthusiastically to my interview request.

Ahead of our visit, he sent me numerous links and online videos about geopolitical events, including the current war in Syria and the U.S. tensions with Russia and Iran. He called it “a preview.”

Doug is college educated and a voracious reader and researcher. It is easy to see how he could be successful at investment management, as he takes in information from a wide variety of sources from all over the world. His media diet contains sites such as France 24, German newspapers, Al Jazeera, Russia Today and The Intercept.

“As an American, you're told those two [RT and Al Jazeera] are toxic, but there's often much more truth in RT than there is in any mainstream crap here,” he said.

He also reads a variety of independent sites that are considered purveyors of disinformation. Two favorite sites he mentioned often were Strategic Culture and Unz Review.

The Strategic Culture Foundation is a Moscow-based think tank run by a former head of Moscow's Communist Party and has been known to target U.S. veterans with disinformation.⁷⁰ The Unz Review, founded by businessman and conservative publisher Ron Unz, has been labeled a “questionable source” by Media Bias Fact Check for “extreme right wing bias, promotion of propaganda and hate.”⁷¹ The site regularly features writers who push anti-Israel views and Holocaust denial.

Doug has always been very interested in politics, religion and history, and that interest was heightened in the 1990s when he began to question what he calls the “single source narrative,” which he describes as the version of history as told by the media and government.

He has good reason to be skeptical. Doug served in the Army during the disastrous U.S. foray into Mogadishu, Somalia, in 1993. He lost good friends there and was extremely upset by the media's portrayal of the events that occurred. He was disappointed that the mainstream narrative surrounding those events was sourced, in his view, directly from the American government, which he says lied about what happened and was never questioned. This event triggered a change in how he has seen himself, his country, the media and his view of reality ever since.

“I felt betrayed, by things I'd been told and things that had happened to good friends of mine,” Doug said. “That caused me to withdraw from those that led me to believe these things. And there was a period of time when I just rejected access to any information or sources because they were just all liars. I just said, ‘Fuck everybody that supports this system.’”

“There was a period of time when I just rejected access to any information or sources because they were just all liars.”

Doug spent more than 10 years avoiding mainstream news of all kinds. It wasn't until 2004, when he decided to work for himself, that he really got into the internet, where he found all of the answers he did not know he had been looking for. He found outlets and people who told him things about geopolitics that, in his view, mainstream media would not. It also brought a like-minded community of people into his otherwise isolated life. More than anything, Doug believes that the internet, by allowing anyone free access to publish, reveals truths that were not possible to know in the past. If anything, he says, it came along too late.

“In the past, the narrative that was developed without the internet created all of these storylines we know today,” he said. “You have Americans walking around today thinking that we freed Europe from tyranny because that's what the news media told them. These false narratives only took hold in the '40s and '50s because the power of the single source of the media; it created the narrative that you can't get back.”

Because of the growth of subgroups around every belief system, made possible by the advent of the internet, Doug thinks it would be impossible for the U.S. to wage war effectively on other countries and sustain broad public support. This, he feels, is a good thing.

“There's no unity because there is no longer a singular culture that shares the singular interests. So any war we get into, the internet is going to proliferate those differences,” he said.

He speaks clearly and has a sharp memory for sources of information when talking about subjects about which he is passionate. He recites names, dates and sources effortlessly. He gets emotional at times, clearly getting angry about how some historical events played out, slapping the table or his knee for emphasis. I told him he would probably get a lot of fans if he took his storytelling to the likes of YouTube, as he has a compelling delivery. He just laughs at the thought. He said he knows he could be better than Alex Jones, but he doesn't want the media baggage that comes with so many people knowing what he believes.

I first met up with Doug in a café in downtown Ellensburg, Washington, that he likes to work in from time to time. After lunch, I followed him to his small farm, which is roughly 10 miles out of town.

Throughout our conversation, Doug clearly was testing me to see how I would react to his controversial beliefs. He wasn't threatening or jeering, almost playfully testing out the boundaries of what he could say. He would say things like, "This is going to scare you" or "This will freak you out."

Throughout our long conversation, Doug seemed surprised to have someone listen to him. We had scheduled two hours to talk, but we easily slipped to four. He wrote after I left to thank me for the conversation. He still sends me a text on occasion to see if I have seen this or that news story.

Shravani, 48, and Sankumani, 52, Marlboro Township, NJ

Shravani and her husband, Sankumani, are immigrants who came to the United States from the Assam region of India more than 20 years ago. Since their arrival, they have lived in New Jersey and built a family, raising two sons who Shravani said are more American than Indian. One is in college and the other just turned 16.

I met the couple at their home in suburban Marlboro Township.

Both Shravani and Sankumani have successful careers in the information technology field, which have afforded them a comfortable life in an upper class bedroom community in Marlboro Township. They live in a beautiful, large home on a big lot, surrounded by homes like theirs.

The couple are amusing to watch together; it is easy to see how over the years of their marriage, they have acted as different sides of the same coin. Shravani is, by her own words, a bit cautious and reserved, always assessing people and situations before reacting. She said some of her reserved nature has developed over her years in America. Sankumani, on the other hand, is more gregarious and outgoing with everyone.

They both became citizens in 2008, just in time for Sankumani to cast his first-ever vote: for Barack Obama. (Shravani's citizenship was finalized too late for her to vote in that election.) Shravani admits she keeps herself in a political bubble these days, as the 2016 election caused a split between her and some of her friends who voted for Donald Trump. She unfollowed them on Facebook because she didn't want to get into any arguments. She tries to keep herself in check, but sometimes her emotions get the better of her and she doesn't want to say something she'd regret.

They have a strong Indian community in the area, as well as their friends and family back in India, whom they communicate with via many WhatsApp groups. They are in groups of families, friends and old schoolmates, and they often see the same stories shared throughout the many groups.

Shravani self-selected to be interviewed for this study because of how much disinformation she sees in her WhatsApp communities and sometimes among her coworkers in New Jersey. She said she sometimes gets frustrated with the obviously fake stories her friends and family share with her.

“It’ll be inane things like ‘United Nations has declared Indian anthem the best in the world’,” she lamented. “What is that? Do you really have any idea what the United Nations does? It's none of this, why would it do that?”

