

SCIENCE DISCOVERS THAT ONLY STUPID PEOPLE READ FACEBOOK AND MAY BE CREATING A LESS-INFORMED ELECTORATE

A new study finds the more people rely on their Facebook feed for news, the less politically knowledgeable they are.

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(Photo: Chris Jackson/Getty Images)

Facebook has been taking a lot of flak of late, with the revelations that Russian entities used the social media platform to sow discord and spread misinformation. But it turns out that's not the only way Mark Zuckerberg's ubiquitous creation may be harming our democracy.

A new study reports the more time people spend reading and sharing news items on Facebook, the poorer they did on a simple test of foundational facts about our system of government and its key players.

"A greater reliance on social media and Facebook specifically for news might serve to depress knowledge levels," writes a research team led by Michael Cacciatore of the University of Georgia. "This is particularly important given the growth of news sharing and consumption through social media."

Indeed, a 2017 Pew Research Center survey found two-thirds of Americans get at least some of their news through such platforms. Only 20 percent said they did so "often," but that

figure was up from 18 percent the year before. This research suggests that may not be a good thing.

The study, published in the *Journalism and Mass Communications Quarterly*, used data from two surveys: one featuring 2,806 Americans in late 2011 and early 2012, and another featuring 3,006 Americans contacted in June of 2010. All were asked how often they read news stories on Facebook, and how often they share such stories.

They then answered a series of multiple choice questions about politics and government. For those in the first survey, these included "Who is the current vice president?," "Who has the final responsibility to determine whether a law is constitutional or not?," and "Which one of the parties is more conservative than the other at the national level?" The second group was asked, among other things, which party held a majority in the House of Representatives, and to identify Eric Holder (who was then attorney general).

"The analysis revealed that, while Facebook use itself failed to predict political knowledge scores, HOW Facebook users engaged with the platform was a significant predictor of knowledge," the researchers report. "Increased use of Facebook for both news consumption and news sharing purposes was associated with lower political knowledge levels."

The reasons for this aren't clear, but the researchers offer some plausible explanations. The first and most obvious is "selective exposure"—the notion that "users who rely heavily on Facebook for news purposes are specifically selecting agreeable information from like-minded individuals." In other words, their goal is to feel good, not learn new things—hence their lower level of knowledge.

Two other possibilities: People who spend a lot of time on Facebook are spending less time with traditional news sources, and thus missing out on important information; and social media encourages people to engage in emotion-laden "hot button" issues, rather than nuts-and-bolts information about how the government actually operates.

While these findings are troubling, Cacciatore and his colleagues offer some reasons for hope. They note that people

who had Facebook accounts for longer periods of time also tended to have higher levels of political knowledge. While they could simply be older, it's possible that, "as people become more familiar with Facebook, they become better equipped to sift through the vast quantities of data available on the platform, making knowledge acquisition easier."

Perhaps. But on balance, this research offers more evidence that—as Facebook itself admitted earlier this year—"social media can have negative ramifications for democracy."

Contributing to the decline of the republic is quite a price for the pleasure of sharing vacation photos with your friends.

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