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Abstract

People read differently on digital platform than on print, which can affect the way they interpret and understand what is being read. When reading digitally many people *hyper-read*, meaning that they skim the material in an attempt to withdraw essential information. This can lead to a shallower reading, with less understanding and reflection on what is being read. Since social media, a digital type of media, is getting increasingly popular as a source of news, the way people read news is changing. In addition to how people hyper-read on digital platforms, social media has also changed the way in which news are presented to people. Facebook is the most popular social media for news, and on here people can be shown material that their Facebook friends react to. In addition, Facebook's own algorithm suggests and promotes news that the reader is believed to be interested in. This has the potential to lead to both exposure to new viewpoints as well as to the creation of political echo chambers, where people are only shown a limited amount of information. People who hyper-read are unlikely to even click on the majority of articles they see on Facebook and read only the headlines. Of the articles they do click on, around one third of the material is actually read. There is then a risk of social media users severely limiting the quality and scope of information which they read.

This thesis looks at how digital reading differs from traditional reading and how this can affect people's reading of news, and consequently their use of news reading as a way to understand the world and shape their *Weltanschauung*. To see if there are major discrepancies between the news stories presented by the nine major U.S.-based news outlets on Facebook, 400 headlines from each of these news outlets has been collected, analyzed and compared. This showed that there are indeed big differences in type of content and type of narrative being presented by the various outlets based on the headlines presented on Facebook. If readers restrict their news reading to one or just a few news outlets, they risk getting little exposure to opposing viewpoints and a limited understanding of the topics they read about. It is possible that social media can contribute to increased political polarization because of the very way in which users read and reflect on digital material, in addition to how social media outlets present news content.

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1. Introduction

“If you watch Fox News, you are living on a different planet than you are if you listen to NPR”

Former U.S. President Barack Obama (Memoli 2012)

This thesis will look at how using social media as a platform for reading news can affect the process of news reading. While social media is getting increasingly popular as a platform for accessing news, concerns are also raised over the negative consequences this might result in. One concern is whether or not the use of social media as a way to be exposed to news leads to increased political polarization and the creation of echo chambers. This thesis will look at how social media differs from traditional news outlets, what and how material is being presented by the major U.S.-based news outlets on Facebook, and whether or not there are significant discrepancies between these, which might lead to political polarization. It will also look at how reading on a digital platform differs from reading printed material and how this could affect the way one interprets what is read.

When one is observing the various heated debates on various online platforms, one can often get a feeling that the people arguing are not so much disagreeing as they are misunderstanding each other, and approach the same topic from very different backgrounds. It can be felt that people from across the political spectrum end up viewing the world in very different ways because of the information they see and consume. When this information is what people use to further shape their views of the world, it is not surprising that misunderstandings and political polarization can occur. It can further feel like this process is intensified by the use of social media as a news platform, both in how one is exposed to content on such a platform and in how one ends up reading the information one is exposed to. Part of the inspiration for writing this thesis was a felt discrepancy between what information was given to various people who follow different news outlets. Another part was seeing how these people who follow different news outlets end up disagreeing with each other, as a result of different pre-understandings, when approaching a much-debated topic. It was further felt that perhaps these different understandings were not only a result of *what* was being read, but also *how* it was being read,

and consequently interpreted and understood. Further theoretical background, as well as a review of the literature used for this thesis, is found in Chapter 2.

As will be shown in Chapter 3, people who hyper-read end up reflecting less on the material they have read and retain less memory about the details of the information they have consumed. The process of hyper-reading has also led to only a fraction of available and displayed information actually being read, as social media readers tend to scroll past the vast majority of displayed information, only reading headlines and the top parts of articles they choose to click on. Chapter 4 deals with how social media function as a news platform and how it differs from previous media. This chapter looking at how news are presented differently on digital platforms than on traditional print, as well as how social media differs from news outlets' own websites. Chapter 4 also covers current usage and perceptions of social media as a source of news. Chapter 5 deals with how social media can lead to both the creation of echo chambers of opinion and the spreading of misinformation, as well as a tool for correcting misinformation and providing a diverse range of opinions. The use of social media as a platform for the conscious spreading of misinformation is also discussed in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 looks at the collected data on headlines shared to Facebook by the nine most popular U.S.-based news outlets and the method used to collect and compare these. Tables showing the statistics are also found here. Chapter 7 features the conclusion of the thesis as well as an outlook at what could be studied further based on this work that would be too wide-spanning and/or time-consuming if they were to be included in this thesis.

It is hoped that this thesis will contribute to raising awareness of the positive and negative potentials of using social media as a news platform, and to a general increase in overall digital literacy. It seems reasonable to believe that people are less prone to political polarization if they are more conscious about how the information they consume, and the manner in which they consume it, may not provide them with a comprehensive overview of current events.

2. Theory & literature review

2.1 Literature

One goal of this thesis is to develop an understanding of the concept of “hyper-reading” and how the way people read digitally, and thus on social media, can affect the way they approach and understand news. It will therefore look at how people read on digital platforms and on social media, largely relying on the works of Naomi Baron, Katherine Hayles, Nicholas Carr and Anne Mangen for this. Nicholas Carr’s book *The Shallows* takes a critical stance towards digital technology’s impact on people’s ability to read well and to remember what they have read. Katherine Hayles’ book *How We Think* has been used to get a more optimistic view of the phenomenon of hyper-reading and of digital technology and its influence. Naomi Baron’s *Words Onscreen* provided much information about how digital media affect people’s reading capabilities and reading habits. To get a better understanding of how people understand and interpret through the reading of texts, tools from the field of hermeneutics have also been borrowed to explain how reading leads to understanding. These are primarily influenced by the works of Hans-Georg Gadamer and his use of the concepts of pre-understandings and of hermeneutical circles and how these affect a reader. The primary source for this has been Gadamer’s chapter titled *Language and Hermeneutics* in his work *Truth and Method*. Jean Grondin’s writing on the hermeneutical circle has also been used.

Cass R. Sunstein’s book *#Republic* provided insight into how social media can lead to increased political polarization through the creation of echo chambers of opinion and reinforcing people’s ideological stances while limiting their exposure to opposing views. To get more information about how false information spreads online this thesis used an article by Michaela Del Vicario, Alessandro Bessi, Fabiana Zollo, Fabio Petroni, Antonio Scala, Guido Caldarelli, H. Eugene Stanley & Walter Quattrociocchi, titled *The Spreading of Misinformation Online*, and one by Soroush Vosuoghi, Deb Roy & Sinan Aral, titled *The Spread of True and False News Online*.

Leticia Bode & Emily Vraga's article *In Related News, That Was Wrong* was used to get an understanding of how social media can also be used to correct misinformation through exposing readers to stories correcting misinformation. Eytan Bakshy, Solomon Messing & Lada A. Adamic's *Exposure to Ideologically Diverse News and Opinion on Facebook* provided data on Facebook user's likelihood to click on articles they see, as well as how Facebook can function as a tool for exposing people to opposing views. Elisa Shearer & Jeffrey Gottfried's *News Use Across Social Media 2017*, done for the Pew Research Center, as well as un-credited reports by the Pew Research Center, Gallup & the Knight Foundation, provide most of the data about current social media usage and how media is perceived by those who consume it. To look at what type of news are being read, 400 headlines shared on Facebook from each of the nine major U.S.-based news outlets (as measured in amount of Facebook likes) were compiled, analyzed and compared. The comparison consisted of looking at the various outlets' rate of use and coverage of certain terms and topics that were felt to have possible ideological connotations. For further details on the methodology for data gathering, see Chapter 6.1. As this thesis was being written, several articles were published which related to the topics being discussed here. These include articles by Paul Blumenthal and Scott Shane's articles about possible Russian use of social media to influence the American 2016 presidential election, and Brendan Nyhan's article on how the perceived impact of fake news and bots might be overblown. Kara Pernice's article on F-shaped reading patterns on the web was also published during the writing of this thesis.

Rodney H. Jones & Christoph A. Hafner's *Understanding Digital Literacies* was used to get a better overall understanding of the field of digital literacies. To get a traditional definition of what constitutes a "good reading", the book *How to Read a Book* by Mortimer J. Adler & Charles Van Doren was used. The work of Marshall McLuhan and of Guy Debord also provided insight into how technology's impact on people's reading and their relation to media was perceived in the pre-digital era. For a full list of the works cited in this thesis, see the Bibliography. Collected headlines that are cited in this thesis are found in the appendix as they appeared on Facebook.

2.2 Theoretical background

The theory underlying this thesis can be summed up as such: digital media and the intensity of available information in the digital age has altered the way people read, which consequently alters how people interpret and understand what they read. Both the amount and filtering of information presented as well as the shallow reading done by many digital readers can be contributing factors in increased political polarization. While social media can function as a mediator between different ideological stances and as a tool for clearing up misinformation, this requires the users to possess a certain level of digital literacy. When people rely on social media as their primary news platform they risk getting a limited presentation of news, as well as a shallow understanding of the news stories they do read, because of the tendency to hyper-read online. Because of how news outlets operate on social media and because they are aware of the limited attention span of the social media readers, it seems likely that there might be an increase in misleading headlines in an attempt to capture the readers' attention. If this strategy to slightly deceive the reader to incite them to click on an article fails, however, it will lead the reader with the false or misperceived impression from the misleading headline. As people who read digitally are unlikely to click on the majority of material they see, they thus risk reading a lot of misleading headlines, without correcting this initial misinformation through reading the actual article. As the reader makes a decision whether or not to click on an article when reading the headline, the headline information must be read and interpreted before making the decision to scroll on or to click on the article. The information in the headline, which might be misleading, has thus entered the reader's hermeneutical circle, which can consequently affect how future material is read and interpreted. This is discussed in-depth in Chapters 3, 4.5 and 4.6.

The way social media uses algorithms to show people material which they are believed to be interested in, based on their previous online activity, can lead users to be exposed to a vast amount of material but only from one perspective, creating echo chambers. At the same time there is potential for using social media as a way to be exposed to differing viewpoints, but unless Facebook and other social media outlets change the way their algorithms work, this requires active work by the social media user. The fears of echo chambers and informational cascades on Facebook are discussed in-depth in Chapters 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, and 5.4.

3. Reading and understanding

3.1 Hyper-reading: What we do and what it does to us

Defining and elaborating upon the concept of hyper-reading and its effects and relevance will be important for understanding much of the theoretical foundation for this thesis. This chapter will look at how hyper-reading is defined and analyzed in current scholarship within the digital humanities and attempt to explain why the phenomenon of hyper-reading can be vital in shaping the way a reader interacts with the world through the written word.

The concept of hyper-reading (also spelled “hyper reading” and “hyperreading”) was introduced by James Sosnoski in 1999 and was defined as “reader-directed, screen based, computer-assisted reading”, and includes doing things such as: including search queries, skim-reading, hyperlinking, fragmenting and keyword filtering (Sosnoski 1999: 5). Katherine Hayles defines it in the following way:

“Hyper reading, which includes skimming, scanning, fragmenting and juxtaposing texts, is a strategic response to an information-intensive environment, aiming to conserve attention by quickly identifying relevant information, so that only relatively few portions of a given text are actually read”
(Hayles 2012: 12)

The concept of skimming the surface of a text for information is not a new phenomenon. In the classic work “How to Read a Book”, Adler & Van Doren use the term “Inspectional reading” for what seems to be a similar way of reading: “Inspectional reading is the art of *skimming systematically*” (Adler & Van Doren 1972: 18). What is new is the frequency of hyper-reading, resulting from the drastic increase in data that a person is exposed to when surrounded by digital tools and information technology.

Hyper-reading is a vital ability to avoid drowning in the massive amount of information that is available on the internet today, and searching for data is “fundamentally a linguistic activity” (Jones & Hafner 2012: 30). Being able to skim through a large list of suggested links after an internet search, to find the information that is relevant, is important so that one does not end up reading a vast amount of unrelated material and thus wasting valuable time. A quick

search for “Washington” on Google, for instance, gives approximately 1,280,000,000 results in less than a second (as of November 19 2017), but the majority of these results will not be relevant to what a person wants to learn about Washington, be it the state, the district of Columbia or the former U.S. president. Because these names are homographs, the search will bring results connected to all things called “Washington” unless the user specifies with further keywords, such as “state” or “George”.

When doing a search on Google or DuckDuckGo or a similar search engine, one gets three to four levels of text for each link: A headline and often a webpage’s name in a large font, the actual URL in green and then an excerpt from the beginning of the page’s text. Some search results, such as those leading to Wikipedia articles, offer direct links to sub-passages in the article. In the case of a search on “Washington”, one can get links to the Wikipedia article’s sections on demography, economy, history, and so on. When searching for something that is in the current media picture, one can get links to news articles from popular media in one’s respective country, together with pictures and an expanded information section on the right side of the search results.

Being able to quickly skim through these various levels of text and extract information about which links to click is an important ability, as is knowing which keywords to add to one’s search to get the most accurate results. After a quick internet search, a skilled hyper-reader will often have several tabs open, possibly ranging from interactive websites to pdf-documents to online articles filled with further hyperlinks. This could be compared to having several books and magazines open on one’s desk at once, which does sound like an impractical way to read, so how does one really “read” when hyper-reading?

Researchers have found that when people read text on a webpage, the eye movement typically goes in an F-like pattern, reading the first two or three lines, but paying less focus as the article goes on, in the end reading almost vertically and overlooking the text on the bottom right (Hayles 2016: 61). It should be mentioned that this F-pattern is flipped for users who read languages from right to left, such as Arabic or Hebrew (Pernice 2017). When viewing more visually complex pages, users concentrate more on the center and scattered around images (Djamasbi 2011: 335). This all ends up with an estimated 20-28% of an article actually being

read, and almost 50% of web users spending less than 12 seconds on a webpage (Baron 2016: 42).

Some writers, like Nicholas Carr in his 2010 book *The Shallows*, express grave concerns over the effects of reading on digital platforms. Carr starts by giving an account of his own personal experience and how he struggles with reading longer, deeper texts, instead jumping between e-mails, blog posts, Facebook updates, music downloads and scanning headlines. The mind is constantly being bombarded with stimulation and information, and Carr fears that reading too much online hurts one's ability to remember what has been read, one's ability to focus on longer texts, and to withdraw complex information (Carr 2010: 104-5, 116). Drawing from studies by psychologists and neuroscientists, he fears that by using the internet a lot the reader overflows their cognitive load and that when one reaches the limits for working memory it becomes more difficult to separate irrelevant and relevant information (Carr 2010: 125). Having one's attention divided is a leading source of cognitive overload, and multitasking hardly ever leads to as good results as focusing on one task at a time says Carr, citing Australian psychologist John Sweller, and the neuroscientists Jordan Grafman and David Meyer (Carr 2010: 125, 140-141).

Naomi Baron expresses similar sentiments in her 2016 book *Words Onscreen*. On the topic of multitasking when reading, she adds her own 2010 inquiry about students' likelihood to multitask when reading on different platforms, where 90% reported to be "more likely to be multitasking when reading onscreen". In a survey of which medium people believe they concentrate best on, 92% also state "print" (Baron 2016: 88, 181, 238). Both Carr and Baron cite several studies that show that less information is remembered when people are dealing with more than one form of stimulation simultaneously, be these hyperlinks in a text or written text on the bottom of the screen while a news anchor speaks on TV (Baron 2016: 180-181) and less reflection is being done on what one reads. She states:

"Comprehension: when subjects were given a set amount of time to complete the reading tasks, their comprehension scores were comparable. However, when free to decide how long to spend on the readings, subjects devoted less time – and had poorer comprehension – in the onscreen condition. Since very little of the reading we do in everyday life is timed, the results lend credence to many people's perceptions that printed text is taken more seriously." (Baron 2016: 169)

And:

“The meaning of “reading” increasingly becomes “finding information” – and often settling for the first thing that comes to hand – rather than “contemplating and understanding” (Baron 2016: 39).

Baron even has a chapter titled “*tl;dr*”, short for “too long; didn’t read”, a common phrase online when users on web forums or other communication platforms find a piece of text too long to read. This can be anything from a linked article to a longer, elaborate reply by another user. In most cases this phrase is used to imply that the author should have been more concise and able to shorten their text so it takes less time to read, rather than being an admittance of the reader’s own incapability or unwillingness to read longer texts.

Concerns over new technological media’s effects on people’s reading abilities are not new. As early as the 1960’s, Marshall McLuhan wrote about how children who had grown up watching TV and were used to a multi-sensory “bombardment” met the task of deep reading: “Pointlessly they strive to read print in depth. They bring to print all their senses, and print rejects them. Print asks for the isolated and stripped-down visual faculty, not of the unified sensorium” (McLuhan 2017: 413). “Isolated and stripped-down visual faculty” does not sound anything like the literacy practices required to navigate through the wealth of information in the digital era.

Katherine Hayles seems to be more optimistic about the future of reading than Naomi Baron and Nicholas Carr. Hayles is critical of Carr, finding him too negative of hyper-reading, and accusing him of tilting the evidence cited in favor of his view. Hayles argues that both hyper-and deep readings have their own distinctive advantages, and that the problem is not hyper-reading in itself, but rather to get hyper-reading and deep-reading to co-exist and “interact synergistically” (Hayles 2016: 69). She does not deny that hyper-reading can have a negative effect on one’s ability to deep-read, but sees more value and importance in hyper-reading than what perhaps Carr and Baron do. Since the majority of reading being done today is, for a large amount of the population, digital, having the tools for efficiently maneuvering the information-heavy internet is more relevant than having the patience and focus to read and understand a long text. According to Hayles it is therefore not surprising that hyper-attention is becoming more widespread while the prevalence of deep-attention and deep-reading is diminishing; it is all a

sign of our times. Steven Pinker, as cited by Jones & Hafner, also points out that there have always been distractions to information processing, and that people “have always developed strategies to deal with them” (Jones & Hafner 2012: 40).

With an increase in media and data, there is also an increase in narratives and the cultural position of narratives contra data. Hayles claims that while in the ancient world, narratives were accepted explanations for grandiose events, such as the creation and working of the world, this is not enough for the modern human (Hayles 2016: 181). Now, understanding is based on analyzing data, and large amounts of it. Anecdotes are typically not considered as valid explanations for understanding or describing a phenomenon, while in earlier eras the limited access to data would mean that anecdotes and simpler narratives were more prevalent as methods of understanding larger events. However, people still use narratives to represent, explain and interpret the conclusions of large-scale data analysis. A press conference on some situation in the national economy would not consist only of data being listed, rather, an economist or a politician would be telling a story, and it is this story that would be picked up, interpreted and spread by the media. Hayles claims that because of the overwhelming amounts of data that is available, “no one narrative is likely to establish dominance as *the* explanation, for the interpretive possibilities proliferate as databases increase” (Hayles 2016: 181).