She also noted more insidious disinformation, such as rumors that were spread on Indian WhatsApp and that warned of child kidnappers, leading to the deaths of innocent people at the hands of mobs that were reacting to these rumors. Shravani noted that while a lack of education could possibly have a role in the spread of disinformation that has come out of India, that was not the case with her contacts either there or in the U.S.

She said she sees similarities between well-educated friends in both countries sharing conspiracy theories and false rumors. She had a former coworker who believed there was a town in America being ruled under Sharia Law.

“He's obviously reading about it someplace and actually believing it,” she said. “So if he can believe it, he has two master's degrees and seen the world, we expect somebody in India to not believe what’s on WhatsApp?”

Shravani often plays the role of a fact-checker for her father, who only got a smartphone a few years ago. He will send her news items from India that she will check out to see if they have been reported in the “real news” or not.

She didn’t have to leave her own home to debunk a major disinformation storyline in the United States. In 2016, her husband, Sankumani believed such a story. There were several conspiracy theories on the internet suggesting that people attached to Democrat Hillary Clinton’s campaign had murdered Seth Rich, a young Democratic Party staffer, for leaking private emails. Sankumani believed it because, he said, “I thought these things were only becoming known because of the election.”

In Sankumani’s defense, he did not learn of this story through non-mainstream media. In fact, he read about it on his Apple News app, which, in his view, further added legitimacy. That story came from Fox News, and was later retracted by the network for its inaccuracy.⁷²

Shravani said she fought her husband on this story for a long time until he found out it wasn’t true from other media reporting.

“That was already too late,” he said.

Will, 38, San Mateo, CA

Will's high school classroom in San Mateo, California is a shrine both to history, which is the subject he teaches, and to information literacy. A timeline on one wall depicts a series of events in American history as told through a variety of propaganda posters, historical photographs and newspaper front pages. On other walls, there are posters offering questions and checklists for evaluating information, with tips on proper sourcing, corroboration and context. This isn't anything like my history class growing up, and that's exactly this teacher's intention.

Will is on the front lines of the war for trust and against misinformation, teaching tomorrow's adults how to critically assess information today. He applies these skills not only to get his teenage students thinking about what they've learned about the past, but also to evaluate the reporting on current events that they may be reading about today. He calls what he is teaching "argumentation development." He is teaching high schoolers how to make an argument and how to use evidence to support that argument.

I was eager to talk to Will for this project not only to hear about how he's teaching students to sidestep disinformation and misinformation, but also to see how his hyperawareness of these threats and mastery of these skills has shaped his own media consumption.

Will has been a teacher since 2006, but he has only really started including argumentation development in class for the last five years or so. The 38-year old was a part of Stanford's teacher education program when he began to work closely with professor Sam Wineburg, who is a pioneer in the field of studying and teaching historical thinking. This field's approach is an inquiry-based means of teaching history that involves analyzing primary source documents to construct a more accurate account of the past (as opposed to just reading someone's account of history in a textbook).⁷³

After leaving Stanford, Will stayed in touch with Wineburg and his colleague, Sarah McGrew, often allowing them to use his high school classroom as a laboratory to test out new methods.

"It's about teaching those critical skills for sourcing for reliability, perspective, corroborating evidence or putting the event or information into context, close-reading it for biases and silences," Will said. "[If] those skills would be taught in history class, they would just naturally translate to the real world environment."

Will said the young people he teaches have a challenge that he doesn't have because they don't yet have a baseline against which to measure their trust. He has "anchor institutions" he can use as a foundation to help him evaluate information, but the students

don't have the benefit of that perspective. He uses the polling of the Pew Research Center and Gallup, Inc. as examples.

Will, as a teacher and a news consumer, is hyper aware of the influence of the biases of storytellers and their audiences. He said this has made his own news consumption experience very "meta," as he sees behind the curtain without even consciously meaning to.

"I'll be listening to NPR or whatever and I find myself analyzing, 'Oh that's a contextual argument you're making.'" he said. "I'll notice how news reports infer reliability and the reliability of their sources. It's gotten so I can spot limitations of arguments or the stretches that an editorialist makes. I'm also a little bit more reflective of my own bias and wary of my assumptions."

In terms of his own news outlets, Will really only has time to take in the biggest news of the day from some trusted sources and viewpoints. He regularly reads *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, listens to a variety of news-related podcasts and will take in a little Fox News for a different perspective. Growing up in Virginia, his parents had the *Post* and *Times*, among other papers, around the house, which he said helped to establish those as bedrock news sources for him.

Evaluating news and information professionally has changed how Will views the news overall. He is less trusting of the news now than he was when he was younger, but he consumes a lot more of it. He surmised that his view of the media began to change when he was in college, during coverage of the leadup to the Iraq War. The U.S. government, aided by much of the media, put forth an argument that Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, which later was found to be wrong.⁷⁴ Will said this experience disillusioned him at the time and shaped his feelings about the media going forward.

"I'm less trustworthy of [the media] in aggregate... but I still rely on it extensively," he said. "I think I'm a bit more savvy, so I can get more out of it. I now know when I can hedge my understanding that it might not be as completely true as they see it."

Will knows all too well that one's perspective can shape how they interpret information - and admits openly that despite this knowledge, he has fallen for stories that proved to be false because of his own biases.

He recalls when Rolling Stone published a now-retracted story about a female student who reportedly was raped at a fraternity house on the campus of the University of Virginia, his alma mater.

"I assumed it was true, and it wasn't," Will said. "Reading it, I didn't check my assumptions about frat life and the lack of corroborating evidence. Even though I have my perspective of what I think is true, I know it's not 100 percent."

A major element of Will's curriculum is giving students a variety of information sources to critically evaluate arguments, along with regional source documents to assess what really happened in historical events. His approach values the long view, rather than the short-term reaction.

As an example, he cited how he teaches the Cuban Missile Crisis. Will gives the students newspaper articles from the day after the crisis concluded, which tell a different story than the historical perspective. On that day, he said, trusted news sources praised President John F. Kennedy and said Russia capitulated in the face of U.S. threats. In the years since, it has been revealed that Kennedy had negotiated a compromise with the Soviets.

