

Chapter 12

#Trump #Fakenews #Notmypresident: Assessing First-Time Voters of Color

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ABSTRACT

In the 2016 general elections, a Stanford University study found that American voters shared fake news stories at extraordinary high levels about the leading candidates, adding up to over 30 million times. While the primary researchers for this study noted that this number does not necessarily mean that fake news was persuasive, it suggests its accessibility, readability, and sharing was pervasive in the last election. This chapter looks at media and politics literacy for the millennial voter of color, who scholars describe as having low-levels of information, and media literacy. The irony is this is a group most in need of news and information for making informed decisions, as they are often first-time voters, now engaging with the political process. The classroom at an HBCU is part textbook and part bringing textbook to life, contextualizing the past and the present, and engaging young minds for making a positive difference in society.

INTRODUCTION

Trump. Donald Trump. The Donald. Donald. #Trump. One of these variations was the most common response by first time voters, mostly African-American students, at Historically Black Colleges and Universities in New Orleans as they reflected on the news of the 2016 presidential election. One 19-year-old African-American student from California wrote: “trump views on minorities” was the ‘story’ she followed the most in the election cycle. A 19-year-old female student from Alabama wrote: “Trump’s opinion of women and minorities.” Another 19-year-old African-American student from Texas wrote:

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“The main thing I saw on social [sic] was controversial statements made by Trump.” And yet another student, 19, from Louisiana, wrote: “Donald Trump’s insults.” #Trump was the news story about a topic or person during the election, that these first time, primarily Black voters said they followed the most, primarily through social media platforms. And a majority of them indicated they were dissatisfied with the results of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election.

Their sentiments echoed national reactions to the election of Donald J. Trump as the 45th president of the United States. The reactions of young Black people were both virtual and literal. The hashtags #NotMyPresident and #Resistance were synonymous with #Trump on social media, for this demographic. These feelings of resistance to the Trump presidency in particular were prevalent among African American millennials. Roughly 57 percent of surveyed young Americans between the ages of 18 to 30 indicated they felt that Donald Trump’s presidency was illegitimate (Kellman & Swanson, 2017). But for young African Americans, this average was higher. Three-quarters of Black respondents surveyed after the election said Trump’s presidency was illegitimate in a GenForward (2017) poll conducted by the Black Youth Project at the University of Chicago, alongside The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. Likewise, for other communities of color, a majority of young Hispanics and Asians in the same poll conducted from February 16 to March 6, 2017, also considered Trump’s presidency as illegitimate.

Media literacy is the study of how educated mass audiences are about the content, and nature of the news and information they receive (Livingstone, 2004; Potter, 2013). It also seeks to provide audiences with the critical lens to examine the media content they receive. If the role of the media in society is both to inform and entertain, we seek to understand how different groups engage and respond to media content in a constantly changing digital world (Kellner & Share, 2007). Therefore, this study is at the intersection of media and politics. We explore how media and political literacy explains the reactions of African-American, young, first-time voters’ processing of the outcome of the 2016 presidential election.

This study uses two methodological tools to explain media and political literacy, among millennial African-American voters, in the 2016 election. Firstly, this study surveys primarily African-American first-time voters at three HBCUs to describe their reaction to the outcome of the election. The survey captured their media consumption, political engagement in the 2016 election and literacy of the media and the politics of the election. Secondly, this study examined, through pedagogical engagement, how students in a freshman first-year orientation course, wrestled with instruction in media literacy, when it came to politics. To center this study’s findings, two scholarly areas guide this project: the impact of technological change on media and political discourse and media literacy among African Americans.

BACKGROUND

#Notmypresident: Theorizing New Media’s Impact on Political Literacy

The premise of political literacy in a democracy is that mass publics understand political ideas, facts, and distinctions in political parties and policies (Cassel & Lo, 1997). When it comes to the current generation, O’Toole, Marsh and Jones (2003) noted it was not enough to simply measure political literacy by looking at political and civic engagement alone: as evidenced through voter turnout. They outlined that when it comes to political literacy of younger voters, political interest is a measure that can be high,

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