It is, however, possible that while large amounts of data are theoretically available to those who look, only a select fraction of data is being presented to the majority population who still rely on media outlets and their narratives over actively mining various databases themselves for information. For, as Baron and Carr have argued, hyper-reading does appear to limit, or at least frame, the scope and depth of reading done by digital readers. While information is definitely easier to access now than ever before, it appears that many readers read for reasons other than expanding their range of knowledge. Scrolling through social media, from Twitter and Facebook to forums like Reddit and 4chan, can lead to serendipitous discoveries, but they can also function as habitual or purely entertainment reading, where the reader is “grazing” over information they often knew already. On Facebook and Twitter a user follows specific outlets or users, and on forums like Reddit a user decides which sub-forums (or *subreddits*) to visit based on their field of interest. The reader thus risks limiting their exposure to new narratives and challenging data, despite informing themselves of new happenings. The way social media works

can lead to people severely limiting their exposure to narratives and databases, as will be discussed in-depth in Chapters 5.1 and 5.2. “To be informed is to know simply that something is the case. To be enlightened is to know, in addition, what it is all about: why it is the case, what its connections are with other facts, in what respects it is the same, in what respects it is different, and so forth.” (Adler & Van Doren 1972:11). If one is always hyper-reading instead of deep reading, one can end up being informed but not enlightened.

Hyper-reading then seems to be a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it is a necessary skill, not just for academics and students searching online for information, but also for the layman who uses the internet for a variety of functions. Quickly choosing which articles to read, for knowledge or entertainment, extracting the relevant information and moving on (or back and forth) to new websites saves a lot of time. On the other hand, there is the risk of losing or diminishing one’s ability to deep-read, to critically think about what has been read and to remember important information. The modern person is often seen with a laptop in front of themselves and their smartphone next to them, frequently jumping between something they are writing or doing to browsing websites, then to checking Facebook notifications while answering Snapchat messages. They are, obviously, distracting themselves. While many people claim to be efficient and successful multitaskers, studies show that this is essentially a myth (Baron 2016: 176). While Hayles stresses the importance of learning to master both deep reading and hyper-reading (Hayles 2016: 69), most evidence seems to show that hyper-reading is replacing deep reading unless people take active, conscious measures to balance the two (Baron 2016: 213, 233).

It can indeed seem that hyper-reading is a natural consequence of the digital landscape where so many different elements are competing for a reader’s focus. Many websites are *polyfocal*. That means that they have several focus points that compete for human attention. There is an aspect of multitasking called “the state of continual partial attention”, described as a “stressful state where people are constantly, but only partially, attending to the information from their communication devices, motivated by the fear of ‘missing something’” (Jones & Hafner 2012: 82). The readers of digital media pay near constant attention to what is “going on”, and the media producers fight over users’ attention because it is what brings in revenue. It has even been

claimed that we are not living in an information economy, but in an attention economy, where the exchange of attention is what creates value (Jones & Hafner 2012: 90).

Since the way people read has changed, so, naturally, has the way people gain information. People read more text, but they read shallowly, and often only skim articles, if they click on the articles at all. On Facebook, only 7% of hard content that shows up in a user's feed will be clicked on (Bakshy et al. 2015: 1131). With the plethora of articles to choose from, headlines become ever more important, as they are what is read or skimmed before a reader decides whether or not to click on any article.

One goal of this thesis is to look at which narratives are being presented by the most popular U.S.-based news outlets on Facebook and how. This will be done to see if there is a wide range of different narratives being presented or if there is a large homogeneity, even across the political spectrum. But before going into how Facebook functions as a tool for news outlets, it seems important to expand on some concepts which will be borrowed from the field of hermeneutics, namely the *hermeneutical circle* and the idea of understanding shaped by *pre-understanding*, as understood by the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, as will be seen in the following chapter.

3.2 Hermeneutical methods for understanding

In its most basic definition, hermeneutics can be said to be the interpretation of texts. Every time a person reads a text and interprets it they are doing a hermeneutical activity on some level. As Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it: “Reading fundamentally involves interpretation” and “understanding occurs in interpreting” (Gadamer 2013: 407, 417). Within the field of hermeneutics, one finds the concept of the *hermeneutical circle*. In the words of the philosopher Jean Grondin, “it is the idea that we always understand or interpret out of some presuppositions” (Grondin 2017: 1). When people understand something, they do so based on their presuppositions. Grondin also cites Heidegger who called these the “anticipatory structures” of understanding, and Gadamer who used the term “prejudices”, while others would speak of “frameworks for understanding” or “hermeneutical background” (Grondin 2017: 2).

As Gadamer himself points out, the interpreter does not always know that when “he is interpreting, he is bringing his own concepts into the interpretation” (Gadamer 2013: 421). He further claims that “(...) it does not occur to people who are not used to reading that what is written down could be wrong, since to them anything written seems like a self-authenticating document” (Gadamer 2013: 412). People interpret texts based on what pre-understandings they have when they read the text, and the text is thus not self-authenticating. While the above statement about people trusting the written text can be doubted, especially in the current discourse where the term “Fake news” is used so frequently, it is true that people must have some faith in that what they read is true for there to be any point in reading for information and understanding at all. This is especially true when it comes to reading about events one did not personally witness, such as most events covered by the news tend to be. If a news reader sees a story about a certain event taking place, the reader will assume that the event did, in fact, take place, presuming that the news outlet is seen as a valid source.

The topic of fake news will be expanded upon later in this thesis, in Chapter 4.5. For this chapter, the important thing to remember is that people absorb information when reading, and that this information then enters the person’s pre-understandings which then enters the reader’s hermeneutical circle and then shapes their future understandings. Adler & Van Doren mention understanding and making one’s own assumptions explicit as an important part of reaching truth: “You must know what your prejudices – that is, your prejudgments – are” (Adler & Van Doren 1972: 155). Gadamer also calls it absurd to try to escape from one’s own concepts in interpretation, because interpreting means precisely to bring one’s own preconceptions into play to make the meaning of the text speak to us (Gadamer 2013: 415).

If all reading involves interpretation and if understanding occurs through interpretation, then a change in how people read will consequently alter the way in which people understand through interpretation of text. When hyper-reading online leads to people skimming amounts of texts, much of it headlines and extracts and snippets of larger texts, this shapes the data which enters into a person’s hermeneutical circle and form their prejudices and further understandings. If a news reader reads a lot of headlines covering a story or a point of view, they will know that this is a much-covered story in addition to knowing something about the story in itself. One can look back at Katherine Hayles’ take on the database vs. narrative development (Hayles 2016:

181), but it appears that the various narratives presented by the media can function as a type of database in themselves due to the large amounts of stories being made available to the reader. This seems especially true when one considers the way in which many modern readers hyper-read to withdraw the essential information from a story rather than doing a deep reading. What is being represented and told in the short pieces of text that are most often read, headlines and sub-headlines on social media, can be an increasingly important factor in shaping the news reader's understanding of the world.

3.3 Digital hermeneutics

Former U.S. President Barack Obama has stated that “One of the biggest challenges we have to our democracy is the degree to which we don’t share a common baseline of facts”, and that technological innovations have led people to be kept in “bubbles” of information (Memoli 2018). How social media creates bubbles of information, so-called echo chambers, and can lead to political polarization will be expanded upon in Chapter 5.2 and 5.3, but first one should get an understanding of how digital literacy influences and is affected by the field of hermeneutics. The philosopher Rafael Capurro has stated that “The Internet’s challenge for hermeneutics concerns primarily its social relevance for the creation, communication and interpretation of knowledge” (Capurro 2010). Considering how a growing number of people use the internet and reading on digital platforms for obtaining information, and that digital reading can lead to hyper-reading which alters the way one reads, and interprets, as seen in Chapter 3.2 and 3.3, hermeneutics definitely seem to be socially relevant.

Capurro sees digital hermeneutics as a twofold “weakening process”, where an interpreter “finds herself within a network that she can only partially control” and that:

“information technology is a weak technology as far as it deals with ‘conversations of mankind’ (Rorty 1989) now based on networked subjects, an oxymoron from the point of view of the autonomous subject constructed by European modernity” (Capurro 2010).

He also observes that the role of mass media has changed, and that it no longer gives the impression of being a meta-observer providing an objective view of social systems as it could in

the last century (Capurro 2010). One could argue that mass media has never been an *objective* observer and that it has always had an ideological bias it wished to present, and that the digital age and flourishing of available media outlets has merely made this more obvious to the modern, digital reader. This awareness does, however, seem to potentially displace digital readers, who are increasingly aware that they are getting a narrative and not an objective, factual, unbiased report. Increased media scepticism will be elaborated upon in Chapter 4.8. To sum up, digital technology definitely seems to have affected both how people read and how they interpret what they read, and consequently understand what is read.

3.4 What is “Good reading” and how is it a tool for understanding?

While the process of hyper-reading has been shown to be invaluable in a modern information environment, nobody seems to argue that it is a “good” reading. What really constitutes “good reading” is not a question that seems to have a single universal answer, but there does appear to be some general aspects that most people could agree make up a good way of reading. In the work “*How to Read a Book*”, Mortimer Adler & Charles Van Doren have a lot to say about what makes for a good reading. They differentiate between reading for information and reading for understanding. They consider the former sense of reading as reading “anything else that [...] is at once thoroughly intelligible to us. Such things may increase our store of information, but they cannot improve our understanding”. Reading for understanding is when a person “tries to read something that at first he does not completely understand. Here the thing to be read is initially better or higher than the reader” (Adler & Van Doren 1972: 8-9).

Interesting to note is that Adler & Van Doren place the reading of newspapers into the first category of reading for information, not understanding. They do not see any intellectual difficulty in simply gathering new information if the type of facts one learns are similar to the type of fact one already knows. “Being informed is prerequisite to being enlightened. The point, however, is not to stop at being informed” (Adler & Van Doren 1972: 11). One does not need to do a full analytical reading when one reads for information and not “enlightenment”, and most people presumably read news to be informed. Having accurate information about various things, being informed, is, however, a necessary prerequisite to any sense of true understanding or

“enlightenment”. When even the process of reading for information is weakened, as may be the case when hyper-reading, this naturally makes it nearly impossible to get any solid understanding of the world, or whatever happens to be covered by the news.

While Adler & Van Doren talk about analytical reading as “thorough reading, complete reading, or good reading – the best reading you can do” (Adler & Van Doren 1972: 19), they also claim that “[...] analytical reading is hardly ever necessary if your goal in reading is simply information or entertainment” (Adler & Van Doren 1972: 19). One could argue against their view on informational reading as being so inferior to “enlightenment” reading, especially in a modern world where informational reading is done so frequently and where data representation plays a bigger role than it did in the past (Hayles 2016: 181). Adler & Van Doren also seem to be aware of both the importance and the danger of what could now be called hyper-reading headlines in statements such as: “(...) we do have an obligation, as human beings and as citizens, to try to understand the world around us” (Adler & Van Doren 1972: 249) and “the problem of speed reading, then, is the problem of comprehension” (Adler & Van Doren 1972: 42). While this was written before the digital age, it shows that fears over losing out on reading comprehension when one reads quickly is not a brand new concern.

While it would be hard to argue that a reader should devote the same effort to reading the news as to reading Heidegger or Herodotus, the current media landscape of several conflicting narratives might encourage or even require a reader to reflect more critically on what is being represented than media has done in the past. While Adler & Van Doren rate analytical reading as the best form of reading, their final form of reading is *syntopical reading*, which includes reading several books on a topic to compare and analyze them to get a better understanding of a topic as a whole. In a digital landscape with mass media presenting such a plethora of different narratives, it can be useful to compare different news outlets’ varying narratives in a syntopical manner. This way one can analyze the different narratives in a critical and comparative way, which can be an important process for the news readers who wish to gain a better understanding of things happening and not just be exposed to any one single narrative.

4. News reading in the digital era

4.1 The changing face of news

News outlets have had to change their presence on social media and must dedicate more effort to staying relevant on various social media platforms. Scrolling through a news outlet's Facebook feed is a different experience from browsing the news outlet's own website in several ways. When going onto a news outlet's home page, one can encounter pop-up ads or alternatively pop-ups asking for the reader's ad-blocker browser extension to be turned off. Some deny access to articles unless a reader's ad-blocker is disabled. Some pages offer a limit on how many free articles can be read each week for people who do not subscribe to the news outlet. One is often given the option to choose from a variety of categories ("Politics", "World", "Lifestyle", "Business", etc.), there can be videos that automatically start playing, and lists of recent, relevant articles, and/or opinion pieces, video clips and other related links are promoted. There is a clear visual hierarchy, with some stories being featured top-center with a large following image and large font headline, and other news being given smaller spaces. Some are given only headlines. Research shows that readers' eye movements are drawn towards the center and around images when reading visually complex websites (Djamasbi 2011: 335). The user experience of going onto a news outlet's website is significantly different from how one uses Facebook to get news from the same news source, which is described in detail in Chapter 4.4. Reading on either of these digital platforms are very different from how one would interact with a printed medium such as a newspaper.

Presence on social media also has the possibility of altering readers' perceptions of the authority, seriousness and longevity of a news outlet. Daily or weekly newspapers existing for over 100 years (such as New York Times, founded in 1851) are now equally present on the Facebook feed as news outlets that have never had a physical paper format and have only existed digitally (such as HuffPost, founded in 2005). Especially for younger readers who are less familiar with e.g. the New York Times as an old and serious news institution, they can have the same *ethos*. Both rely on publishing daily content to get the most amount of likes, shares and comments, increasing their presence to get the most amount of clicks to drive up advertising

revenues. This can lead to outlets that used to be perceived as serious and focusing on high-quality output posting a lot of soft news to stay present on readers' feeds. The result can be a social media presence quite different from the news outlet's printed form, if it has one. A physical copy of TIME Magazine, for instance, comes out once a month, is less than 50 pages long, and features more content about serious events (hard news) than stories about light entertainment and lifestyle advice (soft news) (TIME January 2018), while their online presence publishes twice as much soft content as hard, and posts an average of 23 stories per day in the period sampled here (see Chapter 6.2 for the exact numbers).

4.2 The Facebook news experience

Going on Facebook to read news can primarily be done in two ways: One way is to go directly to a news outlet's Facebook page and start scrolling down, to see only content presented by this outlet. Alternatively a user can stay on their own primary Facebook feed and see a variety of content, sorted by Facebook's algorithm for presenting content they think the user is interested in. The latter method can then show a mix of news, new photographs of friends, posts to groups a user has joined, updates about concerts and festivals and so on, based on the user's profile (what they like/follow, who they befriend, which groups they join). Scrolling through one's feed can show both opposing viewpoints shared by Facebook friends as well as distract the user from news reading by showing more attention-grabbing material that is not news-related. The Facebook feed also does not allow a media outlet to create a visual hierarchy like on their webpage, as every story, be it a major or a minor one, is given the same amount of space for text and images. If one story is to be covered more than others it will have to be promoted by multiple articles and/or posts as well as intriguing headlines to increase reader response, which will in turn boost a post's popularity. It is also possible to pay Facebook to "boost" a page's post, making it more likely to appear in users' feeds even if they have not liked or followed the relevant page.

As of November 21 2017, the Facebook feed is placed slightly left-of-center when accessed on a computer. On the left side there is a list of options for going to the Messenger function, a *Marketplace*, a list of groups a user is a part of (if any), things to *Explore* such as

nearby events and groups that might be of interest. At the bottom there is an option to create new content (*Ad, Page, Group, Event* and *Fundraiser*). On the right side of the news feed, one sees upcoming events and birthdays of Facebook friends, an option to *manage Pages* one is an administrator of (if any) and, almost greyed out, links to further Facebook options and information: *Privacy settings, Terms, Advertising, Ad Choices, Cookies* and “*More*” as well as a copyright mark (“*Facebook ©2017*”). Below this is a relatively large area without any content, and to the far left there is a vertical segment split into parts. On the top there is a social news feed showing what friends have liked and commented on, something which might be of interest for the user but not something most people want to be seeing on their primary news feed. Below this is an option for viewing notifications on Pages one manages, such as messages, comments and number of new likes. Below this is the largest segment: the list of friends that are active or recently were, and the ones one interacts with the most. This is in line with the eye tracking research of both Djamasbi and Nielsen, featuring centered images where people are more likely to look for them, and not featuring any content in the bottom-right, where people are less likely to look, before reaching the above mentioned vertical line of content (Djamasbi 2011: 335: Hayles 2016: 61). As one would expect, it appears that Facebook is keenly aware of how to optimize the presentation of content and make it easy for the user to read through their feed. The design consultant firm Nielsen Norman group (including Jakob Nielsen of the much-cited F-pattern reading pattern study) also recommends that an efficient website should “Prioritize and format text to direct users to what you want them to see, and to what you know they want to see” (Pernice 2017). Facebook clearly knows that what their users are most interested in is their feeds, and position this where the user’s eyes are most likely to focus.

The experience is slightly different if one accesses Facebook through a mobile device, such as a smartphone. Since smartphone screens are typically a lot smaller than a computer screen, many of the options placed in low-intensity areas on a computer screen are simply not present on a mobile screen. These include all the options for accessing groups, pages, creating ads, etc. These are instead accessed through selecting smaller icons which open up bars of options, and save space from the primary page. Scrolling on a mobile Android device on February 20 2018 shows a top bar for searching, adding photos and a notification about potential messages (messaging has been moved to a whole other app, Facebook Messenger, on mobile devices). Underneath there is a second bar, with the option following options: to go to one’s

Home Feed, accept friend requests and find “people you may know”, enter a Marketplace to find nearby things for sale, view recent notifications and accessing one’s profile overview, for managing pages, events, friends, and so on. Scrolling down one’s home feed or that of a certain page or user, shows material presented in a vertical, centered manner. Similar to Facebook on a computer screen, each story is given equal space. On a mobile device, each presented story takes up almost the entire space of the screen, requiring a finger swipe. The available material on hyper-reading does not seem to differentiate between reading digitally on a computer screen or a smaller mobile screen.

4.3 Digital devices

Digital technology has not only changed the form of the material being read, it has also rapidly changed the platforms on which things can be read. At one point, digital news were only accessible on a computer and consequently read on a computer screen, which tends to be roughly the same size as most printed books, but smaller than printed newspapers. As of 2018, digital news are accessible through several other devices, such as smartphones, tables and even on watch clocks, such as the Apple Watch. A 2017 report from the Pew Research Center shows that over three quarters of Americans, 77%, now own a smartphone. This is more than twice the amount of Americans who reported having a smartphone in 2011: 35% (Smith 2017). Following the general trend of younger people being more engaged in new technology, the amount of people between ages 18 and 29 that own smartphones is 92%, and there is an increase in smartphone ownership amongst both those over 50 and low income families (Smith 2017). While less popular than smartphones, about half of Americans (51%) own digital tablets, up from just three percent in 2010 (Smith 2017).

12% of Americans say that they are “Smartphone only” internet users, meaning that they rely on their smartphones to access the internet and not a computer. This is more common amongst lower income households, where one-in-five adults report only using their smartphones, while only 4% of those living in households earning over \$100,000 report the same (Rainie & Perrin 2017). As of 2016, more than half of smartphone users reported getting news alerts on their smartphones, but few get them often. 72% of Americans report getting news on mobile

devices (Lu & Matsa 2016). The study does not differentiate between users who get news or news alerts (app notifications) from a news outlet's app or through a social media app such as Facebook.