"They weren't seeing the contextual problems of the articles from the day after the event, that they may not have all the information," Will said. "So I guess that's taught me to be wary of immediate analysis. Understanding it may not be completely true, not because of malicious intent by the journalists, but by the inability to know the long-term takeaways."

Knowing the importance of the long game of a media narrative is among the many reasons that Will isn't a big fan of social media and the "hot take" culture of journalism that caters to it. He said this balance between craving a long-term perspective and doing the right thing makes it difficult for him to navigate a world of daily online controversy.

"It can be tough for me to determine when people need to kind of calm down and play the long game or when I need to check my privilege and say something needs to change now because it is extremely wrong and bad," he said.

He isn't on Twitter and he has quit Facebook for the most part. He checks it for messages every now and then, but he didn't find it worth his time to sift through his feed to find something useful or engaging. Though he isn't a big user of social media, he sees how his students' mastery of digital and social tools hasn't necessarily made them less susceptible to disinformation online.

"It's a falsehood to say that just because kids are so good on their phones and online means they understand everything about media literacy," he said. "But I'm often impressed at times with their abilities to pick it up quickly. It's not rocket science, they just need to be explicitly taught over months and years."

Will said it took him a long time to learn these skills, but that it is a worthwhile goal to spread information literacy for future generations by getting teaching styles like his into multiple subjects and schools.

"If there were some sort of anchor standard on media literacy, that would be pretty powerful for changing our society," he said. "But I'm not going to hold my breath."

Kelsy, 30, Oxford, Michigan

Kelsy lives on her parents' large horse farm just outside of Oxford, Michigan, with her husband and nine-month-old son.

Growing up here, Kelsy was embarrassed and annoyed to be so far from the nearby city and the suburban communities of her friends. She couldn't wait to leave home. After high school, she married her high school sweetheart and began a path toward becoming a science teacher. She completed undergraduate studies majoring in geology and minoring in geography. She then began grad school, where she planned to get a master's degree in education. She was 90 percent of the way done when she realized that she wanted to change her life.

She said she saw a life laid out before her that no longer felt like her choice, but something that was expected of her. In 2012, she left her studies and her marriage and moved to New York City without much of a plan. She had a friend who was there already and another who was making a similar change in her life.

"I don't regret it," Kelsy said of her decision to quit school. "I am glad that I didn't go in that direction because I would probably be brainwashed like everybody else in the public school system."

She lived in New York just over a year, doing odd jobs and figuring out who she wanted to be. During her time in the city, she was in a long distance relationship with her now-husband, who connected her to life back in Michigan. After leaving New York she and her boyfriend began traveling around Central and South America, volunteering and working in local communities enough to continue their travels. Kelsy fell in love with the way of life in many of the communities they stayed in, and she met a variety of people who changed her worldview.

Kelsy readily admits that she frequently changes her worldview—it's something she's proud of.

"I guess I feel like I haven't just changed like one time, I feel like I'm always changing," she said. "I think about how like the person that I was when I was 20, I wouldn't even recognize this person today. And I once thought that I could never think the things that I think today. And I just think that being able to change and evolve is so important."

That ability to shift tracks is very important to Kelsy—she does not feel comfortable committing to any one set of beliefs for life.

"I like to have an open mind and I feel like when people come to me with different ideas, I'd like to be open to these ideas and let myself change if need be and not be stuck," she

said. “You know, I just like to be able to change my mind and not be labeled and put into boxes.”

Her politics have shifted dramatically and more than once since she was a teenager, as have her views on science, education and, perhaps most notably, on motherhood. When she was in her 20s, she didn’t think she wanted to have children at all. Now, as a full-time mom, she has a very different life than she had just five years ago, and she says she’s content. Unlike her politics or her diet, she knows this is a choice she will stick with for life.

Kelsy is also used to being “the weird one.” Even before she adopted a vegan lifestyle two years ago, she was the oddball in her family and among her friends in one way or another. In addition to veganism, she has adopted some other practices as a mother that have put her at odds with some of her friends, such as using cloth diapers, feeding her son a vegan diet (in addition to breast milk) and keeping him away from screens. Mostly notably, she doesn’t vaccinate her son. Kelsy would prefer to be left alone regarding these decisions, and is not interested in being a spokesperson for or pushing her beliefs on others.

“I don't want to have to justify my decisions to people and I don't want to be an advocate for the anti-vax community or the, you know, pro-vax community or whatever,” she said. “Whether I vaccinate my child is my own decision.”

Kelsy says she reserves the right to change her mind at any time. She says she might even change her mind about vaccines some day, who knows?

When she looks to the future, Kelsy hopes to have at least two more children fairly soon, while she is young. She will remain a full-time mom for now, and she is preparing to homeschool her children, as she no longer has faith in the public school system.

“I don't want to say there aren’t great teachers out there, but I just think that they're not given what they need to help kids succeed,” Kelsy said. “They're learning what the state wants them to learn and it's not what I want my children to learn.”

For someone who once wanted to be a schoolteacher and had such an interest in science, this turnabout is interesting. Kelsy said that when she was in school, she wasn’t really learning anything except how to be a good student. She was just focused on acing the test, getting the good grade and moving on to the next milestone, with no focus on in-depth knowledge development, alternative views and true understanding of the areas of her interest. She pursued math and science because, at the time, she liked that they had “only one right answer.” In the years since then, she says she has found that there is typically more than one right answer out there, but society and the scientific, education and media establishment refuse to recognize it.

Kelsy has similarly been turned off by politics in recent years. She voted twice for Barack Obama, then for Bernie Sanders in the 2016 primaries. When it came time for the general election, she didn't like her choices, so she didn't vote and hasn't since.

“By voting I feel like I'm just like participating in the system that I don't even agree with,” she said. She refers to her political beliefs as libertarian.

Kelsy doesn't keep up with the news much these days, especially now that she isn't on Facebook. Her parents watch TV news and subscribe to a few local newspapers, which she'll read if she's at their house, which is on the same property. She and her father differ on who they trust to tell them the news.

Her father trusts TV and newspapers, but not any online news. Kelsy, on the other hand, can't stand CNN, Fox, or many other of the big news brands, because she distrusts how they try to make people think and feel about a story.

“I think a lot of the news today is not really so much just reporting the news, but more so trying to sway people to think a certain way,” she said.

