

How social media have created an uninformed society

Americans love news. We get a thrill clicking on enticing headlines, following intricate celebrity details, exploring bad guy's motives, sympathizing with tragic events and ranting alongside our favorite politicians.

But we are also busy. Few of us – especially millennials – have or take time to browse through newspapers or linger over magazines. We need our news, but we need it quickly and easily so we can keep up with our frantic pace. Thankfully, social media is ready and willing to meet that need.

Pew Research conducted a 2017 study and discovered more than 67 percent of Americans get at least some of their news from social media, with Facebook being the leading source. This trend has grown steadily over the past several years as news articles are increasingly being accessed online.

However, Americans appear no more knowledgeable than we were in past years. The latest Pew Research Center News IQ quiz found many Americans struggled to identify major political figures, with only 44 percent knowing who the U.S. secretary of state was and only 37 percent able to identify Emmanuel Macron as the president of France. So with so many news articles being accessed in the social media world, why is there still such a gap in information?

When people see an article on social media, research done by the American Press Institute shows they will only access it if an advertisement does not interfere with the news, the site or application loads fast and the content works well on mobile phones. Similarly, people tend to click on catchy, enticing headlines with interesting flair. The Washington Post reported on a study done by the Media Insight Project showing that

nearly 60 percent of people in a given week admitted to reading nothing more than headlines of the news articles.

While this may appear to simply point to the busyness of our society, the alarming part is how people interact with this surface-level news they are receiving. There is only a small link between completing an article, and sharing that same article on social media. A case study done on a popular technology website found little relationship between scrolling through an article and sharing it online. Similarly, articles receiving a high number of tweets did not necessarily get read very thoroughly. The problem develops as people continue to share and generate action on an article, but as a survey done by the Science Post discovered, 70 percent of these people do so before fully knowing what they are advocating and promoting.

Headline scanning

Most people tend to read an interesting headline and peruse the opening paragraph or sentence before they share it with their social media contacts. Others see the information, and glance at it before they also pass the article along their social-media cycle. Before long, many people have accessed this same information, but few truly understand what is being shared. Thus, while conversations and interactions are taking place in relation to the information, rumors and mistakes are perpetuated and misinformation becomes both common and accepted.

But do Americans think they are less informed today than in past years? According to a survey done by the Rasmussen Report, most Americans say they believe they are informed, but almost half say they think their fellow Americans are less informed than those in other developed nations.

While skimming through popular news articles and headlines appears to satisfy most Americans, this practice breeds less

understanding and a tendency to believe rumors and pop ideas. Yet, when people think they correctly grasp a topic or issue, they are more likely to share it with friends and family who trust it because it comes from a known source, and then half-skim it themselves before passing it along. This creates the vicious cycle of a whole group of people knowing little but sharing much. If we did not live in a democracy, it might matter less if people were misinformed about common topics. Everyone could just happily live in their little information-bubbles, and silly Facebook posts and shares would not change anything of substance.

Instead, every adult citizen has the potential to have a major impact on the development and actions of this nation. This places a strong responsibility on people to be well informed so they can make well-reasoned decisions and vote accordingly. It is one thing for a generation to be ill-equipped to understand the events around them. But it's quite another for people to continually make poor choices with the information they are given and to treat everything as entertainment.