The U.S.-based news outlets that are the most popular on Facebook all have their own news apps easily available on both Android and Apple devices, with the exception of Time Magazine whose app is not available to Norwegian IP addresses on Android devices, but does seem to exist for American readers. A list of the most popular U.S.-based news outlets on Facebook is found in Chapter 6.1. Accessing *Google's Play Store* on an Android device with a Norwegian IP address on February 20 2018 shows the following popularity, measured by number of downloads, for above mentioned news outlets' apps:

1. CNN - 10 Million
2. New York Times - 10 Million
3. Fox News - 10 Million
4. USA Today - 5 Million
5. NBC News - 5 Million
6. ABC News - 1 Million
7. HuffPost - 1 Million
8. Business Insider – 500,000
9. TIME Magazine - No app available to Norwegian IP addresses

It must be repeated that this is just the number of downloads to Android devices. As of January 2017, Android devices made up 55% of the U.S. smartphone market, followed by Apple and then various smaller producers (Fried 2017). It is therefore possible that some outlets' apps are vastly more popular in Apple's App store than in Google's Play Store, but it seems more likely that some news outlets simply have more popular apps than others. New York Times especially stands out, with almost as many downloads as they have Likes on Facebook, compared to the other outlets (see Chapter 5). This might be caused by New York Times having a limited amount of articles available for free, unlike the other major news outlets. A reader who is interested enough in the New York Times' material to pay for a subscription might then also be more likely to download the app than readers who primarily follow other, free-to-read news outlets. It should also be noted that the number of downloads an app has is not necessarily representative for how frequently the app is used, and by how many people. A person might delete and download the app again several times across several devices, bringing up the number of total downloads.

It is further possible that people who read on mobile devices are even less inclined to click on articles they see than readers who use a computer, because they would then be using more mobile data. This is often limited, depending on the user's phone subscription deal. Mobile devices are also more used in social settings than computers, which leads to further distractions and consequently a potentially weaker reading of material on the screen. The social aspect and near constant availability of mobile phones can also create a more interactive, social way of reading and sharing news. People who browse their phones while having a real-life conversation might share a news article they see with the other people present, while they would not feel inclined to share it while browsing the internet in solitude.

4.4 Facebook as a news platform

An increasing number of people get news online. 81% of Americans get at least some of their news through websites, apps or social networking sites, with 67% of Americans getting at least some of their news on social media, an increase from 2016 when 62% of Americans got news from social media (Mitchell et al. 2016: 3). The number is even higher for younger people, with 78% of Americans between the ages of 18 and 49 getting news on social media, a number unchanged between 2016 and 2017 (Shearer & Gottfried 2017: 2). More people between 18 and 49 also report getting news often on social media. (Mitchell et al. 2016: 5). Many social media platforms now offer some sort of news presentation and the number of people accessing news on these platforms varies, with Twitter, Reddit and Facebook being the ones with the highest percentage of users getting news there. Facebook is by far the leading social media site as a source for news, largely due to their large user base. Since ca. 66% of Americans use Facebook, and most Facebook users (68%) get news on there, almost half (45%) of Americans get news on Facebook (Shearer & Gottfried 2017: 4-6). For news about politics and government, Facebook is overall the most common source of news: 61% of Americans asked reported getting political news from Facebook, but only 44% said CNN, the next most popular source (Sunstein 2017: 126). Perhaps due to being exposed to such a large amount of information, the average Facebook viewer ends up clicking on only 7% of hard content in their feeds (Bakshy et al. 2015: 1131).

This is also in line with the theories on hyper-reading as skimming for information discussed in Chapter 3.1.

Younger people are not only getting more news from social media, they are also drastically less likely to get their news from more traditional channels such as TV, radio and print newspapers. A 2016 Pew Research Center study shows that “Only 5% of 18- to 29- year-olds often get news from a print newspaper” and only 27% of the same age group often get news on TV. Overall, TV is still the most widely used news platform, as it seems that online news reading is primarily attracting those who prefer reading news over watching them, with 59% of those who prefer reading news doing so online and only 26% sticking to print. Of those who prefer watching news over reading or listening, 80% prefer TV but only 12% go online. The Pew report does, however, see the difference in demographics as suggesting future shake-ups in how and where news are received (Mitchell et al. 2016: 5).

While Facebook is the largest social media platform for interacting with news, more Americans now get news from multiple social media sites: 26% of U.S. adults get news from two or more social media platforms (Shearer & Gottfried 2017: 7). If this leads to an increase in jumping back and forth between several websites and/or apps, the findings of the studies cited in Chapter 1 would indicate that this jump leads to more distraction and less focus on what is actually being read. As social media platforms such as Facebook feature a lot of linking back and forth between other websites it seems reasonable to suspect that the multiple sites news intake will increase. A comprehensive study of the inter-linking of news articles between Facebook and other social media platforms would, however, be outside the scope of this thesis, so the focus will be solely on Facebook as it is still the most popular social media for news.

4.5 The importance of clicks: Clickbait and Fake News

Since online news outlets often get much of their revenues from advertisements, it is in their interest to gain a high amount of clicks on their articles. They hence attempt to direct the reader to further pages on their website and being exposed to more advertisement. The various news

outlets are presumably aware of the phenomenon of hyper-reading and of how little time people actually spend on reading webpages. Naomi Baron, citing a 2008 study, states that almost 50% of users linger on a webpage for less than 12 seconds (Baron 2016: 42). This is perhaps what has led some news outlets to make headlines that are intentionally alluring, often misleading, exaggerated or provocative, to get people to click on articles they otherwise might not have been interested in. This phenomenon is often known as *clickbait*. Many readers are annoyed by clickbait headlines, and there are even dedicated Twitter accounts and applications for stopping or bypassing clickbait (Shire 2014), but the practice of having clickbait headlines has been defended by some, such as Editor and CEO of Business Insider, Henry Blodget (Ha 2012).

The use of clickbait headlines to get clicks to generate advertising revenue can be a potentially dangerous thing if it leads to misleading headlines that exaggerate events out to generate engagement rather than presenting a factual and nuanced story. While eye-catching newspaper headlines are not a new phenomenon, they can seem more threatening and impactful on a platform where over 90% what is read is only the articles' headlines (Bakshy et al. 2015: 1131). An article with an exaggerated headline might dispel the headline's initial false statement in the main text, but if readers do not click on the article to read this, they are left with the false initial impression given by the headline. Because of Facebook's presentation method it can also be harder to detect if an article is intended as satire or not, as one might not be shown other stories by the same source that would make it easier for the reader to discern whether or not it is a satire outlet or not. If one goes to a satirical "news" website such as *The Onion* (www.theonion.com), some of the headlines could be seen as believable if one was unfamiliar with the source's satirical nature, but others are so far-fetched that most reasonable people would immediately understand that this is not a trustworthy source of news. Accessing *The Onion*'s website on November 22 2017, one somewhat believable and one completely unbelievable headline would be, respectively: "Tearful Trump Puts Down Ladle, Walks Out Of Soup Kitchen After Learning Charitable Foundation Shutting Down" and "Frustrated Jesus Christ Forced To Find 22nd Vessel For Reincarnation After Death of Charles Manson". This context, which helps assess whether or not an outlet is parodic or not, is not present on a Facebook user's feed. Satirical articles can be displayed equally alongside serious news outlets on a Facebook user's news feed. If the reader sees satirical articles shared by friends who do not state that they are

satirical, and if the reader is unfamiliar with the source or simply does not look at it, they might easily be deceived.

The term “Fake News” was much used during and after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and some say that the presence of fake news on Facebook might have swayed the results (Ivanova 2017). Google and Facebook have both promised to implement tools to allow users to determine whether or not news are trustworthy (Ivanova 2017; Gunaratna 2016). Facebook already has a list of 10 tips for spotting fake news, with number one being “Be skeptical of headlines”. The prevalence of fake news on social media might help to explain why people who prefer digital news have a more negative view of the news media overall (Mitchell et al. 2016: 19), and people trust social media news even less than mainstream news (Goldsmith 2017). Since fake news seem to be so prevalent, this skepticism towards media could be a healthy sign of a population that is conscious of media bias, false stories and misleading headlines. It is interesting to note that even though trust in the media is low, many people still pay attention to the news, especially on social media platforms, which is seen as the least trustworthy outlet. This level of media skepticism can seem to be a relatively newer trend. Writing in 1964, Marshall McLuhan describes a friend’s recounting of trying to teach critical media reading to his students: “The students could not for a moment accept the suggestion that the press or any other public means of communication could be used with base intent” (McLuhan 2017: 281 [First published 1964]). This attitude no longer seems to be the dominant one. Media skepticism will be discussed further in-depth in Chapter 4.8.

If social media as a news platform will keep growing in popularity, as it seems to be doing, changes in users’ reading habits will be vital to be able to extract factual information in a climate filled with news that range from completely false to very biased and misleading. While Facebook and Google’s efforts to implement fact-checking tools might be very well intended, they will presumably also face criticism for being selective, biased and potentially favorable to established corporations over smaller, independent news outlets. Even though larger news outlets are seen as more serious actors and are expected to follow ethical guidelines of journalism, including fact-checking, they are not free from the tarnish of publishing fake news. CNN, the largest American news outlet, had to retract a story on a connection between Donald Trump and Russia, leading to three journalists resigning after a video surfaced of a CNN producer admitting

that the story was false and that this was known to the journalists at the time of publishing (Grynbaum 2017). Politically controversial and divisive cases often seem to attract accusers of false and inaccurate media portrayal. For example, conservative writer Ben Shapiro has also accused CNN of presenting “fake news” during the coverage of the controversial case of the shooting of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman:

“CNN isolated audio that made it sound as if Zimmerman used a racial slur, mumbling about ‘f—ing c—ns’” [...] “Oops. As it turned out, Zimmerman had said that it was ‘f—ing cold’ since it was raining that night. [...] It was obvious that the so-called objective news media was in the tank on the story. And they were going to ruin a man’s life to achieve their political ends” (Shapiro 2013: 89).

These are just some examples, chosen to show how even the largest news outlet can fall in the trap of publishing fake news. Such accusations, both true and untrue, presumably exist against every major media outlet. This shows how the intense competition for readers’ attention can lead even large news institutions to publish information that is not well enough researched, simply to keep up with the intensity of the modern online news. Being seen and getting clicks seems to be vital for news outlets managing to survive in the digital era.

There has been some debate over how much revenue is really gained through being active on social media. Cass R. Sunstein, writing in 2017, states that “Facebook accounts for more than 40 percent of the referral traffic to news sites” (Sunstein 2017: 126). In stark contrast, in 2010, Facebook accounted for only 3.52% of referred traffic to news and information sites (Ju et al. 2014: 5). It has also been claimed that “the magnitude of their [social media] contribution to web traffic and advertising revenue seems underwhelming” (Ju et al. 2014: 1). If these numbers are accurate, and one remembers Bakshy et al.’s findings, (2015: 1131) there has been a significant change in people’s news reading habits. If only 7% of hard content is clicked on, yet accounts for over 40% of the referral traffic to news outlets as of 2017, compared to Facebook only referring 3.52% of traffic in 2010, there must have been a huge increase in articles on Facebook and/or a decrease in traffic from other sites or people going directly to the news outlets’ websites. Either way, Facebook seems to clearly play a large role in how people now read news.

The decline in traditional paper-based newspapers, both in print circulation and in how many once-popular ones have fallen from popularity on Facebook, and the growth of new

digital-only outlets such as HuffPost can remind one of Marshall McLuhan is near prophetic words written decades before the internet: “A new medium is never an addition to an old one, nor does it leave the old one in peace. It never ceases to oppress the older media until it finds new shapes and positions for them” (McLuhan 2017: 237 [First published 1964]) & “Each of these enterprises lack any ‘literacy’ in any medium but its own, and thus the startling changes resulting from new hybrids and crossings of media catch them unawares.” (McLuhan 2017: 265 [First published 1964]). It does indeed seem as if many traditional news outlets were caught unaware by the potential of social media as a news platform.

Getting a lot of likes, comments and shares on their content increases the overall presence of a media outlet on Facebook. It increases the chances of new people serendipitously finding the page through seeing a Facebook friend interact with the outlet’s content. If a user only Likes or Comments on an article, it is less likely to appear in their friends’ news feed than if a user shares an article, but any interaction can lead to the article being shown to a user’s Facebook friends. This entices news outlets to publish engaging stories that will get people to comment, like and share their stories, but as discussed above, this can lead to false or exaggerated stories being published. It is also worth noting that the sharing of news to spread their online presence depends on the activity not getting suppressed as uninteresting to others by Facebook’s algorithms. One potential downside of the algorithm system suppressing information it deems less interesting to users, based on their previous likes, and promoting news that a user is deemed likely to enjoy and interact with, is the potential for creating echo chambers of opinion. This is discussed further in Chapter 5.2.

4.6 Reaction-evoking material

It appears that different types of stories elicit very different levels of reader engagement. Two examples that were noted during the gathering of the headlines are: On December 7, at 7:04am, ABC News posted a video on Facebook that showed a man rescuing a rabbit from the California wildfires. As of December 11 2017, this video had over 315,000 reactions or likes, and 414,455 Shares. In sharp contrast, ABC News published a story about homelessness being on the rise in

America one minute before the rabbit video. This article, which deals with a much more serious topic than a rabbit, only got 178 reactions and 90 shares.

Similarly, on January 2 2018, CNN posted a video featuring a musical student with a rare genetic condition, which left him severely physically deformed, overcoming difficulties to play music. This video had over 8,200 reactions as of January 4 2018. On the same day CNN posted a video about Retriever puppies learning to be avalanche rescue dogs which had over 12,000 reactions as of January 4 2018. An Opinion piece on the dangers of environmental disasters posted on Jan 2 had 1,700 reactions as of January 4 2018. Environmental disasters are presumably seen by most people as being more important than avalanche dog puppies and inspiring people with disabilities.

While the numbers from CNN are far from being as different as those from ABC News, both examples show that there might be something about sentimental videos that gets people to react and engage with the Facebook post. It is also worth noting that both of the above-mentioned posts that received a lot of reactions were videos, and images and videos appeal to human emotions in a way that text does not (Jones & Hafner 2012: 62). Media companies have also found that emotionally loaded content drives up user engagement (Blumenthal 2018). By not being directly political, sentimental material might have a broader appeal than more serious news that can divide people with differing views and only be enjoyed by people who agree with the relevant political/ideological stance that is being presented. If people interact with a post, by liking, commenting or sharing it, it will show up on their friends' news feed, and so a cascade of interactions with a Facebook post is potentially created. The reasons behind people's enthusiasm for sentimental videos are for psychologists to explain, but if more news outlets decide to prioritize more sentimental, soft videos over hard content, that could be a potential problem if it leads to people's attention being drawn away from the covering of events with more serious implications and consequences.

One example of a very eye-catching, reaction-invoking type of headline was observed after the initial collection of headlines was finished. On March 7 2018, HuffPost ran a headline stating "This Anti-Semitic Term Was Casually Used At The White House 3 Times This Week", which is a very serious accusation. The alleged anti-Semitic term in question was the word "Globalist", which is not traditionally seen as an anti-Semitic slur. The Merriam-Webster

dictionary defines globalism as “a national policy of treating the whole world as a proper sphere for political influence”, which can be seen in opposition to the Trump administration’s policy of “America First” (White House 2018). The HuffPost article points out that the term “globalist” is apparently frequently used by members of the so-called “alt-right”, citing a New York Times “glossary of extremist language”: “For the far right, globalism has long had distinct xenophobic, anti-immigrant, and anti-Semitic overtones”, and that ‘It refers to a conspiratorial worldview: a cabal that likes open borders, diversity and weak nation states, and that dislikes white people, Christianity and the traditional culture of their own country’” (Golgowski & O’Brien 2018). While members of right-wing extremist groups presumably do use the term, it seems to be a stretch to claim that the term in itself is an “anti-Semitic term” and that anti-Semitic terms are “casually used at the White House”. This would be implying that various politicians, including the U.S. President Donald J. Trump, are using anti-Semitic slurs and are, consequentially, anti-Semitic. Considering how President Trump’s daughter, Ivanka Trump, has converted to Judaism and is married to a Jewish man, as well as Trump’s outspoken support for Israel, it seems unlikely that he should harbor any strong anti-Semitic beliefs, but further speculation on this is not relevant to the purpose of this thesis. If a fringe-group of political extremists frequently use a term, this does not mean that everyone who uses the same term is a political extremist, but this seems to be the conclusion drawn by the above-cited HuffPost article. As will be shown in Chapter 6.2, HuffPost is the major news outlet that is the most negatively inclined towards the Trump Presidency. With articles featuring headlines that essentially accuse the U.S. President of being anti-Semitic, it seems likely that this style of discourse will continue, which could risk further polarization of the American population. The headline was in itself also quite misleading, asserting that the term used was indeed anti-Semitic, but not mentioning in the headline what the term actually was. If one recalls Bakshy et al.’s finding that only 7% of hard content in a Facebook user’s news feed is clicked on (Bakshy et al. 2015: 1131), this means that the majority of people who see the controversial HuffPost headline are unlikely to click on it to find out what alleged anti-Semitic term was being used. If the headline had instead been worded along the lines of “Is the White House’s use of the term “globalist” flirting with extremism?” or similar, it might invite the reader to reflect upon the topic instead of making an outright claim that anti-Semitic terms are being used. As it stands, HuffPost is requiring a reader to click on the article to find out what the word is, and then to determine if they find it to actually be anti-Semitic, unless a reader

accepts the headline's conclusion. As will be discussed further in Chapter 5.7, studies show that people are more likely to react and spread information which makes them feel fear and disgust (Vosoughi et al- 2018: 1). A headline accusing the White House of using anti-Semitic terms is (presumably) likely to invoke feelings of fear and disgust amongst readers, so it invokes a stronger emotional reaction than an invitation to ponder over the connotations of the word "globalist".

As was mentioned in Chapter 3.1, human attention is one of the most sought-after resources in today's digitalized world. Various online news outlets are competing with each other and with other entertainment providers for people's attention and reactions. Digital news outlets therefore face a challenge in creating attention-grabbing headlines. There seem to be a lot of things that need to be taken into consideration when creating such a headline and deciding on which story to present, and how. People seem to generally have gotten tired of "clickbait"-style headlines, and will often choose to scroll past them, use a third party software or site to get the gist of the article, or look in the comment section for somebody "spoiling" the information. The headline therefore has to be informative and appear as something serious and/or interesting that is worth clicking on to read. If the headline is too informative, however, the reader might feel that they have extracted the most important information just by hyper-reading the headline. If the headline is not informative enough the reader might be confused as to what the story is actually about, and not be enticed to click on it to learn more. The possible consequence of this is that a culture develops in which headlines are misleading, exaggerated and biased in their representation in order to create a powerful emotional reaction amongst people in an attempt to get them to click on the article, and thus create ad revenue. Headlines being somewhat misleading is nothing new, but often a headline's initial bombastic claims are dispelled and/or corrected in the actual article, so the reader is not left with a faulty impression. But what if the strategy of making shocking headlines does not lead to more clicks? Then the reader will be left with the impression of the misleading headline without correcting it through reading the article.