She wishes they would just tell her the facts, and then let her decide what she believes or feels about it. She distrusts a lot of media outlets because many are owned by only a few big corporations that push, in her view, the narratives and stories that cater to their interests, while ignoring the stories that run counter to their goals.

“I think a lot of the news today is not really so much just reporting the news, but more so trying to sway people to think a certain way.”

“I just think that the media has so much control and power because they have this direct link to every person in the country or every person in the world basically and they can shape reality,” Kelsy said. “I feel like I avoid a lot of media for that reason; I don't want to be brainwashed by them.”

Kelsy is a fan of YouTube, which she believes was a great development for independent thinkers like herself. She watches programming there by people she trusts because she says they are telling their own stories and living lives like hers.

“You feel like those people wouldn't lie to you because they're like you and you know they're just like regular people,” Kelsy said.

Kelsy said she trusts these real people more than any academic study or the so-called experts because she believes they are telling about their lived experiences and aren't pushing an agenda. She trusts her compass above all else, and says she can decide for herself what she wants to do and what she will believe.

"I think we all have to think for ourselves and make decisions for ourselves and not be swayed by the media," she said. "As far as the news is concerned, I would rather just figure out the information myself not take anyone else's word for anything."

Brendan, 37, Washington, D.C.

Brendan will be the first to say he is a changed man. Not long ago, he was working at the Pentagon and living the prosperous lifestyle of a young, white-collar government worker in Washington, D.C. Today he is a community organizer, part-time cannabis cultivator and doer of whatever needs to be done in his view for justice.

Brendan's change of heart started seven years ago, in 2012, in the pews of his Unitarian Universalist church. The minister was preaching about the military industrial complex on the anniversary of the atomic bomb dropping on Hiroshima. The sermon struck a nerve.

"I got up from that sermon and went home and planned out how I was going to divest myself from a government career that was heavily based in military, national intelligence and homeland security work," he said.

The sermon was just a catalyst for Brendan, as this need to change had been building inside him for some time. He had seen videos and heard tales of human misery from the front lines of Iraq and, perhaps most importantly, didn't feel that some of his coworkers shared his values for human life. He knew he needed to get out.

Over the next two years, Brendan changed his life. He gave up his car and his nice apartment in Chinatown. He moved to a group house and began working on voting rights and the effort to get money out of politics, all while still working at his day job at the Pentagon. He did what he could to stay away from defense-focused projects, but in the spring of 2016, he knew it was time to quit. Two days later, he was arrested at a protest at the U.S. Capitol. Soon there were several more arrests at protests targeting climate change, police brutality and white supremacy.

"I didn't realize how muted my voice was until I didn't have a security clearance to worry about," Brendan said. "Sure, in my life before I could take an Uber or order in food whenever I wanted, but I like this life. I'm doing so much better."

Brendan was on the ground in Charlottesville on August 12, 2017, counter-protesting a Unite the Right rally. He was close by when some of his fellow protestors were struck

and one was killed by a vehicle driven by a white nationalist. That event and what came after traumatized Brendan and many others in his circle, and he still feels the reverberations nearly two years later.

“I saw people I knew get hit by car by a Nazi, but it didn't stop there because I didn't mask up that day,” Brendan said. “They figured out who I was and got personal information and they doxxed me. I had a known Nazi show up at my house and follow me when I walked my dog. Even now, I still receive at least a call a day, threatening me.”

After Charlottesville, Brendan took a step back from front-line organizing and threw himself into doing what he could do to help online. It is what happened in this phase of his work, nearly a year after Charlottesville, that led me to seek out Brendan for this research.

In the summer of 2018, Brendan interacted on Facebook with “Mary,” who was the administrator for a feminist Facebook page named The Resisters. That group had set up a Facebook event for a protest to counter a second “Unite the Right” rally in D.C. in August of 2018. Brendan had suggested they get buy-in from local activists and groups. He became an administrator for the organization’s page and encouraged other local activists to connect and collaborate.

In late July, Facebook shut down the page and deleted the related event. The company said “Mary” was a fake account and the related page for the organization was part of a coordinated political campaign to influence the American elections in 2018. He then had only 10 days to try to rebuild the event and its support with local organizers. He also had to rebuild his own image. He spent days on the phone and on FaceTime, proving to both reporters and other activists that he was a real person and not a Russian influencer. He felt guilty for getting others involved in the situation.

“I felt like I had to answer everyone,” he said. “I didn’t want to see a newspaper article that said anything like, ‘We tried to reach Brendan and got no response. Maybe he doesn’t exist.’”

The entire experience soured Brendan’s relationship with social media and made him far more wary of the potential allies he meets online.

“I don't think I'm as friendly anymore, I don't accept friend requests unless I've seen you face to face and I'm much more skeptical,” Brendan said. “There's a lot of anxiety for me around engaging with a new account now. It gives me an overwhelming sense that whatever I do on there, it's not worth my labor to do anything or organize anything anymore.”

Because of how much he now distrusts Facebook, Brendan doubts the story he was given about the Resisters page. He is not sure that Russian influencers were behind the account

at all, but rather that this could all have been an excuse to disrupt local activism or shut down the event.

“Maybe somebody was trying to keep tabs on local activism in D.C. and saw me as a target,” Brendan said. “I really don't believe that Russia had a dog in the fight when it came to us protesting any number of things, but I do think the government and Facebook do.”

Brendan is a very active user of social media, especially Twitter. He isn't afraid to mix it up with politicians and journalists, especially about the issues that mean the most to him. He has seen real results from his efforts. For instance, he tweeted to a local DC radio talk show, asking why the police chief could block him on Twitter, and thus infringe his right to speak out to a public official about grievances. Soon after that issue was raised on the air, the city's mayor issued a memo instructing city officials to stop blocking constituents.

“In those moments I see the power of social media and what good it can do,” Brendan said. “It can disrupt and it can put public officials on notice. It just makes them step back.”

But sometimes all of the fighting on social media has been too much for him. He said he would have days when it all felt exhausting and counterproductive, and it made him depressed. After what happened with Facebook, and the continued push to monetize the major social networks, he has taken a step back.

“Social media has become less important to me in my organizing after I've seen how poorly it's been treated by moneyed interests and by Facebook and Twitter. It doesn't have as much of a return on investment on my time anymore.”

Being an activist and a source for news outlets on occasion, Brendan is a close observer of the media and he is skeptical about its commitment to telling the real story. He follows some major news outlets, like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, and he appreciates them telling him what is going on, but he also knows what to expect from them.

“I know that they are going to have a liberal slant and probably not really explore any kind of real justice that's anything more than the liberal line,” Brendan said. “I know that they're going to be credible on some things, but their anti-racism work is shit. So if they tell me something, it is going to be with a grain of salt, but I take it.”

Brendan said he is far more likely to trust an eyewitness and accounts from those involved in the story.

“It's kind of scary to think that there's nothing that we can really trust to tell us what's actually going on on the other side of the world besides, like, a guy with a cell phone,” he

said. “I see that and I feel like, ‘Thank you, this is the first time I feel like I actually know what's happening on the ground.’”

Brendan is similarly dissatisfied with politics. As with media, he does not feel as if he has good options. He trusts his fellow activists, but once anyone gets enough money and clout to make it in electoral politics, he becomes suspicious of them.

“We do not have as much choice as we think,” he said. “At least, I don't feel like I have as much choice as I want. We have the illusion of choice.”

In the last election, Brendan said the D.C. Statehood Green Party tried to get him to run for the position of shadow senator, a position that doesn't have an actual vote in Congress, but is supposed to represent the people of Washington, D.C. Brendan said for now he is more interested in holding the powerful accountable versus holding power himself, but that might change.

I met Brendan for our interview at a group house in far Northeast D.C., where he now lives with his partner and their three dogs.

Nora, 70, Berkeley, CA

Nora lives in a colorful communal house along a busy thoroughfare in Berkeley, California. She's partially retired now, though she still works a few days a week as a nurse. The rest of the time, she is active in her home and community: tending the commune garden, watching after others and trying to stay up to date on the happenings in her community and beyond.

Though she is outwardly very friendly, Nora's experiences as a single mother and activist have made her a fairly guarded person when it comes to people she doesn't know.

“My trust was broken a long time ago, and it can't be fixed,” she said.

Nora has lived in the area for 19 years, both in Oakland and Berkeley, though she feels more like an Oaklander because of its diverse activist community focused on social justice issues. She has often been heavily involved in direct action over the years, especially during the antiwar movement and Occupy Wall Street. She didn't go to Standing Rock, but she wishes she had.

**“My trust was broken a long time ago,
and it can't be fixed.”**

“I don't think that I'm really an activist in the way that I used to be,” she said. “As far as political activism goes, I'm like an armchair activist. Which I don't really want to be but I am right now. I keep thinking I might jump back into something, but I don't know what. I don't know what I am.”

Nora is extremely interested in issues relating to climate change. She reads a lot about it and has gotten involved in marches here and there, but said she doesn't think the message is getting through in any effective way, which is disheartening for her.

“The last time I went to an environmental march was a couple years ago and I honestly felt like crying,” she said. “It felt like this is not going to make any difference. It was for the people who were there and nobody outside that. They're not necessarily rattling people's cages anymore. Speaking truth to power is bullshit because the people in power are not listening.”

Nora's communal house is steeped in activism and is her strongest connection to that larger community. She is one of the newer residents, having been there only four years. The other residents she described as anarchists and other activists of varying ages and backgrounds, including two children. In addition to being a home, the house is also involved in distributing *Slingshot*, a publication for the radical activist community that has been in circulation for more than 30 years.⁷⁵

The sense of community between the housemates is intentionally maintained. They have dinner together five or six nights a week, and in the mornings, they have a ritual of reading the print edition of *The New York Times* together.

“It's kind of a house event, reading parts of the paper ... some of it out loud,” Nora said. “The kids will be listening and then there will be conversation and questions.”

Nora doesn't always take part in this ritual, but she will read sections of the paper most days, even if she thinks the *Times* is a bit biased.

“I think *The New York Times* is biased, but I think that it has enough information and it's moderate enough,” she said. “It's just that sometimes I disagree with how they make a story a priority. Sometimes you read the headlines and you're like, ‘Why are they softening that? Or why are they making it clever when it really is horrible?’”

Nora does have a few publications that she trusts. She is a loyal reader of *The Guardian*, *Mother Jones*, *Truthout* and *The Intercept* as well as more activism-focused publications such as the *The North Star*, founded by social justice activist and writer Shaun King.⁷⁶ She said *The Guardian* is her favorite publication.

“I don't think I've ever read anything by *The Guardian* that I don't like,” she said. “They write about things that we should be talking about and thinking about way more than a lot

of other more mainstream sites. They're very environmentally conscious and the kind of stuff they prioritize is what I think I prioritize.”

Nora has a unique perspective on the media that was very insightful for this research. In the 2000s, her daughter was imprisoned overseas, and Nora not only became a source for journalists for stories about her daughter, she also had to learn to use the media as a means to get public and government support to get her released. It was then that she saw how the media works, and how it can be manipulated. This didn't help her trust it more; just the opposite, in fact.

“We had to deal with a lot of kind of unseemly types, you know, like news broadcasters, PR people and media people,” she recalled. “It didn't seem that their standards were very high. They were in it for the money and were not concerned about whether they're actually telling true stories or not.”

Nora said there were only two reporters she encountered that she really trusted to tell her story, especially after so many hadn't gotten it right, in her view. Those reporters told her story exactly as she did, which signaled to her they were listening and they cared.

Having used the media as a megaphone, Nora said that she can see behind the curtain on news coverage today. She is very wary of “spin,” but also knows it is necessary to get a story heard.

Nora said she feels like the media itself used to be more trustworthy than it is now. Due to staff cuts and changes in story choices, she feels like the media isn't doing the on-the-ground reporting it used to do, whether for a car accident down the street or a bombing in another country.

“It used to be that what [the media] did well was to have someone there actually reporting on what happened,” she said. “They do it, but it is in such a sensational and kind of weird way that it all becomes bad news and all becomes stressful and anxiety producing. But if you start to learn anything at all about reporting or journalism, you know that there isn't anybody on the scene anymore the news is second hand or third hand.”