Another randomly chosen example of a very misleading headline could be yet an article by HuffPost, where the headline shown on Facebook was "KKK Hoods and Urine-Proof sheets Seen At Trump Tower Gift Shop". When clicking on the actual article, the headline shown on HuffPost's website reads "Pranksters Slip KKK Hoods And Urine-Proof Sheets Into Trump

Tower's Gift Shop" (Wanshel 2017). While most critical readers would presumably not believe that the Trump Tower's gift shop actually sold and promoted KKK-memorabilia, the Facebook comment section at the time the article was posted did show some users who apparently believed the initial headline at face value. Since most people who read the initial misleading headline on Facebook would not click on the actual article to read the more factual headline, this seems like it could be reason to worry about how media choose to phrase headlines.

Language is never objective. The reality depicted by a text is always a result of a determined selection, of various words chosen to depict certain things and actions, which are also selected. The story one gets from a headline is told, not shown. "Language is basically a 'filter' – a system of inclusion and exclusion: whenever we choose to include or emphasize one thing in our version of reality, we are also choosing to exclude or downplay something else" (Jones & Hafner 2012: 104). The topic of information flow control will be returned to in Chapter 5.5.

4.7 Source criticism and verifiability

It seems nearly impossible for a regular Facebook reader to accurately verify the truth of the material they are presented with on social media. As was seen in Chapter 4.5 and 4.6, even major media outlets, which one would generally view as trustworthy, have been accused and found guilty of spreading misinformation and "fake news". Guy Debord's view of contemporary events as retreating into the realm of "unverifiable stories and uncheckable statistics" (Debord 1998: 16) still seems relevant. While people have for a long time relied on media to convey information and stories, it seems like more awareness is now being raised about how the media themselves gain access to these stories. Are they not also just reporting what they have heard? While a traditional weekly print newspaper's process of gathering information to create stories might consist of sending reporters to a scene, interview several relevant people and create a well-researched story, current news has to stay constantly updated on events that are going on, and thus rely more on the trustworthiness of people who claim to have been related to an event, which can be difficult to confirm when communicating digitally. It is possible to digitally alter pictures that are nearly impossible to easily discern as false fabrications, which can be presented as evidence of a user's validity.

One clear example of a major media outlet relying on contacting people through social media and ending up unknowingly publish a fabricated story is when the newspaper The Mirror posted a story about the mass-murderer Elliot Rodger. The story claimed that he was hooked on creatine (a common fitness supplement), and that he had traveled to Russia with his friend, Hugh Wootmeigh (a near homophone of a stereotypically low-class sociolectical pronunciation of “you what, mate?” which is popularly written “u wot m8?” and used as an online meme). It further claimed that Rodger had lost his friend in a weightlifting accident, where the person allegedly lifted 350kgs and got his head crushed (Davidson 2014). Several points of the story should make it stand out as an obvious falsification, and the killer also published a 140-page manifesto explaining why he did go on a murderous spree, which would have disproven the outrageous hoax claims. While the real reasons for this slip-up in journalistic standards are unknown, it seems reasonable to speculate that it might be a result of the digital world’s constant pressure to provide new and exciting content being prioritized over journalistic integrity and a critical checking of source material.

Another example of media relying on second-hand information for coverage of major events could be the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights (SOHR). The SOHR is cited by nearly all major media outlets, as well as the United Nations, on casualties and events taking place in the Syrian Civil War, but the entire organization is run by a single man located in Coventry, England, who reports what he has been told by anonymous people who are allegedly present in Syria (MacFarquhar 2013). While the SOHR’s validity is not of direct interest to this thesis, it is worth pointing out that relying on an individual located in England, with no journalistic experience, who conveys anonymous sources seems to be a potentially unreliable method of gaining accurate reports of events in Syria.

When news media also create stories based on events taking place on social media platforms such as Twitter, there also seems to be potential for spreading false information. A known public figure might re-tweet a fake troll profile, as is shown in Chapter 5.7, and/or a news outlet might create a story about “Twitter/Facebook backlash against X” which relies on social media reactions from users whose real identity and purpose is not known. CNN’s headline reading “Trump calls his presidency 'consensual,' Twitter responds” (Appendix, headline 1) is based entirely on things occurring on a digital platform, where the online reactions might be

falsely presented and/or exaggerated. It is possible for an outlet to claim that “Twitter is outraged” over something, which could then be reported by a second news outlet to present the perceived outrage in a negative light, for example by promoting it as irrational or exaggerated. For example, a right-winged news outlet might report on CNN’s above-mentioned report to present “the left” as overly sensitive and outraged over trivialities. This could thus in turn spark further outrage over the initial outrage, which may or may not even be real to begin with. Since it is not possible to get an accurate number of how many social media users show their outrage on the relevant platform, these articles are based on what the journalists perceive, which may be a small, initially insignificant number of users. This type of material could be described as “unverifiable stories”.

4.8 Media skepticism in the age of digital news reading

Americans are getting increasingly skeptical of the mainstream media. 43% of Americans have a negative view on media, 33% have a positive view and 23% are neutral (Knight Foundation 2018: 2). Most Americans believe it is harder to stay well-informed and to be able to determine which news are accurate or not, and the public seems to be evenly divided when it comes to who should be responsible for ensuring that people have an accurate and objective understanding of the news. 48% of those asked say that the news media is responsible for providing accurate and balanced news, while 48% state that individuals themselves are responsible (Knight Foundation 2018: 1-2). Young adults are the most critical of mainstream media, with twice as many people between 18 and 29 saying they have an unfavorable opinion of the news media. For the American population as a whole, 43% report a “very unfavorable” or “somewhat unfavorable” opinion on news media, with 33% having a “very favorable” or “somewhat favorable” opinion (Knight Foundation 2018: 4). This follows a drastic increase in perceived political bias in news coverage, with 45% of Americans saying that there is “a great deal” of political bias in news in 2018, while only 25% felt this way in 1989 and 30% in 1996. In 2012 this opinion was held by 37% according to a Pew Research Center poll, and has thus increased dramatically in a little over half a decade (Knight Foundation 2018: 9).

Different political and ethnic groups report different levels of perceived media bias, with 67% of Republicans saying that they see “a great deal” of political bias in the news, whereas only 26% of Democrats say the same (Knight Foundation 2018: 10). When it comes to media’s separation of facts from opinions, “Fifty-three percent of Democrats and 50% of blacks believe the news media are careful to separate fact from opinion, but all other age, race and political subgroups say the media does not do a good job of this, including nearly nine in 10 Republicans” (Knight Foundation 2018: 11). Democrats generally being more trusting of the media does seem to contradict them also having the youngest voters, since younger people are generally more skeptical to the media (Knight Foundation 2018: 14-15). Despite this media skepticism, however, younger adult Americans are generally more positive than older Americans when it comes to the impact of modern news sources on the news environment over the past decade (Knight Foundation 2018: 20). Further, frequent consumers of news from websites like Facebook and Google are also more likely to see the information heavy environment positively, and better for staying well-informed (Knight Foundation 2018: 18). It is possible to infer that while younger news readers are more critical to media, they view the flourishing of available information as a positive thing since it makes it easier to get different viewpoints from several sources. Having grown up with access to digital devices, it seems likely that younger people will be more confident in their own abilities to deduct the truth from many conflicting news outlets’ reporting. While this might be the case, it is also possible that younger people are blinded by confidence in their own skills. This is reminiscent of how Jacques Ellul claimed that intellectuals are the most vulnerable to modern propaganda because they consume largest amount of it and consider themselves capable of “judging for themselves” (Ellul 1973: VI).

It is also not surprising to see that Democrats have a more positive view towards media than Republicans do. Looking at the findings in Chapter 6.2, Fox News is the only major news outlet that presents the Republican President Donald Trump in a primarily positive way. With most major media outlets being primarily Democratic and left-leaning, as shown in Chapter 6.3, it is to be expected that Democrat voters have a more favorable view of them than what Republicans do. One should, however, remember that only a little over half of Democrats thought that media did a good job at separating fact from opinion. This means that the remaining either have no opinion on the matter or feel like the media does not do a good job at separating fact from opinion, despite being likely to be in general agreement with the media’s narrative.

5. The power and influence of social media as a news source

5.1 The “Daily Me”: Facebook’s algorithm and fears of an echo chamber

The headline of Zeynep Tufekci’s TED talk is “We’re building a dystopia just to make people click on ads” (TED, 2017), and in it she talks about the dangers of social media’s algorithms. She describes how watching Bernie Sanders, Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump rallies can lead you down a so-called rabbit hole, ending up with either white supremacy or far-left conspiracy videos. The algorithms can find more extreme content to people who might be susceptible to being influenced by such content. Just by looking at a person’s browsing habits, these algorithms can easily discern people’s ethnicity, opinions, religious and political views, level of happiness, use of addictive substances, age, gender, parental status and so on. People are then exposed to tailored advertisements as well as suggested information and entertainment outlets, based on their interests and expressed views. Tufekci claims that “ads are also organizing our political, personal and social information flows and that’s what has got to change” (TED, 2017).

With each individual user freely choosing which news outlets to follow, Facebook’s algorithm system for showing user content they are expected to be interested in and the sheer amount of data being produced each day, some fear that Facebook is creating an echo chamber of opinions (Del Vicario et al. 2016). Others have argued that Facebook’s option of sharing content and occasionally seeing content Liked by friends in one’s feed exposes the user to opposing views (Bakshy et al. 2015), and that Facebook use can be a tool for correcting misinformation (Bode & Vraga 2015: 634). Social Media is often scapegoated to explain the rising polarization across America, with studies being in conflict on whether or not this is accurate (Soergel 2017).

Facebook’s algorithm was changed on June 29 2016 to make it more likely that people see things in their News Feed that are relevant to them (how Facebook decides what is relevant to a person is not clear, however), and thus increasing the user’s activity and enthusiasm (Sunstein 2017: 14). Facebook’s statement says “To help make sure you don’t miss the friends and family posts you are likely to care about, we put those posts toward the top of your News

Feed” (Sunstein 2017: 14). It is presumably true that most users are more interested in content posted and shared by friends and acquaintances, and Facebook would be the ones to know, but there are downsides to an overly personalized Facebook feed. One downside could be if a user has started to rely on Facebook as a decent outlet for news but ends up not seeing a lot of news stories because Facebook decided their relatives’ posts were more appealing to said user.

There is reason to be skeptical of Facebook’s tailoring of the user’s news feed to present the information that Facebook, through their algorithms, presumes that a user is interested in. One vocal critic has been Cass R. Sunstein. In his book *#Republic* he states: “When people use Facebook to see exactly what they want to see, their understanding of the world can be greatly affected” (Sunstein 2017: 2). He sees the possibility for users to create feeds where they only see what they want as a potential problem for democracy itself, and fears an increasingly polarized America, and his fears can easily be extended to the rest of the world. To back up claims of increased polarization, he cites polls showing that:

“In 1960, just 5 percent of Republicans and 4 percent of Democrats said that they would feel “displeased” if their child married outside their political party. By 2010, those numbers had reached 49 and 33 percent, respectively – far higher than the percentage of people who would be “displeased” if their child married someone with a different skin color.” (Sunstein 2017: 10).

He further underlines the importance of shared experiences and public spaces to further understanding between people and to avoid echo chambers, polarization and radicalization (Sunstein 2017: 9, 11, 13, 24). If people insulate themselves from positions they disagree with, group polarization can occur, and this can produce serious social problems (Sunstein 2017: 89). One can look back at the hermeneutical concepts of pre-understanding to further understand how shared experiences can be important for creating a common and similar foundation for further interpretations and understandings. If people’s experiences are too different and if their consequent pre-understandings lead them to interpret new things very differently, it will be difficult to reach an agreement.

5.2 Opinion groups and echo chambers

On the topic of echo chambers, Cass R. Sunstein cites an experiment done in Colorado comparing the opinions of Democrats and Republicans on some highly debated topics before and after they were grouped together, one group of Democrats and one group of Republicans, to discuss these topics. The study showed that the members “ended up with more extreme positions after they spoke with one another” (Sunstein 2017: 69). That is, the Democrats and Republicans spoke with people who generally shared their views, and this ended up with their opinions being pushed in an extreme direction. Similar experiments have provided similar results, all showing that a group whose members already share some level of agreement on a topic will reinforce this view in a group of similarly minded people, and thus sway further away from those who have opposing views, who, in turn, become more extreme in their respective views (Sunstein 2017: 69). The result is then polarization.

A central factor behind this is, according to Sunstein, the limited amount of arguments in an argument pool. When like-minded individuals come together they can share arguments that support a cause they all believe in and thus expand their range of arguments reinforcing their ideas but limiting their exposure to opposing arguments, both by not being exposed to contrasting views but also by filling their attention span with information they agree with. Sunstein identifies another mechanism that contributes to polarization in that people want to be viewed positively by those around them, often adjusting their positions in the dominant position’s direction. People who are in a minority of opinion often end up silencing themselves. (Sunstein 2017: 73).

While this can lead to people with extreme opinions keeping them to themselves in scenarios where they know they are in the minority, it can also lead to a radicalization within groups where the members essentially agree to some extent. Just exposure to others’ views can lead to group polarization, a discussion is not necessary (Sunstein 2017: 73). Thus being exposed to a plethora of headlines in the mainstream media which one disagrees with may lead to a minority opinion individual either changing their views to feel more in line with the popular opinion. But it can also lead to the user becoming further radicalized if they find refuge in a group of like-minded individuals who oppose and ridicule the opposing view they are exposed to. A shared pre-understanding amongst a group of people also seems important in shaping or

refining their views. As Sunstein puts it: “When people deliberate together, they often give disproportionate weight to ‘common knowledge’ – information that they all share in advance. By contrast, they frequently give too little weight to unshared information – information that is held by one or only a few people” (Sunstein 2017: 79). One sees here the importance of hermeneutics and to have an awareness of the concept of pre-understandings.

While it is possible for the internet to be used to increase the variety of information and thus decrease polarization, it appears that this goes against human desire to group together, but some studies have also implicated that Facebook and social media does in fact not lead to echo chambers. This is discussed further in Chapter 9.

5.3 Cascades of information and exposure to disagreeing views

Cass R. Sunstein uses the term “Cybercascades” when talking about how information is spread online. He further distinguishes between two kinds of cascades: informational and reputational (Sunstein 2017: 99). Informational cascades are when people start to rely on others over their own private information or opinion. If person A has an opinion on a topic, person B is more likely to follow that opinion, with person C being even more likely to do so. In a group of opinionated people, it is likely that only a fraction actually made the decision independently, according to the informational cascade theory. Reputational cascades, however, are when people follow what they believe to be the majority opinion, even when it goes against what they themselves believe to be right, in order to save face and maintain the goodwill of others. This explains why groups can end up believing vastly different things as a result of which cascade they have ended up in, as people are mimetic beings. For most beliefs, one does not rely on direct information but on the statements or actions of trusted others (Sunstein 2017: 98). When it comes to understanding the world through reading news, these trusted others are the media and news outlets.

To illustrate how cascades of opinion function, Sunstein cites two studies, one studying habits of music downloading and one of an online upvote system of comments. In the study of music downloading, the participants were given a list of previously unknown songs, instructed to

listen to them briefly and decide which ones to download. About half were asked to make independent decision while the other half could see how many times each song had been downloaded by other participants in the study. The study showed that whichever songs became popular were the ones chosen by the first downloaders, the ones starting the cascade (Sunstein 2017: 102). The other study, by Lev Muchnik at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, carried out an experiment on a website allowing people to up-or-downvote comments. The study found that after seeing an initial upvote, the next viewer became 32% more likely to also upvote the comment. After five months, a single initial upvote “artificially increased the mean rating of comments by a whopping 25 percent!” (Sunstein 2017: 112). The artificial downvote, however, had no effect on median ratings, showing that “whereas positive social influence accumulates, creating a tendency toward ratings bubbles, negative social influence is neutralized by crowd correction” (Sunstein 2017: 112).

This is not to say that people are largely mindless creatures who get sucked up in whatever informational or reputational cascade comes their way, but it does show how people without strong opinions on a topic can be persuaded to a specific side. Younger people who are just starting to form opinions on various topics also seem more likely to be swept up when first encountering a cascade, something which now often happens online. People’s opinions can also change over time. Many people are more respectful of alternative positions after hearing a variety of views, including those they disagree with, so exposure to differing viewpoints can increase political tolerance (Sunstein 2017: 91). This is not always the case, however. Because of something called “*biased assimilation*”, the idea that people assimilate information in a way that supports their prior beliefs, people can actually become increasingly polarized through exposure to opposing views (Sunstein 2017: 92-97). When people have very strong convictions and are exposed to opposing views they can get infuriated rather than informed, and further polarized. If somebody who vehemently opposes Donald Trump’s politics is shown his quote on how “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. [...] They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists” (Ye Hee Lee 2015), it seems unlikely that they will become more respectful of this viewpoint. On the other hand, when someone who is strongly opposed to Hillary Clinton reads her quote that “Women have always been the primary victims of war. Women lose their husbands, their fathers, their sons in combat” (Evon 2015), it also seems unlikely that they will agree more with her views on the consequences of warfare. Instead she

will likely be seen as ignorant about war and as having peculiar views on what is worse of losing a loved one and of actually dying in combat.. The above-cited statement by Donald Trump is likely to resonate with people who have the pre-understanding that illegal immigrants commit a lot of crimes. A person who does not share this pre-understanding might see both Trump's statement and the previous pre-understanding as being ignorant and discriminatory, and would thus, potentially, be pushed further away from the group which agrees with Trump's statement.

If people's pre-understandings are too different, seeing the opposing view can reinforce their own opinions. There are several online communities which frequently have discussion threads showing opposing views which they disagree with, with titles such as "Infuriating news/statements", and screenshots of headlines, articles or quotes from people with opposing views. Sometimes these are taken grossly out of context, other times it is a case of a misleading headline created to get more clicks, as described in Chapter 4.5, while other times the actual opposing viewpoint in itself is so radically different to that of the observer that it is experienced as infuriating and/or provocative, as in the example of Trump's statement above. Some alternative news outlets seem to dedicate a significant amount of time and effort to finding controversial claims by people with opposing views and presenting these to try portraying the opposing side as extreme or ridiculous. This does seem to be more common amongst alternative, right-winged news outlets, such as *Breitbart News*, Milo Yiannopoulos' *Dangerous* news and the *Daily Wire*, and will be discussed further in Chapter 6.4. Motivated reasoning plays a key role in the way information is processed, accepted and/or rejected. Initial perceptions of an issue shapes how people respond to information that either debunk or confirm a misperception (Bode & Vraga 2015: 621). Essentially, people often believe in what they want to believe and trusts information which confirms their pre-held understandings.

Because of the trend of controversial, often misleading headlines discussed in Chapter 4.5 and 4.6, it seems likely that online news outlets might focus more on presenting news stories that can contribute to polarization because they seek to engage readers who agree with them, reinforcing held opinions rather than presenting a nuanced, varied spectrum of opinions. People spend more time reading stories they agree with and are more likely to read these than the ones they disagree with (Sunstein 2017: 114). People are also more likely to choose news sources that they are almost exclusively in agreement with over those that almost exclusively challenge their

views (Sunstein 2017: 115). The obvious problem with this is the potential for creating echo chambers. Sunstein suggests that Facebook could implement an option for getting opposing views when reading a news story: “With an opposing viewpoint button, Facebook, or any other provider, would be saying ‘there are other positions out there. Want to have a look?’ many people would say yes” (Sunstein 2017: 232). While this might be a good idea, it could be difficult to implement. A case might be covered because it stands as a position in itself. Writing a story about a person doing something unflattering, such as writing about a politician’s trivial but bad habits, is not so much a viewpoint that can be opposed as a choice of representation to create a certain narrative. How would such a story be opposed? A function showing opposing views might also risk only showing a binary opposition of viewpoints, while not managing to represent alternative stances. The risk of this could in turn be to end up ignoring the moderate middle-ground. Depending on how ideologically diverse a Facebook user’s network is, Facebook might already function as a tool for showing opposing views which would otherwise be ignored.