Nora has only been active in online and social media for a few years, and she admits she has made some mistakes in evaluating news sources for accuracy. She said she had a few friends who follow her on Facebook who would point out that stories she shared were not true.

“At first I was I was messing up,” she said. “I would totally fall for what they call clickbait because I didn't get it. I'm not a young person who is brought up on social media, it took me awhile to get what was going on. When you first start [online] it's all very razzle dazzle and it's not intuitive for me because of my age.”

Nora said she would most often fall for false stories that either seemed to agree with her politics or were more heartwarming fare. For instance, she recalls she shared a photo of a seal kissing a scuba diver underwater, and was disappointed to later find out it was a manipulated image. She said she had also mistakenly shared stories that were out of date, but that was a byproduct of some clickbait tactics use by publishers on Facebook.

“You know they do that thing where they’re pretending a story is new and it's not, or they use the wrong picture on the story,” she said. “The story is actually two or three years old but they don't say that. I guess they just decide to rerun it because right now it's connected to something that just happened, and they’ll make it more dramatic than it really is.”

Nora has encountered a steep learning curve with the internet and social media. Even now, she isn’t entirely sure if she is using Facebook correctly because she only shares stories she already sees on Facebook. She knows how to post photos, usually through Instagram, but not links or text. She admits she can be quick to share stories she didn’t read first.

“On Facebook, a lot of times all you read is a picture and the headline. You don't read the story, you think to yourself I know what that's going to say and you’ve got the gist of it already. Of course I know now that's not always the case. I think I have a ways to go in doing this right.”

Nora is a heavy Facebook user, but she wants to stop because it stresses her out so often. She is the only participant I spoke to who referenced Facebook’s practice of sharing user data. She would like to cut back to only sparingly using Instagram, and keeping her communications with others confined to the Signal app, because it is more secure.

Looking to the future, Nora is not an optimist. Climate change and its effects have her deeply concerned, and that fear drives her to always seek out more information, which, in turn, makes her more stressed. She doesn’t trust the government or any of the big institutions to do what is necessary to avert disaster.

“I don't think any of us know what to do, but I'm scared,” she said. “I may be older, but I'm scared for my kids and my grandkids and everybody's kids and grandkids. I have never, ever in my life felt the way I feel now. I don’t know if I’ll ever feel better.”

I met up with Nora in the communal house where she lives on the border of Berkeley and Oakland.

About This Study

Methodology

Going into this research, I had a theory that there wouldn't be any one answer to the questions of how people choose the news they consume and why they believe it. Instead, there would be myriad indicators that would include (but not be limited to) trust in institutions, the abundance of choices in media outlets, worldviews shaped by partisanship and polarization, community-shared news amplified by algorithms of social networks and a lack of media literacy.

This theory largely aligns with the conclusions of Alice Marwick, who said that belief in disinformation is tied to a lot of factors.⁷⁷

“And understanding not only *why* people share fake news, but how we can mitigate the impacts, requires taking a more holistic approach,” she wrote.

My research is a part of that holistic approach. In a sense what I'm doing is building on the body of work started by Marwick and many others that gets to the core of why people share disinformation and how they access and analyze information at large.

Selecting participants to interview

For my interviews, I identified 10 broad archetypes of social media and news consumers – essentially exaggerations of common participants in the media ecosystem. These user profiles were originals that I devised using a design-thinking approach to identify “extreme users.”

These users are those at the extreme ends of a targeted group – an accomplished professional or total novice in a given field, for example. They are outside the norm of the mainstream user, and the assumption in this framework is that their needs from a product or a practice are therefore amplified, and they are more likely to find their own ways to work around flaws in the system (or their own shortcomings) than an everyday user.⁷⁸

In this case, the system is the mainstream media ecosystem and their “workarounds” can lead them to find, consume and share information and disinformation on social media platforms. So I sought to create profiles of the extreme users in that context. I studied the most common types of disinformation shared and/or means of dissemination to determine some broad extreme user profiles. For inclusion in the research, all potential participants

were evaluated against their social media habits and how those habits might fit within one or more of these broad user types.

The Extreme User Types include:

Average Teenager

- Between the ages of 15 and 18
- Raised primarily in the U.S.
- Has a smartphone
- Has used social media accounts

Immigrant WhatsApp User

- First or second generation immigrant to the United States
- In frequent contact with family and friends in their or their families' home country using WhatsApp groups
- Speaks and understands English

“Troll“

- High volume sharer and engager
- Generates many posts per day, on most days of the week
- May use harsh language and tactics in conversations
- Responds or reacts often to public figures, media accounts, etc.

Truth Seeker (a.k.a. Conspiracy Theorist)

- Displays distrust of mainstream media sources, may derive from political views, ownership or other perceived bias
- Visits and shares links to sites that are outside the mainstream
- Expressed desire to seek real truth, and to spread that truth to others
- Voracious consumer of information
- Likely interest in politics and/or history

Alternative Health/Science Consumer

- Frequent sharer of health, science, nutrition and/or fitness links from non-mainstream news sources
- Focus on supplements, home remedies, natural solutions over pharmaceuticals
- Skeptical of mainstream medicine on one or more commonly held beliefs (GMOs, vaccines, etc.)
- Participates in online debates on this subject

Visual Meme Enthusiast

- Habitual sharer/creator of visual viral memes (photos and text or gifs) on any subject

Fake News Warrior

- Regular debunker/questioner of friends' posts
- Links often to Snopes, Politifact and other fact-checkers in replies
- Not a journalist, but may be an educator in media literacy

The Neighbor/Local News Consumer

- Regularly shares/comments on local news sites and/or stories
- Communicates online and off with other local residents, possibly on a site like NextDoor
- May be in city government or other civic organizations
- Engages in local media as a viewer or subscriber

The Online Activist (Left/Right)

- Regular sharer/engager on political/socially conscious events and stories on topics such as social justice, religion rights, the military, feminism, LGBTQ rights, Black Lives Matter, etc.
- Follows accounts relating to the above causes
- Potentially a follower of questionable sites such as Occupy Democrats, InfoWars, Breitbart or The Other 98%

Non-User of Social Media

- Not out of touch with news at large, but not on social media
- May have been on social networks at one time, but has disengaged
- May be proud of not being on social media

In practice, I found it very challenging to put potential participants into such neat boxes. Most of them fit more than one desired category, or weren't exactly what I was expecting going into the study. This hasn't made my desire to design the study for extreme users a moot point, but it has driven me to avoid applying these labels to my participants, as nobody I interviewed fit a particular extreme profile.