5.4 Ideological diversity and correcting misinformation on social media

A 2015 study by Bakshy et al. showed that there was, on Facebook, a “substantial polarization among hard content shared by users, with the most frequently shared links clearly aligned with largely liberal or conservative populations” (Bakshy et al. 2015: 1130). The study also found that liberals tend to have fewer friends sharing cross-ideological, or “cross-cutting”, information compared to conservatives. Conservatives are generally more linked with people sharing liberal content. On average, 20% of an individual’s Facebook friends belong to an opposing ideological stance to that of the user (Bakshy et al 2015: 1131). If this number was higher, users would see more ideologically opposing information. The study concludes by suggesting that “the power to expose oneself to perspectives from the other side in social media lies first and foremost with individuals (Bakshy et al. 2015: 1132).

It has further been argued that social media can function as a tool for correcting misinformation through the “related stories” function (Bode & Vraga 2015: 619). Similar to Sunstein, Bode & Vraga also show awareness of the possibilities of creating echo chambers and “filter bubbles” by relying on Facebook’s algorithms for exposure, but they suggest that the

algorithms may also offer alternative ways to expose people to information which can contradict misperceptions (Bode & Vraga 2015: 620). Even though people are initially critical of news stories that contradict their pre-understandings, Bode & Vraga interestingly note that this “does not prevent those stories from changing attitudes among those who believed the misperception” (Bode & Vraga 632). While this might seem to contradict what was said in Chapter 9 about exposure to opposing views leading to a reinforcement of pre-held beliefs, there seems to be a “tipping point”, where “motivated reasoning still operates in evaluating stories but does not prevent updating of attitudes” (Bode & Vraga 2015: 632). So while social media is often blamed for spreading misinformation, and has been found to spread false information faster than factual information (Vosoughi 2018: 1), social media can also function as a means to correct misperceptions, even without a user relying on selecting specific information streams (Bode & Vraga 2015: 634).

It should be noted that the studies done by Bode & Vraga where misinformation was corrected seemingly relied on the test subjects actually reading the main articles they were presented with, while limiting the access to the related stories which “consisted of a headline and a brief preview of the article to which they were linking” (Bode & Vraga 2015: 625). As was shown in Chapter 3.1, people are often likely to hyper-read text that they see on digital platforms, including Facebook, which can then limit the amount of reflection they do on the information they read. It seems reasonable to suspect that people are more likely to become reflective and contemplative enough to consider changing their pre-held misconceptions if they read an article deeply rather than if they hyper-read it.

It then seems that there are two criteria that should be fulfilled for social media to function as a tool for correcting misinformation and ideological leveler. First, the Facebook reader must be exposed to opposing and/or correcting information, through Facebook’s algorithms showing cross-cutting content, and/or from having a social network consisting of individuals from across the political spectrum, so one is actually exposed to this material. Secondly, the Facebook user must be willing to actually read the opposing or correcting information in an objective and reflective manner.

5.5 Reveal & conceal: Controlled information flow and *Weltanschauung*

“The act of Withholding includes the removal of relevant information from the source being presented. By leaving out important information one seeks for the recipient to draw hurried conclusions based on the limited information presented. What makes this method efficient is that those who are not informed about the case as a whole are not able to see what is left out.

Withholdings can also be used to present something as incomprehensible, rootless or absurd.

Withholdings presumes the messenger’s advantage, an access to an information which the audience does not have access to, or which is difficult to access for the audience.

Contextualization is to tell more than what the source contains. Can be understood as the opposite of withholding. In a retelling it will imply to add information which was not present in what is being repeated or to put the source in a context which creates possibilities for interpretation which were not present in the source, for instance by cross-clipping in a news story“ (VamaMarga 2017). [Own translation from Norwegian]

In today’s information-heavy culture with the intense competition for people’s attention and clicks it seems all the more important to be aware of what a powerful tool withholding or concealing certain information can be. In a culture where literacy is so affected by the hyper-reading phenomenon, withheld information might not be missed as much as in a culture where a deeper reading is the prevalent literacy culture. Because there is such a constant information overload, people forget much of what they just skimmed past and are so used to only getting the headlines and not the whole story. If an article which is read more in-depth by a critical reader omits some important information, for whatever reason, the reader might become aware of this and start asking themselves questions, “But what about (...)? Doesn’t that mean that (...)?”. When one is hyper-reading there is less tendency to reflect upon such things. Hypertext makes for worse reading performances, by increasing the cognitive load on the reader, leaving the users confused about what they have actually read (Baron 2016: 173).

It therefore seems that the culture of digital literacy and of hyper-reading is an ideal platform for news outlets to purposefully avoid covering certain topics or viewpoints while being less likely to be expected to show the whole story. Hyper-reading news readers generally reflect less and are often immediately distracted by new content instead of being critical readers and

search for the truth and a deeper understanding of the world or whatever they have read. In a democratic society which expects voters to stay informed and understanding, this can be a potential problem. If a reader depends on news outlets to provide them with information through which they will attempt to understand the world and to shape their *Weltanschauung*, the selective representation of news presented by any given outlet will affect a person's hermeneutical horizon and how they further understands the world.

This is not to say that media outlets choosing to withhold information and selectively represent certain things is a new phenomenon. Robert Elegant, writing in in 1981 about the Vietnam War, claimed that “For the first time in modern history, the outcome of a war was determined not on the battlefield but on the printed page and, above all, on the television screen” (Elegant 1981). Controlling the flow of information has been a vital political and ideological tool throughout history. The point made here is that new technologies and new literacy habits following them intensifies and alters how this informational flow can be directed. Ever since the invention of the telegraph and the coming of the first newspapers, “News has steadily overtaken views as a shaper of public attitude (...)” (McLuhan 2017: 342). Most modern people seem more likely to understand the world through the information they read through media, with an earlier ideological indoctrination serving as a foundation, in contrast to traditional societies where other institutions such as the church, family and traditional myths were the factors that actively shaped people's world views. Now a person's *Weltanschauung* might (in theory) be affected by an unknown person commenting on Facebook news from across the globe.

5.6 The spectacle of shills

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines shill as “one who makes a sales pitch or serves as a promoter” or “to talk about or describe someone or something in a favorable way because you are being paid to do it”. The dictionary further claims that the word first appeared circa 1914-1916, with uncertain etymology. While the word has been somewhat obscure, it now sees frequent use online, and is one of Merriam-Webster's top 40% most popular words as of March 13 2018 (Merriam-Webster). The newfound popularity of the term might be explained by a perceived increase in shills, and accusations of shilling, seen online with the rise of social media.

While technologies such as the printing press, the telegraph, television and now the internet undoubtedly have helped make more information available to more people, there have always been those who see these new innovations and social changes as potentially harmful or manipulative. One can recall the gloomy words of Guy Debord, writing about what he saw as a “Society of the Spectacle”: “With the destruction of history, contemporary events themselves retreat into a remote and fabulous realm of unverifiable stories, uncheckable statistics, unlikely explanations and untenable reasoning” (Debord 1998: 16 [First published 1988]) and “Spectators are linked solely by their one-way relationship to the very center that keeps them isolated from each other” (Debord 2014: 10 [Originally published in 1967]). This can be seen in light of fears that social media and online news lead to greater difficulty in discerning the truth as well as the potential impact social media has on inter-human relationships.

Especially the last of the above quotes might seem to stand in stark contrast with the view of Marshall McLuhan, who wrote “We live today in the Age of Information and of Communication because electric media instantly and constantly create a total field of interacting events in which all men participate. [...] The simultaneity of electric communication, also characteristic of our nervous system, makes each of us present and accessible to every other person in the world” (McLuhan 2017: 333 [Originally published in 1964]). Remembering that both these authors wrote before the age of internet, it does seem like McLuhan had the most accurate prediction about how each of us would be accessible and present to everybody in the world, but Debord’s view of contemporary events as “unverifiable stories” seems strikingly accurate when one takes a closer look at the ongoing debate over “fake news”.

The human interconnecting aspect might be one of the most revolutionary new changes to news reading on an online social media platform as opposed to traditional news reading. Social media also creates engagement, especially amongst younger people, as it is a more interactive medium than television and newspapers. It has been claimed that the results of the American election in 2008 was considerably affected by the active use of social media by the Obama campaign and his supporters. Obama himself has stated that part of the reason for why he was able to win the 2008 election was his campaign’s use of social media as this new technology was emerging (Memoli 2008). Users of social media are able to connect, comment and interact with each other and with the news source in a way that has never before been possible.

While many news websites offer a comment section, it often seems to be ignored by the majority of readers (it is usually at the bottom of an article after all, so on average the reader does not get that far before clicking on to something new). A traditional newspaper is also severely limited in how much reader feedback it can present to the other readers. On Facebook, however, every story has a comment section, available to anyone who sees a post, to be read and interacted with. This can lead to the public actively correcting and criticizing a news outlet's possibly flawed presentation of a given story. Especially coverage of international news can be corrected or expanded upon by people who are present at the relevant place. If a news outlet shares a story on Facebook claiming, for instance, that the inhabitants of Country A are displeased with the regime and protesting, a citizen of that country can then comment and deny or confirm that this actually taking place. If people across the world read this, they might be inspired to look for more information from different sources and grow skeptical to the original news outlet's validity and credibility. "Hypertext and the interactivity of the read-write web have changed the way that readers and writers relate with readers moving from the position of passive recipients of information to active collaborators in the process of knowledge creation" (Jones & Hafner 2012: 47).

As democratic as this system might seem at first glance, the comment section is not free from manipulation of information flow either. Being active collaborators to the creating of knowledge also opens up for ideological, biased and potentially malignant propaganda to spread. Several governments allegedly pay agents to spread ideological (mis)information in international news on social media. One major example of this is that Russia has been accused of using ads and fake Facebook and Twitter accounts to spread information to affect the American election in 2016 (Shane 2017), which will be covered further in the next chapter. There are also independent groups such as the Jewish Internet Defense Force, founded to combat antisemitism and promote Israeli politics online (Cling 2010), including on Facebook. There are also civilian groups which go on "raids" on news outlets' comment sections or on forums where an opposing view to that of the raiding group is usually held. Commonly known as "Shills", these posters can vary from ideologically convinced keyboard warriors to government paid agents and may or may not include any number of non-human fake social media accounts, bots, which are run by computer-made systems to post a certain message or to automatically react to comments made by other bots or their human operatives. It is also possible to create false Facebook profiles pretending to

be a member of e.g. an ethnic or religious minority group and comment on controversial topics under the guise of presenting an opinion not typically perceived to be held by this group (such as “I am Muslim but Trump is great”). A person can thus use a fake social media account, post an ideological comment on a news outlet, and get their associated bots to like this comment, making it appear like a more popular point of view than it might actually be. This can increase the presence of some comments, by giving them a lot of reactions. This can lead to other, neutral and genuine comments being filtered away by Facebook’s algorithms that usually only show the “Top comments” in a comment field, unless the user actively changes these settings, which a hyper-reading individual is unlikely to do.

When gathering headlines for this thesis, it was noticed that many CNN stories had comment sections featuring several top comments that were unrelated to the article itself but was in some way or form praising Donald Trump’s presidency while attacking CNN’s credibility. In contrast, HuffPost articles often featured negative comments about Trump on articles that were in no way related to politics. As of January 24 2018, a soft story about questions to ask on a first date has a top comment saying “Only one question need be asked.. did you vote for Trump?” [sic], by a profile with no pictures or previous activity. Is this a shill account or just a person who does not spend a lot of time updating their Facebook profile? This is impossible to tell. Even if it is a professional troll paid by the Russian government to spread division in America, the comment itself reflects a sentiment that many Americans presumably agree with, hence the comment being liked enough to become a top comment (presuming that the Facebook likes are from real profiles).

Social media comment sections can provide an excellent platform for a democratic and interactive process where readers engage with the news publisher and with other readers, but it can also be manipulated into yet another controlled informational cascade. It is not surprising that trust in media is at an all-time low (Ingram 2016; Knight Foundation 2018: 2).

5.7 Russian bots, disinformation, and the 2016 United States presidential election

It is perhaps very telling of the power that social media is perceived to have that a major story in February 2018 is about Russian influence on the 2016 American presidential election through use of social media. It is claimed that several Facebook pages and groups pretending to be American patriots and/or nationalists were set up by Russian operatives in an attempt to interfere in the American election (Shane 2018). It has been called a “sweeping Russian disinformation campaign that was funded with millions of dollars” (Shane 2018). On February 16 2018, the special counsel investigating Russian interference in the American election filed an indictment in court, claiming that many Americans were unknowingly engaged with Russian trolls who assisted in organizing pro-Trump events (Shane 2018). Answering to questions from the Senate Intelligence Committee, Facebook stated that around 338,300 people saw the rally announcements promoted by these hoax pages (Shane 2018). While this number can seem nearly insignificant compared to the number of Americans eligible to vote, it could be actions like these that start an informational cascade, as described in Chapter 5.3.

While it is debatable how much influence these Russian posters have had, some influential people were fooled by Russian social media accounts, such as a Twitter account (“@TEN_GOP) posing as a Tennessee Republican account, being retweeted by Donald Trump Jr, and presidential counselor Kellyanne Conway (Shane 2018). Another example could be the 2017 trending hashtag *#BoycottStarbucks* after the Starbucks Company announced that they would hire 10,000 refugees as a response to President Trump’s travel ban. One Twitter user, “@Pamela_Moore13”, posted the comment: “Hiring 10k refugees makes liberals feel warm BUT we have homeless vets that need those jobs. *#BoycottStarbucks* *#ReasonsToProtest* *#MuslimBan*”, which was retweeted by major media outlets such as the LA Times, HuffPost Mexico and Vice News, and even addressed by the Starbucks company. It was later revealed that this user was a Russian fake account (Blumenthal 2018). People who have been accused of being influenced by Russian trolls tend to deny this, such as when CNN tracked down a woman who ran a pro-Trump Facebook page through which she supported events promoted by “Russia-linked trolls” (Logan 2018). Not surprisingly, this CNN interview was harshly criticized by right-winged news outlets who accused CNN of “doxing” and harassing an

elderly woman (Saavedra 2018) and causing her to become a victim of abuse and violent threats on social media (Nash 2018). This last news story is a good illustration of the many levels of influence social media now has: On the first level people are exposed to information and disinformation on social media, which may be organized by foreign governments. Then, people who further shares this information are portrayed on news on social media themselves, which in turn leads to a third series of news events about the coverage of the people influenced by social media, which includes civilian social media reactions as evidence of a CNN report leading to harassment (Nash 2018).

As of the writing of this thesis, the conclusions about potential Russian influence on the American election through social media is inconclusive. The media's focus on potential foreign influence and use as social media as a powerful platform of spreading disinformation and influencing politics can remind one of the coverage of Twitter's role in the Iranian protests in 2009. Western media then portrayed Twitter and other social media as having a "dramatic role" in the protests, but these claims are "probably wildly exaggerated" (Jones & Hafner 2012: 99). It is entirely possible that any Russian trolling on Facebook has an insignificant amount of influence on American politics. Then again, social media has become more popular since 2009, so it is also possible that social media's influence has seen a drastic increase over the past decade or so. Brendan Nyhan cites several studies that show that the exposure to potential Russian bots is pretty limited, and that the people who are exposed to the most fake news are already very ideological, making it unlikely that they will be changing their political party affiliation as a result of Russian activity on Facebook (Nyhan 2018). While Twitter's data showing that Russian bots tweeted 2.1 million times before the election might seem like a lot at first glance, this only makes up 1% of election-related tweets, and exposure to them make up 0,5% of election-related tweet views (Nyhan 2018). While Nyhan points out that "none of these findings indicate that fake news and bots aren't worrisome signs for American democracy", and that they can lead to citizens being misled and polarized as well as undermining media trust, he states that combatting online misinformation should be based on "evidence and data, not hype or speculation" (Nyhan 2018).

The interesting point for the purposes of this thesis is to see how social media is *perceived* as having a potentially significant impact on the outcome of a presidential election. It

is also interesting to see how a speculative, emotional and “hyped” reaction to possible influence of Russian bots, which may be wildly exaggerated, can in itself spread in the same way as the sensationalist, pathos-appealing fake news. It has been claimed that these alleged Russian trolls played on the very nature of social media and its encouragement of creating divisive, controversial material to evoke reactions amongst people and create user activity (Blumenthal 2018). An unnamed former staff member of the social media news site Mic has been quoted as saying “‘A lot of the videos that we would publish would be like, ‘Here is this racist person doing a racist thing in this nondescript southern city somewhere.’ There wouldn’t be any reporting or story around it, just, ‘Look at this person being racist, wow what a terrible racist’” about the news outlet’s method of creating user-engaging content (Blumenthal 2018). This type of content is very easy to produce and requires little to no journalistic labor. It is therefore also easy to produce by foreign agents, and they incite strong reactions from people, which can cause further political polarization.

This type of news reporting, if it can even be called that, can blur the lines between what constitutes “fake news” and just very sensationalist and substance-lacking news. Touching on controversial topics that are likely to have a sentimental reaction tries to make up for the lack of substance in the content. The form is also easily created, simply following the blueprints already available on digital media and spreading it on social media. A 2018 study found that fake news (or “false news” as the study calls it) spread significantly faster than true news on Twitter, and that this is especially prominent for false political news (Vosoughi et al. 2018: 1). False news were also found to be more “novel” than factual news, and that people are more likely to share information that invoke strong negative emotional reactions, such as fear and disgust (Vosoughi et al 2018: 1).

While this study only focused on one specific social media platform, Twitter, it seems likely that an equivalent study of fake news spreading on Facebook and other social media would show similar results. News about politics, urban legends and science were found to spread to the most people, with politics and urban legends also spreading the fastest (Vosoughi et al 2018: 4). The study also found that users who spread false news typically had fewer followers, followed fewer people and had been on Twitter for a shorter time period than the accounts spreading true news. The rapid spread of false news is therefore not caused by some users having built up a

large audience on Twitter over a long time, as might have been expected (Vosoughi et al 2018: 4). It was further found that falsehoods were 70% more likely to be retweeted than the truth (Vosoughi et al 2018: 4). The study sees a possible explanation for this in that novelty attracts human attention, which in information theory can be seen as contributing to productive decision-making and encourages the sharing of information, as “novelty updates our understanding of the world“ (Vosoughi et al 2018: 4). The study by Vosoughi et al did consider that perhaps bots were responsible for the spread of false news, but even after running advanced programs to filter out tweets by bots, the conclusions remained unchanged, leading the researchers to conclude that false news spread faster and deeper than true news because humans are more likely to spread them (Vosoughi et al 2018: 5). The study concludes that: “The greater likelihood of people to re-tweet falsity more than the truth is what drives the spread of false news, despite network and individual factors that favor the truth [...] Furthermore, although recent testimony before congressional committees on misinformation in the United States has focused on the role of bots in spreading false news, we conclude that human behavior contributes more to the differential spread of falsity and truth than automated robots do” (Vosoughi et al 2018: 5).