All potential interviewees were evaluated for inclusion through a study of their social media usage and habits. Once a user was identified using one of the following methods, I examined their public social media profiles in search of posting habits associated with one or more of the above Extreme User Types. These may be indicated by the networks used, topics discussed, sources referenced and/or interactions with other users. To be included in the research within the bounds of one or more Extreme User types, the potential participant had to meet most, but not necessarily all criteria of the suggested media or social media habits of the user type(s).

Potential interviewees were identified for inclusion using one of three potential methods:

Discovery, self-selection or referral.

Discovery is the process by which I would identify potential participants via their use of public social media networks. In these cases, I would identify the user by their discussions on social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, NextDoor, Reddit or Gab. They may be found via reverse-link searches, keyword/hashtag searches, or participation in trending topics. Once found, I monitored the participants' posting habits for familiar patterns associated with the Extreme User Types. If a user was determined to be an ideal participant, I reached out to them using social networks or other available contact methods to gauge their interest in a preliminary screening interview.

Originally, I intended to find all of my interviewees using this method, as I was familiar with it from my years working in eyewitness media. I found that using this approach for the purposes of this project was far more difficult and unpredictable. In more than half of the outreaches I began, the user did not respond at all to multiple entreaties and methods. Several of the rest either refused to participate or tentatively agreed and then fell out of contact. Only two of my successful users was found using this method.

I have a few theories for why this didn't work as well as it did when I was a journalist reaching out for an interview or for permission to use a person's content in a news story. For one, social media users may be more dazzled by the prospect of being featured in a widely published news story as opposed to a study, and thus be more inclined to participate. Secondly, depending on one's education level, they may not be familiar with academic studies and thus are more wary of the request. Finally, with the perceived rise of bots, scammers and the like on social networks, users may have believed my outreach was an attempt to access private information, despite what I may have said to the contrary.

In self-selection, participants came to the public website for my research project, projectdisconnect.org or otherwise contacted me with interest in inclusion. They were evaluated for participation using a form questionnaire that asked for links to social media accounts, as well as freeform questions asking participants why they wanted to be included.

For self-selection via social media, participants responded to public posts requesting interviews with people who fit a particular demographic profile. Once contact was made, I evaluated their participation using the same criteria in the screening questionnaire to see if they fit an ideal Extreme User Type. Two of my interviewees came in via this method.

The best method for connecting with potential interviewees has been referral from people familiar with my research question who feel they may know someone who fits a user type. They would make an introduction via social media, mail or phone. From there, I conducted an intake interview and initial social account observation to evaluate them for potential participation. Five of my final participants were referred by mutual acquaintances, though we did not know one another before the interviews.

The final participants come from different backgrounds and a variety of demographic groups. I took particular care to seek out the sort of people that had not been the focus of such studies before, so I refrained from tightly focusing my outreach efforts on older Americans or those with right-leaning views. The gender breakdown is five men and four women. Four of the participants are based in California, which was not by design, and the rest are from other states. Five are left-leaning in their politics, two identify as libertarian and two did not state a preference. Four participants are under the age of 40, one of those was under 18.

The interviews and interviewer

Once I determined I wanted to interview them, we set up a date and time to meet, usually far in advance, as three of my users are outside the area where I was living at the time of the research, and I would have to travel to meet them.

I knew early on in my research that I wanted to meet all of my users in person, if possible. I feel this is necessary not only to get a real sense of who they are and how they live, but also for them to feel comfortable with me. Once in the interview, I would be asking them sometimes quite personal questions and hoped they would open up in a way that I don't think would have been as likely over the phone. I fully believe I would not have had access to the information I got in my interviews had they not been conducted in person.

Once we met, sometimes at the interviewee's home, but also occasionally at a neutral site chosen by the user, we first had to get the awkward bit out of the way – signing a waiver for inclusion in the research. This waiver included permission to record the interview, the taking of photographs (not for publication) and payment to the participant for their time at a rate of \$50 an hour. In every case, this was an awkward way to start the conversation, making it feel too formal and giving the impression that the participant was giving something up to the interviewer. I usually tried to avoid this by sending the waiver ahead of time, but often the interviewee would not have it completed by the time we met.

I decided to pay my participants to help underscore to them the official nature of my research and in hopes that they would be more likely to trust me and the process. This also further distinguished our conversations as something different than those between a reporter and source.

Only about half of the participants accepted payment. The rest said they were not comfortable accepting money for their time.

During the evaluation process, either I had the participants fill out an intake questionnaire or I would conduct an intake interview to assess their suitability for an interview. The

basic participant questionnaire, which included the intake questionnaire, was formed out of discussions I had with many stakeholders in the journalism and technology fields about what they would want to know from all users.

Beyond basic demographic information, the questionnaire focuses on technology and media. It asks which devices they use to access the internet, how long they have been using mobile devices, when they joined the internet, the social networks they use and the media they consume. In addition to determining suitability for inclusion in the study, I used this initial data to better focus my interview questions on the individual participants.

In the interviews, I would ask additional questions about some of the media habits identified in the questionnaire and would use those questions to open larger discussions about personal beliefs, political views and the participant's approach to disinformation. In the interviews, everyone was also asked questions about trust (in the media, the government, one's community and police), security (do they feel safe) and where they see themselves in five years.

Aside from the base questions, the interviews were loosely structured to allow for adaptability to each participant. This was a diverse group of users with different backstories and levels of comfort with the interview process, so I did not feel the need to adhere to a rigid interview protocol. Instead, I would start with easy and open questions, then use observation of the participant's answers and body language to draw out deeper answers as needed, then move on to more difficult questions.⁷⁹ As often as possible, I wanted to create opportunities for the participant to offer stories of their choosing, which often proved to be the most fruitful parts of the interviews.⁸⁰ This approach is similar and somewhat inspired by that of danah boyd, whose study on teen life had a semi-structured interview approach aimed at understanding how the participants understood their worlds.⁸¹

I did not see it as my role as interviewer and researcher to challenge the beliefs of the participants interviewed. The intent was to get to know them to better understand their motivations, interests, fears and challenges in a safe environment. I believed it would be counterproductive to set myself up as opposition to the participants' beliefs, no matter if I personally disagreed with their views. I think this approach served me well in terms of effective information gathering from the participants, though it may be somewhat controversial to journalists reading this final report.