This can suggest that even though the current media focus (as of March 2018) is largely on bot accounts possibly interfering with the U.S. election, one should perhaps look closer to the human element to understand how and why fake news spreads so quickly on social media. After all, the false stories produced by bots are also spread by real people because they appeal to human elements and appeal to emotions, something a bot or algorithm does not possess. Sinan Aral, who co-authored the above-mentioned study, has also stated that “labeling news sources, similar to how food is accompanied by a nutrition label that explains how it is made and what is in it, might ‘reduce the spread of fake news online’” (Darcy 2018). Since the human element is so prevalent in the spread of false information, it could possibly be more useful to teach people to be aware of how they read, and react to what they read, than to primarily focus on making new algorithms to combat the spread of false news. If people were critical and reflective of what they read, it seems likely that they would be less likely to spread false information.

6. Data findings

6.1 Methodology

This thesis aims at getting an overview of what news are being shown to the U.S.-based Facebook user, so naturally looking at the actual news articles being presented is important. To obtain this data, 400 headlines from nine of the 10 most popular U.S.-based news outlets (on Facebook) were collected between December 6 2017 and January 4 2018. The terms “collected”, “recorded” and “gathered” will be used interchangeably to describe the process of gathering headlines in written form. Headlines from CNN International were not noted in addition to the regular CNN statistics despite being one of the 10 most popular U.S.-based news outlets. Being a sub-division of CNN it is likely to have a similar division between hard and soft news, and similar ideological leanings as the main CNN branch. Being geared towards an international audience it is natural that it covers fewer domestic stories than the primary CNN page. It was therefore judged unnecessary to include it in addition to the primary CNN Facebook page.

The popularity was measured in amount of likes a page has on Facebook. The headlines were collected chronologically as they appeared on the page’s Facebook wall/feed, to try to get the most objective look at what type of stories were presented, and to note if a page chose to repost the same story several times. The headlines were gathered in a txt-document to be easily entered into the NoteTab software for an analysis of word frequency, including the frequency of the various hashtags. Both the article’s headline and the accompanying text on the Facebook post were collected if both were present. In some cases, the headline shown on the Facebook preview differed from the headline shown when reading the actual article. In these cases, the headline shown on Facebook is the one that has been collected, as it would be the one most relevant to this thesis, as the headlines are often all that is read. In a few cases, human error had caused there to be slightly fewer than 400 headlines collected chronologically for some outlets, so between one and seven additional headlines were collected at a later date. These were arbitrarily chosen and would not impact the overall findings in any significant way.

The ten most popular U.S.-based news outlets on Facebook as measured by the amount of likes were as of December 5 2017:

1. CNN: 29,249,839 Likes (28,869,641 Followers)
2. CNN International: 16,930,366 Likes (16,813,187 Followers)
3. Fox News: 16,050,164 Likes (15,639,112 Followers)
4. New York Times: 14,986, 648 Likes (14,522,277 Followers)
5. TIME: 12,379,516 Likes (12,061,094 Followers)
6. ABC News: 12,150,583 Likes (12,037,521 Followers)
7. HuffPost: 9,814,334 Likes (9,155,007 Followers)
8. NBC News: 9,380,812 Likes (9,197,405 Followers)
9. USA Today: 8,742,491 Likes (8,653,620 Followers)
10. Business Insider: 7,982,945 Likes (7,783,088 Followers)

The initial plan was to gather the headlines of the top 15 most popular outlets over a period of three months, to get an overview of the news shown by various outlets over the same time period. This proved to be pretty overwhelming, however, as many news outlets publish up to a hundred articles a day. Scrolling down several months also caused the web browser to slow down. It also seemed as if content disappeared, or at least did not show up, when scrolling back more than a month. Almost the entirety of October 2017 did not show up when scrolling back on Fox News' timeline, for example. Whether this is a deliberate deletion of articles or a result of Facebook's algorithms not displaying older news is not apparent. This was an interesting observation in itself, as it shows how the very nature of Facebook is focused on the "here and now", with few options for going back in time and "search the archives". The headlines gathered will therefore not be of the exact same time period, but this thesis will primarily focus on digital literacy and online reading habits over exact media representation, and the data gathered still shows the important differences in the types of content presented by the various outlets. Other works, both past and present, have attempted to show media bias with regards to what is

presented in the news picture (Chomsky 1994; Shapiro 2013 are some that are cited in this thesis) and that is not the focus of this work. A total of 4,000 headlines is felt to be sufficient to notice trends, tendencies and differences between news outlets on Facebook, and to draw conclusions on how these may affect the readers' reading habits and understandings.

Each headline was marked by a series of hashtags (#) to further categorize them. Stories that were about events taking place in the USA were marked as #Domestic, while stories from outside the USA were marked as #International. Some stories were marked as #Domestic-International as they deal with things such as US foreign relations or American citizens' activities abroad or with non-US citizens. Many headlines did not fit into a Domestic-International dichotomy, such as lifestyle articles on domestic chores or relationship advice, and were thus left unmarked. The headlines were then categorized as *soft*, *medium* or *hard* news. Some researchers, such as Bakshy et al have categorized their news in only a soft vs. hard dichotomy, counting hard news as "national news, politics or world affairs" and soft news as "sports, entertainment, or travel" (Bakshy et al 2015: 1130).

During the collecting of headlines it was found that many headlines were hard to categorize with such a clear-cut distinction between soft and hard news, and hence the medium section was added for this thesis' data gathering. The type of articles to fall in the medium category would for example be: articles on a celebrity's reaction to a hard news article which they were not directly involved with and events which in themselves are not directly impactful on the world but which might have wider implications in the future. An example of the latter would be the engagement between Prince Harry and the American actress Meghan Markle, or articles about potentially vital health and lifestyle choices or scientific progress which may be presented in a sentimental or tabloid way. It would be unfair to categorize some of these articles as soft news, because they can have strong symbolic value and a ripple effect on serious political and social events, but they are also hard to put on the same level as other hard news which deals directly with important news stories. The above mentioned royal engagement is usually presented as a typical big celebrity engagement, with focus being on the romantic aspects of the relationship itself, but it might have wider implications for serious events such as US-UK relations and racial politics, with Meghan Markle being half black marking an arguably significant change to the British monarchy and possibly affecting race-related politics in the

future. Many of these articles were therefore marked “#Medium”. One can disagree with this thesis’ labelling and categorizing of headlines, as these evaluations were entirely subjective. The struggle with categorizing headlines shows how the current media spectacle blends entertainment, celebrity status, sentimental videos and serious news.

Since the news outlets were not covered over the same time period, it is not possible to get an exact overview of what type of content is represented by looking at the covering or omission of specific events. But by looking at the frequency of certain words and topics, it is felt that a solid impression of a news outlet’s type of content can be shown. Some words whose frequency were felt to have potentially ideological significance were: man/men, woman/women, racism/racist, sexism/sexist, gun(s), feminism, Trump, immigration/immigrant(s) and healthcare. These were noted separately from the hashtag system which was used to collect the topic of a headline, where the topic was not necessarily mentioned by name. In some cases the hashtag system proved necessary to see how often a topic was talked about, either because it was not mentioned by name, or because alternative spellings made it hard to accurately note the word frequency. Some news outlets write “Health care”, others write “healthcare”, for instance.

Because it is such a polarizing political topic, the coverage of President Donald Trump was also registered. Since it is an ongoing event it seems like a good way to get an impression of media’s coverage of events and their positions. If a news outlet covers Trump’s presidency positively, it seems reasonable to assume that they would also positively portray other Republican political views, and vice versa. For similar reasons as for the inclusion of the medium category in addition to the soft vs. hard dichotomy, a category for neutral coverage of Trump was added. This covers headlines that were felt to present neutral facts in an objective manner, without taking any clear side in the news reporting in itself, regardless of how the readers of the story might choose to interpret it.

During the time of data collection for this thesis there were several cases of high-profile figures being accused of having committed sexual assaults or been sexually harassing people in inferior positions of power. The accused ranged from movie stars to politicians, and the public exposure of such figures and their actions would later turn into the #MeToo-movement. While it would be possible to note down which outlets chose to cover which cases of alleged sexual harassment as well as differentiate between assault and harassment claims, this was felt to go

beyond the purposes of this thesis. Therefore, all news stories which were felt to be directly about or connected to a story of sexual harassment or assault were marked as *#SexualScandal* during the data gathering process, and will be referred to here as *sexual scandals*.

6.2 Data findings and tables

The following is the data gathered from the collection of 400 headlines from nine of the most popular US-based news outlets on Facebook, gathered between December 6 2017 and January 4 2018. See a list of the most popular news outlets under the Methodology chapter. The various outlet’s divides between soft, medium and hard news can be seen below in Table 1. In table 2 one finds the outlet’s coverage of domestic and international news stories. In table 3 the various news outlet’s coverage of President Trump/the Trump presidency is found, divided into positive, neutral or negative coverage. Tables 4.1 and 4.2 show the frequency of use and coverage of certain words and topics that are felt to be divisive in the current American political climate. Table 5 lists the amount of stories posted related to various sexual harassment/assault cases. Finally, Table 6 shows the frequency of Facebook posts being in video format.

Table 1 – Soft, medium & hard news

News Outlet	Soft	Medium	Hard
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ABC News	72	79	249
Bus. Insider	253	77	70
CNN	91	115	194
Fox News	50	155	195
HuffPost	147	105	148
NBC News	63	49	288
N.Y. Times	116	70	212
TIME Mag.	202	101	94
USA Today	161	72	166

Table 2 – Domestic vs. international coverage

News Outlet	Domestic	International
ABC News	301	55
Business Insider	44	12
CNN	101	91
Fox News	335	34
HuffPost	285	25
NBC News	245	34
New York Times	209	73
TIME Magazine	183	33
USA Today	183	24

Table 3 – Positive, neutral or negative coverage of President Trump

News Outlet	Trump Positive	Trump Neutral	Trump Negative
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ABC News	1	30	20
Business Insider	2	11	13
CNN	1	30	66
Fox News	65	18	2
HuffPost	0	8	65
NBC News	3	20	15
New York Times	1	12	44
TIME Magazine	1	11	19
USA Today	2	8	19

Table 4.1 – Frequency of some ideologically connected terms and topics

News Outlet	Gun(s)	Trump	Man/Men	Woman/Women
ABC News	10	104	25	26
Bus. Insider	0	41	6	6
CNN	3	157	12	25
Fox News	8	136	15	29
HuffPost	2	94	27	41
NBC News	5	98	14	30
N.Y. Times	1	87	15	30
TIME	1	41	19	18
USA Today	4	52	19	28

Table 4.2 - Frequency of some ideologically connected terms and topics

News Outlet	LGBT	Feminism	Immigration	Healthcare	Racism
ABC News	4	0	4	4	1
Bus. Insider	0	0	1	0	0
CNN	3	0	16	4	1
Fox News	0	2	7	2	5
HuffPost	18	12	5	5	12
NBC News	9	0	2	4	5
NYT	7	1	4	6	5
TIME	3	5	1	1	2
USA Today	2	6	3	0	1

Table 5 – Coverage of sexual scandals

News Outlets:	Number of stories covering sexual scandals
ABC News	38
Business Insider	4
CNN	12
Fox News	26
HuffPost	63
NBC News	39
New York Times	25
Time Magazine	44
USA Today	51

Table 6 – Amount of video format posts

News Outlet	Amount of video format posts
ABC News	164
Business Insider	49
CNN	104
Fox News	262
HuffPost	64
NBC News	109
New York Times	33
Time Magazine	151
USA Today	68

I. ABC News (Scrolling started December 10 2017)

LGBT-issues were covered four times and just one event of racism was reported, and the term “racism” did not appear in the 400 headlines. “Feminism” and “sexism” did not appear within the headlines either. Healthcare was covered four times. “Women” or “woman” was used a total of 26 times, “man” or “men” 25 times. “Gun” or “guns” was mentioned 10 times total. “Immigrants” and “immigration” were used a total of four times, and “Trump” was mentioned 104 times. Trump’s presidency was positively covered just once, neutrally 30 times and negatively 20 times. 72 headlines were categorized as soft, 79 as medium and 249 as hard. There was also a tendency to favor domestic news over international, with 301 falling clearly into the former category and only 55 in the latter. ABC News also covered various cases of sexual harassment 38 times. 164 of the collected posts on Facebook were videos. The gathering of 400 headlines starting on December 10 2017 reached back to stories posted on November 30 2017, showing that an average of 40 stories were posted on Facebook each day by ABC News.

ABC news comes across as a very traditional American news outlet, covering a relatively wide range of topics, from serious international political issues to the weather in America and some sentimental videos and articles. There does not appear to be any obvious ideological stance behind what news stories they present. Their coverage of LGBT-related events is pretty average, and while they report below average amounts of stories about racist-related events, they fall central on the median here. They provide the second-highest number of hard content news. Their soft to medium news content is largely focused on events involving regular people doing or experiencing noteworthy things, not celebrity gossip or lifestyle articles. “*Indiana cop discovers reindeer in back of van pulled over for traffic violation*” can be seen as a representative example of a soft news story from ABC News.

Their headlines are generally informative and tries to present stories as facts, not opinions. On sensitive topics such as immigration, a similar factual presentation can be found. A headline on immigration for example, is worded “*Immigration arrests spiked, illegal border crossings dropped in 2017: DHS*”, which does not take any clear side in the debate over immigration politics. It is then up to the reader to decide, based on their pre-understandings and ideological stance, whether this is a positive or negative thing, and which factors have resulted in this situation. When posting material that was marked as negative to Trump’s presidency, it was

usually done in a factual manner, such as “Colbert, Fallon slam Trump for backing Roy Moore amid harassment scandal”, reserving the moral judgement to the people whose reaction was reported. ABC News also tied with CNN on having the highest amount of neutral coverage of Trump’s presidency, also due to their matter-of-fact style of reporting. On the controversial move to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, headlines such as “*Trump recognizes Jerusalem as Israel's capital in historic move*” were the norm for ABC News. This is in stark contrast to more ideological news outlets such as HuffPost, which described the decision as “a highly controversial move” and citing experts who claim that it threatens peace in the Middle East (see Appendix, headline 2). There were also no opinion-pieces published in the time period noted here.

A follower of ABC news is likely to be informed on a range of domestic events, but relatively few international ones. As the headlines tend to be informative and neutral, they can appeal to people across the political spectrum. The headlines collected here did not tend to draw connections between event and politics or clearly push an ideological narrative, leaving the reader to draw their own ideological conclusions. With the lack of references to pop culture and celebrities, as well as the formal and informative writing, it appears that ABC News tries to appeal to a mature audience.

II. Business Insider (Scrolling began January 3 2018)

Terms like “racist” or “racism” were never used, nor were LGBT-issues covered. “Gun(s)” or “feminism”, “healthcare” were also never used. “Women/woman” were mentioned a total of 6 times, the same as “man/men”. “Immigration” and “sexist” were both listed once, and “Trump” was used 41 times. Trump’s presidency was covered positively once, neutrally 11 times and negatively 13 times. Business Insider has the most soft news content, with 253 stories being labeled as soft, 77 as medium and only 70 as hard. Because of the nature of the articles posted by Business Insider, most were not bound by geographical relevance, with only 44 being clearly domestic and 12 international. 49 Facebook posts were in the form of videos. Only four cases of sexual harassment were covered in the recorded time period. Scrolling through 400 headlines

starting on January 3 2018 only reached back to December 31 2017, showing that Business Insider averages 100 Facebook posts daily.

Business Insider's business model seems to be providing content that is entertaining and light, often connected to technology and popular gadgets and various forms of entertainment, as well as articles dealing with health and lifestyle. The CEO of Business Insider, Henry Blodget, has previously defended the use of clickbait headlines, but using the term 'linkbait', stating that "You know what the definition of 'linkbait' is? It's a story that people want to link to and share" (Ha 2012). This might explain why the majority of Business Insider's material is categorized as soft content. Not surprisingly when considering their name, Business Insider posts a lot of headlines related to economics and finance, but this is often done in an alluring, almost clickbait way. Some clickbait material is still present, with headlines such as "*How I paid off \$24,000 in credit card debt in just 15 months*" (Appendix, headline 3), which requires the reader to click on and read the article to find out how debt can be paid off. Business Insider also features several articles about various technological gadgets, pop culture or consumer culture products, for example "*Amazon Prime members are obsessed with this 7-in-1 kitchen appliance*" (Appendix, headline 4) and "*McDonald's is bringing back one of its most expensive failures — but there's a catch*" (Appendix, headline 5). Note also the lack of concise information provided by these headlines. The reader is not told which kitchen appliance nor which McDonald's item is talked about, and if the reader is interested, they will have to click on the article to find out (or use a tool to circumvent clickbait, as discussed in Chapter 3.4).

Business Insider features several articles consisting of lists of things, ranging from pop culture to facts about successful businesspeople. Examples of this are "*9 things you never knew about Disney parks, according to a man who played Goofy for 20 years*" (Appendix, headline 6) and "*24 mind-blowing facts about Warren Buffett and his \$77 billion fortune*" (Appendix, headline 7). Neither of these articles seem likely to incite a powerful emotional reaction in the reader, unlike hard news reports about controversial topics, but might appeal to readers who desire a more relaxed, non-serious and entertaining type of content. When Business Insider features hard content about very serious events, this material ends up appearing in-between informal content, such as the headline "*21 people are dead and 450 under arrest in Iran's bloody week of protests*" appearing between "*The most popular beer and liquor for the fans of every*

NFL team” and *“The 22 most beautiful buildings in the world, according to architects”* (Appendix, headlines 8, 9 & 10). Many headlines feature informal writing, appealing directly to the reader (“Here’s how you can do/achieve X”) or referring to the journalist(s) themselves (“I/we tried Y, here’s what happened”), something not found on news outlets with more focus on hard content.

With a strong focus on technology, business, travelling, health and entertainment, together with the informal style of writing, it seems like Business Insider tries to appeal to a younger demographic that are financially well off enough to consider exotic vacation destinations and various new gadgets as interesting and relevant. A reader who primarily uses Business Insider as their source of news is unlikely to be very well informed about various political events taking place, either in or outside of the US. In the light of Business Insider CEO Henry Blodget’s statements on what material works on an online medium (Ha 2012), it appears that the news outlet is dedicated to presenting soft, entertaining content that is cheap and fast to produce.

III. CNN (Scrolling began January 3 2018)

In the recorded time period, CNN posted 91 stories labeled as soft content, 115 that were considered medium content, and 194 that were considered hard content. The term “Feminism” was not used, but 13 stories were marked as dealing with feminist-related issues, such as *“A record-breaking 22 women are now serving in US Senate”* (Appendix, headline 11). “Gun(s)” appeared three times. The topic of healthcare was covered four times. “Immigrants”/“Immigration” was mentioned 16 times, more than any other news outlet. “Sexism”/“Sexist” does not appear, “Racist” appears once. “Women”/“Woman” mentioned 25 times, “man”/“men” mentioned 12 times. “Trump” was mentioned 157 times. Three headlines were marked as LGBT-related. Trump’s presidency was covered positively once, neutrally 30 times and negatively 66 times. Of the gathered Facebook posts, 104 were videos. Various sexual harassment stories were covered a total of 12 times.