Throughout this research process, I've learned to be reflexive in my ethnographic practice,⁸² which is a bit of a different experience from that of journalism. Though I argue that journalists should be more aware of their positionality, biases and appearances, this is often not part of a reporter's practice, from my experience. To be keenly aware of my presence, and how it affected my interviews and the relationships with my participants was a new experience, but it proved very useful in determining what I was really seeing and hearing.

I have a feeling that my past as a journalist was a factor that heavily influenced whether users would respond to my outreach for interviews, or pursue further contact after a screener call. Those with positive views of the media were perhaps more likely to respond than those who were negative or wary of journalists entering their private lives.

Learning as much as possible about my interviewees ahead of time really helped me to prepare for my interviews as best I could and, perhaps more importantly, predict how the participants might react to me.

From our first screening conversations, I had a strong rapport with all of my interview subjects. I found each of them to be open and friendly, and eager to help me plan out the interview logistics. Looking at this objectively, I would expect that all of them responded this way in part because I am a woman and, on the phone, I have a soft voice. I have also been told my Midwestern accent tends to put people at ease.

From the interview experience, I got hints of just how the participants saw me before and after we spoke in person. All of them saw Stanford University, New York City and my career in journalism in my outreach biography. Most of them probably also checked out my presence online. From this, they might have assumed that I have lived in cities most of my life, hold “coastal” liberal political beliefs, received a private education and, perhaps, had a high income. They wouldn’t have known that I actually grew up on a farm in rural Ohio, that my family is quite conservative, that I have a public school education save for my Stanford fellowship and that, as a journalist, I’m not breaking into any high tax brackets. Sometimes the participants would ask me questions during the interviews about my background and expressed surprise that it was not what they had thought it would be.

Of my participants, James, Kelsy, Shravani and her husband, Sankumani, seemed most at ease with my background, as they each have a fairly strong relationship with a journalist. They had assumptions about me, knowing I am a journalist, and I believe this made them more open with me at the start. Nora and Brendan, both being activists and having worked with the media as sources, also responded favorably, if guardedly, to my outreach.

Teenager Nicole began the interview giving terse answers, but eventually became more animated as we talked. Giving her a sense that I knew a bit about teen pop culture from my field work as well as my day-to-day tastes also seemed to open her up to providing more anecdotes about her life. At the end of the interview, she hugged me goodbye, which was quite a turnaround.

I found that my background (both actual and perceived) was particularly important in my interview with Doug, a rural conservative who holds views of history and geopolitics that are outside the mainstream. From our screener calls and emails ahead of the interview, Doug assumed I had a city background. In an email he said, “Farms have dirt everywhere, not ideal to dress like a city girl when visiting.” I turned up to the interview

in rural Washington in hiking boots, jeans, a flannel shirt and a four-wheel-drive SUV, just to show him I wasn't too unfamiliar with the setting.

During the interview, he hesitantly offered to show me his gun cabinet, saying, "I'll bet that would freak you out." He was visibly surprised when it did not. I told him I grew up on a farm and my family has many guns, which seemed to flip a switch. He opened up even more than I had expected.

I found it quite difficult to keep myself from letting my opinions cloud my interview with Doug, as his views and statements tend to be anti-Semitic and occasionally white supremacist in nature. I don't agree with this worldview, and I was concerned that Doug might believe I shared those views because I did not challenge them. If nothing else, I am certain I would not have gotten the access I had to him had I not been a white woman with a non-Jewish name. Being blonde and of German heritage, like him, probably also played a part. That said, I don't feel Doug was 100 percent open with me, as his word choices occasionally seemed to be intended to avoid further revealing his opinions about minorities, the Holocaust and other sensitive subjects.

For the sake of full disclosure, I had met or knew of Kelsy and Nora before the study began. Kelsy and I share a mutual friend, though we had never met. Nora and I had met once through her daughter, who was a classmate at Stanford University prior to the interview. I didn't feel that either previous connection affected the interview process, but rather may have made these participants more at ease with me than they would have otherwise been.

About the researcher

Mandy Jenkins is General Manager of The Compass Experiment, a local news laboratory founded by McClatchy and Google to explore new sustainable business models for local news. She was a 2019 fellow in the John S. Knight Journalism Fellowships at Stanford University. It was through the fellowship program that she had the time and resources to pursue this research.

Prior to the fellowship, Jenkins was the editor in chief at Storyful, a leading social media research and news agency, which analyzes content circulating on social networks for veracity, content and point of origin. It was in her time at Storyful that Jenkins began the study of disinformation networks, with a focus on how creators of false news stories get their messages spread across the web and into the feeds of sometimes unwitting news consumers.

Before joining Storyful in 2014, Jenkins was managing editor of Digital First Media's Project Thunderdome, a national newsroom which supported more than 200 local newspapers across the U.S. in producing digital journalism projects before its closure in

April 2014. During the 2012 U.S. presidential primaries, Jenkins coordinated the OfftheBus citizen journalism program as social news editor for politics at The Huffington Post.

In 2010, Jenkins was part of a team of journalists who launched Washington, D.C. local news startup TBD, where, as social media editor, she led several high-profile community engagement projects and crowdsourced breaking news stories. Jenkins also worked in several digital news roles at the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, where she proposed a blueprint for the newspaper's earliest social media strategy, and then became the newspaper's first social media editor in 2008. She got her professional start as an online news producer for the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

She holds a Master's degree in Journalism Media Management (degree focus in cybermedia) and a Bachelor's degree in News (with concentration in magazine journalism) from Kent State University, where she also co-founded the student-run LGBTQ publication *Fusion* magazine.

Jenkins serves on the Board of Directors of the American Society of News Editors, and is also President of the Online News Association's Board of Directors. She grew up in Zanesville, Ohio and currently resides in Mountain View, California.

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