CNN has more coverage of Donald Trump than any of the other news outlets and has a pretty even spread of soft, medium and hard news, with just under half being categorized as hard. They covered almost as many domestic as international news, which was a little surprising considering how they have a whole sub-page dedicated to international news: CNN International. CNN features several opinion pieces where they allow a more informal and opinionated style of presenting stories, with colorful headlines such as *“The political bomb cyclone otherwise known as the Trump presidency has brought 2018 in with a roar”* (Appendix, headline 12) and *“Donald Trump's nuclear button is way bigger than yours: From the size of his buildings to the size of his genitals to the size of his nuclear arsenal, Trump is totally and completely obsessed with being the biggest and the best”* (Appendix, headline 13). CNN also takes small jabs at opposing news outlets, primarily Fox News: *“Dean: Nixon might have survived Watergate if there had been Fox News”*, where the implication (here) is that Fox News supports and protects presidents who commit illegal actions that should cause them to resign. CNN also presents more neutral and matter-of-fact-styled headlines even on controversial topics however, such as *“Trump reiterates he wants DACA as long as it comes with border wall”* (Appendix, headline 14), which can be viewed as either a positive or negative thing, depending on the reader’s political stance.

Several headlines feature informal sub-headlines, such as the headline *“Britain's Princess Charlotte starts nursery school”*, which is factual direct, but followed by the highly informal sub-headline: *“All together: Awwwwwww”* (Appendix, headline 15). A reader who primarily follows CNN as their news outlet on Facebook is likely to be informed about a relatively wide range of topics, both domestic and international. Because of CNN’s opinion articles, a reader seems more likely to be swayed towards a political and ideological perspective than they would be from reading e.g. ABC News, which could consequently affect how they perceive the other, more neutral and matter-of-fact worded headlines.

IV. Fox News (Data collection starting September 1 2017) ¹

Across 400 collected headlines, 262 were videos, but do note that Facebook appeared to not display non-video articles when scrolling far back in time, so this might be a non-representative statistic. Regarding politically controversial and/or divisive topics one found the following statistics: The word “Feminist” was mentioned once, but not in a case dealing with a feminist issue. “Gun(s)” eight times, “ “immigrants”/”immigration” seven times, “sexist” once, “racist(s)” five times, “woman”/”women” 29 times, “man”/”men” 15 times and “Trump” 136 times. No headlines were marked as “#LGBT”. Healthcare was covered twice. Trump’s presidency was covered positively 65 times, neutrally 18 times and negatively only twice. 26 posts covered various sexual harassment cases.

As expected, Fox News presents a right-winged discourse, being the only major news outlet that is primarily positive to the Trump presidency. Fox also joins a trend of media criticism and populism, which seems to be unique among the larger, mainstream outlets. Typically this is done by alternative/independent news outlets, but Fox News still runs headlines such as *“The coastal elites are flat-out jealous of the performance of Houston and Texas”* (Appendix, headline 16). Fox also covers cases of violence by left-winged political activists that seem unlikely to be covered by left-leaning outlets, with phrases such as *“A lot of these leftists agitators like Antifa are being bused in by the liberals to create this chaos”* (Appendix, headline 17).

The populist, anti-media sentiments can be seen in the light of President Trump’s frequent attacks on the mainstream media, and it does seem like Fox News is trying to show their audience that they are different from “the other, left-winged media”. When Fox News cover celebrity figures, it is often in a negative manner, possibly because many famous people have “progressive” political views, and the entertainment industry is often considered as being opposed to conservative views and values. Headlines can then take a mocking tone towards

¹ Here an attempt to scroll back to September was attempted, but as mentioned in the methodology chapter, this proved to have its difficulties. A larger amount of videos than is actually representative is therefore shown in the actual data, and it will hence not be mentioned, but the difference in soft-medium-hard and the focus on international or domestic cases is felt to be representative).

celebrities' actions, such as "*Eminem 'Extremely Angry' Trump Did Not Respond to His Freestyle Rap Bashing. Eminem cannot understand why President Donald J. Trump did not respond to the recording artist's five-minute freestyle rap bashing*". There were a total of 48 headlines which were found to be anti-Democrat and/or anti-Clinton, with harsh critiques of the actions and policies of the Clinton family and the Democratic Party. An example would be "'We have three Watergate-level scandals going on right now involving the Clintons.' - On 'Special Report,' Charles Hurt discussed the latest allegation against Hillary Clinton amid a claim that the DNC rigged the Democratic presidential primary in Clinton's favor" (Appendix, headline 18) and "'We now have the evidence that the FBI's investigation of Hillary Clinton did not follow normal and standard procedures.' – Rep. Matt Gaetz" (Appendix, headline 19).

Fox News also appears to be the only major media outlet which brings in religious topics and quoting Christian religious leaders, such as "'God is not necessarily an 'Open Borders Guy' as a lot of people would think that He is' - On 'Fox & Friends,' Dr. Robert Jeffress talked about immigration through the lens of his Christian faith" (Appendix, headline 20). Many of the headlines feature quotes by people making a statement on the relevant story, which may serve as a way to make the reader feel as if they are seeing a more personalized presentation. By quoting external people, they, similar to CNN's opinion pieces, manage presenting a clear ideological perspective without directly making any claims as a news network. Fox News also features use of internet slang term, such as "red-pilled", in "*Candace Owens talked about "taking the red pill" and leaving liberalism for conservatism*" (Appendix, headline 21), being a reference to the movie *The Matrix* (The Wachowski Brothers 1999), in which consuming the red pill allows the person taking it to see the world "as it really is" and not be blinded by ideology and other forms of deceit. Fox News covers stories where individuals or organizations make controversial and divisive remarks about what is and is not racism, such as "*Chris Prudhome responded to the California NAACP which called the National Anthem 'racist'*" (Appendix, headline 22), which are not covered by other major media outlets.

A reader who primarily relies on Fox News as their news outlet is likely to be well informed about domestic political events, but unlikely to be well informed on international events. While Trump's actions that are perceived as positive are presented and underlined, those who would put Trump in a negative light are not covered, opposite to the other major media

outlets who choose to not cover Trump’s positive actions, or at least to not attribute positive events to Trump’s presidency. A reader of Fox News will likely be more aware of controversial claims and actions done by left-wing and anti-racist groups, such as violence by organizations such as Antifa, and the California NAACP calling the National Anthem racist (see above). It seems unlikely that a regular reader of Fox News is supportive of the Democratic Party and their prominent politicians based on the negative coverage presented by Fox News. As was suspected before the headline data was gathered, shown more clearly by the statistics in Table 3 above and confirmed in a more in-depth reading of the collected headlines, Fox News presents very different stories from the other major news outlets.

V. HuffPost (Scrolling starting December 7 2017)

There were more cases covering LGBT-related topics and news (18 cases) than with the other major news outlets. They were also more focused on women’s rights, equality and identity politics, with a total of 20 headlines being labeled as feminist or as dealing with women’s rights, even though the words “feminist” or “feminism” do not appear themselves. The words “woman” or “women” appeared a total of 41 times in the gathered headlines, “man”/”men” appear 27 times. Words like “sexist” and “racist” only appeared once and three times, respectively. The topic of racism is, however, dealt with 12 times, more than any other news outlet, all featuring non-white victims. The word “gun” appears just twice in the gathered headlines. “Immigrant(s)”/”immigration” were mentioned four times total but covered five times. Healthcare was covered five times. “Trump” was mentioned 94 times. Trump’s presidency was also never covered positively, 8 times neutrally and 65 times negatively. There were 64 videos in the gathered Facebook posts. Various sexual harassment cases were covered 63 times.

HuffPost is nearly a polar opposite to Fox News in terms of what ideology they appear to promote. They use more emojis, memes and slang in their Facebook posts, with more stories covering things related to women’s rights, racism and other minority groups’ interests than the other networks. A headline which features several of the above mentioned would be “*News Anchor Expertly Claps Back At Viewer Who Called Her N****r*” (Appendix, headline 23), which features both a story about a person, who happens to be a woman, being a victim of

racism, as well as the slang phrase “claps back”, which Urban Dictionary defines as “basically a comeback, most likely pumped with attitude, sass and or shade.” (Urban Dictionary 2013). They are also the only news outlet to not have a single story presenting Trump’s presidency in a positive manner across the headlines collected for this thesis. HuffPost has more material focused on celebrities than the other news outlets, and generally portray these positively, possibly as a way to appeal to younger readers who are more likely to idolize these types of people. HuffPost also features several stories related to pop culture in general, social media trends and comics. Some examples of this are: “*Carrie Fisher’s BFF Dog Has A Perfectly Adorable Cameo In ‘Star Wars: The Last Jedi’*” (Appendix, headline 24), “*The Tiny But Telling Detail We Bet You Missed In ‘Coco’*” (Appendix, headline 25) and 27 “*Priceless Tweets About Life As A Married Person*” (Appendix, headline 26). The outlet is also not afraid of taking their own ideological stance in sub-headlines, such as in “*Jennifer Lawrence Reveals What She Would Do If She Ever Met Trump - Sub: We’re right there with you, Jennifer Lawrence!*” (Appendix, headline 27), and “*Trump wasn’t into Roy Moore until the sexual misconduct stuff came out and then he was like ‘my man!’*” (Appendix, headline 28), which take a more active stance from the side of the news outlet itself. This is different from how other outlets with clear political views (such as Fox News) choose to word their Facebook posts, instead choosing to attribute similar opinionated statements to individuals. HuffPost seems to take an active choice to present stories which promote progressive values from across the world, such as “*These badass girls are the first athletes to represent Nigeria at a Winter Olympics*” (Appendix, headline 29). They further stand out in their frequency of featured articles about various topics related to mental health, perhaps to help overcome a perceived stigma against both mental disorders and personality types and preferences. Examples of this are “*The Stigma Of Doing Things Alone*” [sic] (Appendix, headline 30) and “*What Are the Signs of ‘High-Functioning’ Depression and Could You Have It?*” (Appendix, headline 31). Several headlines also feature comedic content and/or headlines worded in a humorous way, such as “*Jesus Statue’s Butt Was Hiding A 240-Year-Old Secret Message*” (Appendix, headline 32) and “*The Funniest Tweets From Parents This Week*” (Appendix, headline 33).

A reader who primarily relies on HuffPost on Facebook as their source of news is likely to be well informed about a range of domestic political issues, popular culture, as well as many celebrities’ political stances. HuffPost ranked low on their coverage of international events in the

time period recorded. It also seems very unlikely that a reader who primarily reads HuffPost will be positive to Trump's presidency or the Republican Party in general, seeing as how HuffPost never presents these in a positive light.

VI. NBC News (Scrolling starting December 15 2017)

Of the headlines on Facebook posts gathered, 9 dealt with LGBT-related cases, five with racism, but the term "racist" was only used twice. "Feminism" was not used, "gun(s)" five times. "Healthcare" was used three times, but covered four times. "Immigration" was used just twice. "Sexist"/"sexism" was not mentioned. "Woman"/"women" were mentioned 30 times, "man"/"men" 14 times. "Trump" was mentioned 98 times. Trump's presidency was covered positively three times, neutrally 20 times and negatively 15 times in the collected headlines. Of the collected headlines/Facebook posts, 109 were in video format. There were 39 stories covering various sexual scandals.

With 245 stories being clearly domestic and 34 dealing with international issues, NBC is in the middle of the median for international coverage. With 288 stories covering hard news events, 49 medium and 63 soft, NBC News has the highest amount of hard content of the major news outlets. Their headlines tend to be informative and formal, avoiding slang phrases, emojis, memes or strong opinions. "*U.S. jets use warning flares to chase away Russian jets over Syria*" (Appendix, headline 34) and "*Bermuda to ban same-sex marriage just months after it was legalized*" (Appendix, headline 35) are examples of this. When covering topics where it seems clear that the outlet has a set ideological stance, the tone is still kept informative and matter-of-factly, such as: "*Since Sandy Hook, nearly 1,000 kids under the age of 12 have died from guns*" (Appendix, headline 36). NBC News does feature Opinion-pieces where less formal sentiments may be expressed, but these are not as inflammatory as those presented by Fox News or HuffPost. For example: "*Even Donald Trump wants Congress to save DREAMERS. So what's the hold-up?*" (Appendix, headline 37). Even when dealing with controversial themes, the tone is quite formal and reserved, such as: "*Golden Globes snubbed 'Girls Trip' because Hollywood cannot handle black joy: Opinion essay | Aramide A. Tinubu: 'Historically black-cast films and*

black actors are only acknowledged as 'worthy' with awards if suffering (or slavery) stands at the center.” (Appendix, headline 38).

NBC News’ soft content features mostly summaries of social studies, sentimental stories, coverage of popular technology, or natural phenomenon, with few celebrity stories. “*Size matters: Your wine glass is getting bigger*” (Appendix, headline 39), “*What did we search Google for the most this year?*” (Appendix, headline 40) and “*Bon Jovi, Nina Simone among five 2018 Rock & Roll Hall of Fame inductees*” (Appendix, headline 41) are examples of some of these. NBC News appears to be aiming at a more mature demographic than e.g. HuffPost, as can be seen in their choice of celebrities to cover: Bon Jovi and Nina Simone are artists that are more popular with an older audience than most of the celebrities covered by HuffPost. NBC News does not feature attempts at humorous or emotional headlines, even when dealing with cases that can be seen as sentimental, such as “*Celebrations erupt as this high school student learns that he has been accepted to the college of his dreams...*” (Appendix, headline 42), which could have included emojis and informal expressions of emotion.

A reader who primarily relies on NBC News on Facebook for their news coverage is likely to be very well informed about current events taking place in the US, and somewhat well informed about international events. With largely neutral coverage of Trump’s presidency but with opinion pieces presenting views tied to identity politics and coverage of the horrors of gun violence, NBC News can be seen as a moderate, center-left news outlet.

VII. New York Times (Scrolling began on December 6 2017, reached December 1 after 300 headlines. A resumption of headline gathering was done on January 17 to gather 100 more headlines)

In the collected headlines, there were nine stories about race-politics and five about racism, but the words “racist” or “racism” were only used twice. Seven stories were about LGBT-issues. The words “Feminist” and “guns” appears once each. Healthcare was covered six times. The words “Immigration” or “immigrant(s)” were mentioned three times, but the topic was covered four times. “Sexist” was not mentioned. “Man”/”men” were used 15 times, “women”/”woman” 30

times. There were 25 cases covering various sexual scandals. “Trump” was used 87 times. Over half their news were categorized as hard, 70 as medium and the rest soft. They only covered Trump’s presidency positively once, neutrally 12 times and negatively 44 times. With 209 cases being marked as clearly domestic and 73 dealing with international topics, New York Times is the news outlet with the second highest amount of international coverage, after CNN. 212 stories were considered hard news, 70 as medium and 116 as soft. Of the collected headlines, only 33 featured videos.

New York Times’ headlines tend to be informative and formal in style, such as “*Supreme Court Allows Third Version of Trump's Travel Ban to Take Effect*” (Appendix, headline 43). Since New York Times is the only major outlet requiring the reader to have a subscription to get full access to their articles, one can see several headlines which hint at a longer, reflective and in-depth article. For example: “*Five Strongmen, and the Fate of the Arab Spring - The fate of 5 Arab strongmen: One is in exile. One is under house arrest. One leads a ruined country. And two died violently*” (Appendix, headline 44) and “*Can a Jew Love France? - From The New York Times Opinion Section: 'I inherited a French dream. But things are not so dreamy for Jews today in France'*” (Appendix, headline 45). They feature some headlines where they seek to interact with their audience, which stands out from the other collected headlines, such as in “*Help Us Find Off-Beat Communities*” (Appendix, headline 46), which was posted twice in the recorded time period. Their cultural articles feature more “highbrow” culture than the other news outlets who primarily focus on pop-culture, shown in headlines like “*The Best Theater of 2017*” (Appendix, headline 47) and “*Hold on tight! We’re taking you on a break-neck backstage tour of the The Metropolitan Opera, with cameos by Misty Copeland, American Ballet Theatre and a snow yak*” (Appendix, headline 48), which features both high culture in the form of ballet and a direct appeal to the reader (“taking you”). The New York Times does feature opinion articles which can have quite strong ideological stances and a somewhat informal and/or accusatory or affirmatory style of writing, such as “*Opinion | No Wonder Millennials Hate Capitalism - The Republican tax plan would gift young Americans an even more unequal society than the one they were born into*” (Appendix, headline 49) and “*Trump Is a Racist. Period. - Charles M. Blow writes in The New York Times Opinion Section: 'Racism' and 'racist' are simply words that have definitions, and Donald J. Trump comfortably and unambiguously meets those definitions*” (Appendix, headline 50).

In the recorded headlines there is also featured an opinion article by former U.S. President Bill Clinton: *“Bill Clinton: Americans Must Decide Who We Really Are - Former President Bill Clinton writes in The New York Times Opinion Section: ‘All too often, tribalism based on race, religion, sexual identity and place of birth has replaced inclusive nationalism, in which you can be proud of your tribe and still embrace the larger American community’”* (Appendix, headline 51), which would most likely not have been featured on Fox News, which tend to talk about Bill Clinton in negative terms, such as calling him a sexual predator (Appendix, headline 52). While primarily being opposed to Trump’s presidency, the New York Times do feature cases of illegal immigrants committing serious crimes, such as in *“Deported Repeatedly, Man is sentenced to 35 years for Attacks on 2 Oregon women - The case drew the attention of the Trump administration as it has tried to crack down on undocumented immigrants”* (Appendix, headline 53). Stories like this could serve to enforce the views of Trump supporters and are typically not covered by far-left outlets such as HuffPost.

New York Times features cooking recipes, which is only found in three of the nine recorded news outlets’ stories (New York Times, Time Magazine and USA Today). They also feature stories centered around life in New York City, which makes sense as that is where the newspaper is localized: *“In a city where breaking a sweat often feels more like breaking the bank, here are some ways to get fit for free”* (Appendix, headline 54).

A reader who primarily relies on the New York Times as their Facebook news outlet is likely to be informed on a wide range of different topics, both domestic and international. With the often quite harsh opinion pieces directed against Donald Trump and his presidency it seems unlikely that a staunch Trump-supporter will be attracted by the New York Times’ ideological articles. As they provide several in-depth articles on serious topics, and require readers to pay a monthly subscription fee to gain full access, it seems reasonable to presume that readers of the New York Times are more likely to do deeper readings of elaborate news material than readers of the other outlets, as if one pays for access to articles it seems more likely that one will read them with more caution than articles that are free to access. With their varied coverage of culture, trends and cooking, it seems like the New York Times tries to have a wide demographic appeal, perhaps leaning towards those with an interest in longer and detailed articles, high culture and international affairs.

VII. Time Magazine (Scrolling started December 9 2017)

Across the recorded headlines, five cases of feminism were covered, only one case of healthcare and one of immigration was covered. Only one instance of “gun” was reported. Racism was covered twice, but the word “racist” or “racism” were not used. One case of sexism was covered, but again the term was not used. 19 cases of “Man”/”Men” were noted, and “woman”/”women” were mentioned 18 times. “Trump” was mentioned 41 times, and his presidency was covered positively just once, neutrally 11 times and negatively 19 times. Three LGBT-related cases were covered. Five instances of feminism were covered. Various sexual scandals were covered a total of 44 times. 183 cases were clearly dealing with domestic issues and 33 were international. 202 stories were marked as soft, 101 as medium and only 94 as hard, making Time Magazine the outlet with the second least amount of hard content after Business Insider. Of the recorded posts, 151 featured videos.

As seen in the statistics above, Time Magazine seems heavily focused on providing soft to medium content. The outlet also did more obvious reposting of articles than what was noticed from other outlets. As was noted in Chapter 3, this is not consistent with their physical magazine. There are several headlines that are not informative and can be categorized as clickbait, with alluring titles mentioning lists of material, for example: “*14 Reasons You’re Tired All the Time*” (Appendix, headline 55), “*Watch This Guy Propose to His Girlfriend 365 Times Without Her Knowing*” (Appendix, headline 56) and “*The Top 10 Movies of 2017*” (Appendix, headline 57). They even feature the stereotypical clickbait line of “you won’t believe”: “*You won’t believe where sugar is hiding*” (Appendix, headline 58). There are also several posts related to pop culture, like “*Kids interview the cast of Star Wars: #TheLastJedi and the answers are hilarious*” (Appendix, headline 59), which also featured emojis, and “*From Taylor Swift to Kesha to Lorde - These are the top 10 albums of 2017*” (Appendix, headline 60). The headlines frequently take an informal tone, expressing emotions, such as in “*Prince George Had the Cutest Role in His School’s Nativity Play - Adorable*” (Appendix, headline 61), where the reader has to click on the article to find out what role Prince George actually had. Claiming that it is “the cutest role” and adding the “Adorable” in the sub-headline expresses subjective opinions of the writer(s), presenting opinions instead of facts. Time Magazine was also the only news outlet which

featured what could only be called a direct advertisement article for another company when they posted: *“Best Buy Is Selling a 60-Inch Smart 4K TV for Under \$500 Today”* (Appendix, headline 62). Time Magazine did feature some informative hard content, such as *“North Korea has launched its first ballistic missile in months. Thought to be its most powerful weapon yet, the missile could put Washington and the entire eastern U.S. seaboard within range”* (Appendix, headline 63) and *“Tens of Thousands Stranded as Bali Volcano Closes Airport”* (Appendix, headline 64), where the style is formal and matter-of-factly, more reminiscent of outlets like ABC or NBC news than the majority of Time Magazine’s content. Time Magazine also features articles related to lifestyle, health and mental health, for example: *“See Who You’re Most Likely to Marry Based on Where You Live”*, *“Belly Fat: 12 Reasons You’re Not Losing Weight”* and *“Here’s what more Americans are doing to combat loneliness”* (Appendix, headlines 65, 66 and 67).

A person who primarily relies on Time Magazine as their Facebook news outlet is unlikely to be very well informed on various serious topics, both domestic and internationally. They are, however, likely to be well informed about pop-culture, technological innovations and contemporary lifestyle advice.

IX. USA Today (Scrolling started December 12 2017)

Of the recorded headlines, six dealt with feminism, two with LGBT-issues, three with immigration and none with healthcare. There was one mention of “racism” and one of “sexism”. “Woman”/“women” were mentioned 28 times, “man”/“men” were mentioned 19 times. “Trump” was mentioned 52 times. “Gun” was mentioned four times. There was a pretty even divide between soft and hard news, with there being 161 soft news and 166 hard news presented in the reported time period. There were also 72 stories which fell in the medium category. USA Today covered Trump’s presidency positively twice, neutrally eight times and negatively 19 times. Various cases of sexual harassment or abuse were covered 51 times. Of the recorded posts, 68 were in video format. There were 183 cases that were marked as being clearly domestic, with only 24 posts dealing with international events, the second lowest after Business Insider. This can perhaps be explained as natural by considering the news outlet’s name: *USA Today*.

USA Today stood out from the other news outlets by presenting the most sports-related content, with 47 headlines being related to sports. Most headlines are informative and factual, for example: *“Charles Jenkins, former U.S. deserter to North Korea, dies at 77”* (Appendix, headline 68). This is the case even when dealing with events that can have major political implications and emotional reactions, such as in: *“Akayed Ullah, 27, strapped an improvised, low-tech pipe bomb to his body with Velcro and zip ties and detonated it near New York's Port Authority, police say. The suspect suffered burns and other wounds and is in the hospital”* (Appendix, headline 69). There are however some more informally worded headlines when dealing with soft content such as celebrity news, such as: *“‘The Rock’ announces he's expecting a baby girl in adorable Instagram post - Dwayne The Rock Johnson is welcoming another girl into his ‘mana’!”* (Appendix, headline 70), where both describing the Instagram post as “adorable” and the use of an exotic word followed by an exclamation mark add to the post’s informal tone. Another example of a headline related to pop-culture featuring an informal style of writing is *“‘Outlander’ Season 3 finale recap: Claire and Jamie take on Geillis - Well, that was A LOT”* (Appendix, headline 71), which features capitalization to emphasize emotional stress. USA Today also features articles intended to help people make purchases, such as *“How to choose the best smart speaker for you: shopper's guide”* (Appendix, headline 72) and *“How to buy gifts online without loved ones knowing”* (Appendix, headline 73), which is generally not found amongst the other news outlets’ posts.

In the recoded time period, USA Today ran articles about the women who have accused President Donald Trump of sexual harassment: *“‘Piece of meat’: Trump sexual misconduct accusers appear with Megyn Kelly on ‘Today’”*. The same headline and link was posted twice in a row, with differing sub-headlines, one stating *“Women who have publicly accused President Trump of sexual misconduct will hold a news conference Monday demanding that Congress investigate their claims”* and the other being worded *“‘I had just turned 20 years old, and I just felt so gross’”* (Appendix, headlines 74 & 75). This is not a type of material one would find on e.g. Fox News. During the data collection period, USA Today posted a speculative article under the headline: *“Women in Germany's east earn close to what men do. Can we thank socialism for that? - The gender pay gap for Germany's formerly socialist east has been one of the lowest in the world”* (Appendix, headline 76), which makes the news outlet appear left-leaning, as a more

right-winged news outlet is very unlikely to feature articles about the possible benefits inherited from socialism.

A reader who primarily relies on USA Today as their Facebook source of news seems likely to be quite well informed about domestic events, but unlikely to be so about international ones. Despite the high amount of soft content, the hard content appears varied. While USA Today did feature two stories which were deemed as positive towards President Trump, the majority are still negative, and some feature very serious allegations, such as the above-mentioned featuring of women accusing Donald Trump of sexual misconduct. It therefore seems unlikely that USA Today will attract those who strongly support President Trump.

6.3 General findings

It is clear that there are large discrepancies between how the various media outlets choose to cover controversial topics. As CNN and Fox News both manage to mention the name "Trump" over 130 times each over 400 headlines, this shows a heavy focus on current American politics and the Trump presidency. Most news outlets featured less than 50 stories out of 400 which could be marked as clearly dealing with international events. Only two outlets featured a majority of soft content, Business Insider and Time Magazine. USA Today and HuffPost also rank relatively low on their amount of hard news coverage, with less than half of their content being counted as hard content. It seems clear that a Facebook user who has Business Insider or Time as their primary news source will get significantly more soft news content than somebody who primarily follows NBC, Fox or ABC News and consequently risks being less informed about topics dealing with serious and impactful events.

It seems reasonable to assume that people will feel more strongly about things if they are frequently exposed to them. For a person who is supportive of Donald Trump, Fox News is the only news outlet which comes across as being in agreement with the person's political views. This is in line with the Gallup/Knight report which states that 60% of Republicans list Fox News as an objective source of news (Knight Foundation 2018: 12) while they are generally distrustful of media in general, and tend to consider "Fake news" to be a bigger threat to democracy than

what Democrats do (Knight Foundation 2018: 30). Barack Obama's comment that "If you watch Fox News, you are living on a different planet than you are if you listen to NPR" (Memoli 2018) seems to ring true.

As expected, there were also noteworthy differences in what type of topics were being covered by each outlet, and how certain polarized events, such as Donald Trump's presidency, were covered. Somebody who primarily follows HuffPost would not be exposed to any positive sides of the Trump presidency, in contrast to a follower of Fox News, who would not be exposed to nearly any negative sides. The controversial presidency of President Donald Trump is a clear example of an event with strong, polarizing emotions on all sides, which is being selectively presented by the media, for a possible variety of reasons. Since it is evidently possible to cover news about President Trump in various levels of positivity to negativity, the media representations appear to show a deliberate selection of negative or positive aspects and stories to present in order to create a subjective narrative more than reflect any universal and objective truth. The reasons for this can be many, from believing that a certain viewpoint is what appeals to the readers and thus brings in more revenue, to ideological convictions amongst the journalistic and editorial staff in a given news outlet, to economic reasons relevant to a news outlet's owners. The reasons for the variety in how certain events are presented and in which stories are published at all is, however, not the focus of this thesis. What is interesting here are the obvious discrepancies in representation on various media outlets, as is shown in the data shown in Chapter 6.2.

Different news outlets also vary in how they present their cases: while traditional news outlets such as NBC News have more typical headlines that try to present the topic of a story, the newer outlet HuffPost often goes for headlines that cite a celebrity's reaction, features memes and slang, and have controversial headlines such as "*Educate Your Relatives This Holiday Season With A 'F*ck Your Racist Grandma' Sweatshirt*" (Appendix, headline 77). As HuffPost has had a rapid growth since its founding in 2005 it can seem like the more informal and slang-filled style resonates with a lot of younger people, who seem to be the outlet's primary target group.

It seems possible to categorize the different news outlets covered here into three categories: the soft content providers, the strongly opinionated outlets and the more traditional

ones. Due to their high amount of soft material, Time Magazine and Business Insider would fall into the first category. HuffPost and Fox News would be the strongly opinionated ones, with Fox News being so staunchly in favor of Donald Trump's presidency and in such stark opposition to all the other major outlet's political views on pretty much every issue, while HuffPost dedicates a significant amount of their hard news coverage to bashing the Trump presidency, and also seems to have a clear ideological basis for much of their soft and medium content. The remaining news outlets then fall into the category of more traditional news outlets due to their varied content and usually matter-of-factly style of presenting, even though some did feature strongly ideological views, or at least presented these through their opinion articles.

If one is to imagine a potentially perceived (albeit hyperbolic) narrative from the reading of the collected headlines, it would appear that a reader who primarily reads e.g. HuffPost could view the world as being full of racist white people who seek to oppress minorities. The imagined hyperbolic HuffPost reader might further see issues such as identity politics, including accurate media representation of ethnic minorities and people with disabilities, as important political topics. Trump would most likely also be perceived as an evil man, who wishes to oppress and discriminate against minorities. His anti-immigration stance can be seen as a return to attitudes held during historical periods such as the slavery or segregation eras. Further, progressive values are supported by young celebrities, and are consequently "cool", in contrast to "outdated" conservative views. Several features of modern society would be seen as problematic due to how they could be perceived as supportive of an oppressive, chauvinistic, racist, oppressive patriarchal social power structure.

On the opposite spectrum, a follower of Fox News could have an opposite world view (albeit here again presented in hyperbole), and see Donald Trump as a well-doing man who opposes a left-winged political and media establishment. This establishment is seen as consisting of people who seek to remove most traditional, conservative social institutions by claiming that these are racist or oppressive (which the hyperbolic Fox News reader naturally disagrees with). The left-winged political establishment might also be seen as promoting a system in which the individual's rights and the American constitution are being replaced in favor of an authoritarian state which seeks to promote "degeneracy" and non-Christian values. The Clinton family are also perceived as corrupt and evil, and function as a symbol of how "rotten" the political elite is. One

frequent illustration to this is how Hillary Clinton allegedly sabotaged her own Party's rivaling candidate (Bernie Sanders) but faced no consequences for this. Violence from left-winged organizations funded by a powerful elite as well as perceived attacks on freedom of speech through politically correct censorship also seems to be perceived as a bigger social problem than e.g. lack of media representation of various minority groups.

It is interesting to note that none of the news outlets here have an equal amount of coverage of positive and negative cases to both Democratic and Republican politicians. Even outlets who have a more neutral coverage of President Trump seem to avoid coverage of controversial cases regarding Hillary Clinton, as well as not presenting hardly any Trump-positive stories, even though these must exist since Fox News presents them. Opposite to this, Fox News chooses to ignore stories which could present Trump negatively, even though there must evidently be plenty of such material, seeing as how much is presented by all the other major news outlets. How a more objective news outlet which presents both positive and negative coverage of both sides of the political spectrum might be perceived would of course only be speculation. Would it be seen as neutral, factual and fair, or would it be seen as inconsistent and “flip-flopping”?

6.4 What the future might hold: Alternative news

“Even when large parts of the general public break free of the premises of the doctrinal system, as finally happened during the Indochina wars, real understanding based upon an alternative conception of the evolving history can be developed only with considerable effort by the most diligent and skeptical” (Chomsky 1994: 171-172)

The “considerable effort” here mentioned by Chomsky is no longer as considerable in the digital age where anyone can start a blog to publish their opinions and report news. While starting an alternative newspaper in the 1980s when Chomsky was writing would require extensive manual labor and materials, all one needs today is a digital device on which to write and access to the internet. This has seen a rapid rise in the number and presence of so-called alternative media, as well as in a spread of so-called fake news. Most Americans consider fake news to be a major

threat to democracy itself (Knight Foundation 2018: 3), but there is no real consensus on what constitutes fake news and what constitutes biased-yet-true news. For instance, “most Americans also say that accurate stories portraying politicians in a negative light always (28%) or sometimes (51%) constitutes ‘fake news’” (Knight Foundation 2018: 27).

The Democrat leanings of most major mainstream media outlets might help to explain why many of the more popular alternative U.S.-based media outlets appear to be right-leaning. Again, popularity is here measured by the amount of likes on Facebook. Popular right-winged media that has grown since the rise of digital media include: Breitbart News, founded in 2007 by Andrew Breitbart (who was also a co-founder of Huffington Post, later HuffPost), which has 3,814,251 likes as of February 20, 2018. Milo Yiannopolous and his news blog Dangerous (promoted through Yiannopolous’ Facebook page) with 2,389,337 likes as of February 20, 2018, and Ben Shapiro and his Daily Wire news (founded in 2015), where Shapiro’s Facebook page has 3,424,331 likes and the Daily Wire has 1,774,205 likes as of February 20, 2018. These news are just some examples of what can be called alternative news. Alternative news is here understood as both presenting content with a different viewpoint than the majority of mainstream media outlets, as well as being independent of the major media corporations which owns the majority of American media (Lutz 2012).

While there are popular U.S.-based left-leaning news organizations that are independent and can be considered alternative news, it is hard to see how many of these differ from the majority of mainstream news outlets in the type of content and viewpoints presented. Vox Media (2,073,774 likes), Daily Kos (1,341,891 likes), The Young Turks (1,973,488 likes), The Raw Story (1,151,221 likes) and Slate (1,533,751 likes) are all independently owned and can be considered alternative, but they generally do not present news content that would be in stark contrast to the viewpoints of most major media outlets (all likes recorded February 20, 2018).

It is worth noting that there is a possibility of certain alternative news having a large following outside of Facebook, despite having smaller numbers of Facebook likes than other alternative outlets. This can be partly because they use other social media as their primary platform if it better suits their content (such as YouTube for a video-based outlet) and/or because their viewpoint is considered so alternative and/or extreme that many Facebook users do not want their profiles, which often feature their full, real name and personal information, to be

associated with such news outlets. Jones & Hafner identify social conventions around use of media as a way media controls people (Jones & Hafner 2012: 100). Engaging with material which could be considered “extreme” while on a platform connected to one’s full name and real life connections can be seen as breaking a social convention. One possible example of material like this could be Alex Jones and his InfoWars channel, which has become popular enough to have featured an interview with Donald Trump (Alex Jones Channel 2015), but also makes extremely controversial statements, such as claiming that the government is creating animal-human hybrids, that several mass shootings and terrorist attacks are instigated by the government for political winnings and that Michelle Obama is actually a man (Glenn Beck 2017: Farand 2017). As of February 20, 2018, Alex Jones’ Facebook page has 1,692,653 Facebook likes, but over 2.2 million YouTube subscribers.

One common denominator amongst right-leaning alternative news is the many attacks on mainstream media outlets, accusing these of spreading “fake news” or at least having strong media bias. E.g. Ben Shapiro, sharing his news outlet Daily Wire’s articles, adds comments like “*Beware the #fakenews...*” to an article criticizing CNN’s coverage of gun control (Appendix, headline 78). The Daily Wire also has headlines such as “*CNN Proves It's An Activist Outlet On Gun Control, Not A Journalistic One*” (Appendix, headline 79). Fox News also makes claims like this, such as “*‘What Donald Trump has done most effectively is expose the media bias.’ - Mitchell Malkin*” (Appendix, headline 80). While Fox News is one of the major media outlets, they still present a rhetoric similar to that of alternative news, presenting themselves in opposition to “the other” media outlets, which are of course seen as biased. Fox News has also made very controversial claims regarding the press ethics of opposing major news outlets, such as when they cited one of the survivors of the Florida High School Massacre when he claimed that CNN had given him scripted questions to ask during a debate on gun rights (Re 2018). There is some irony here in that Fox News later had to retract this statement after it was discovered that the shooting survivor’s father had altered emails to present CNN in a bad light (Levine 2018).

As seen in the data of Chapter 6, there are large differences in what type of material is posted by the various major media outlets, so when Ben Shapiro asks “*Where is the media?*” when sharing a news article headlined “*WATCH: Hindu Extremists Steal Bibles, Burn Them In India*” (Appendix, headline 81), he is most likely right in pointing out that the majority of

mainstream media outlets would not cover this story about Hindus burning bibles. Whether this is because of the various outlet's deprioritizing of international news, a conscious effort to ignore persecution of Christians or fears that spreading this story might incite further repercussions against the Hindu community, or for other reasons entirely, is of course only known by those working in the relevant media outlets, but it can easily be seen as an ideologically grounded concealment, of the type that is discussed in Chapter 5.5. The major media outlets not being able or willing to cover every news story from across the globe opens up for alternative news outlet. This can then result in alternative news outlets objectively covering these otherwise ignored cases, but it can also result in the coverage of these events being used as an attack on the larger outlets.

With the rise of digital media it is easier to commit what is sometimes called *whataboutism*, essentially a deflecting of an argument by reversing an accusation. If one news outlet claims that e.g. right-wing extremism is on the rise and shares a study proving this, a right-winged news outlet might show a story about e.g. Islamist terror also being on the rise in response. This functions both as a criticism of the initial news outlet's priorities on what to present, as well as showing an opposing story to further an ideology opposite to the one initially posted. In this hypothetical scenario, the right-winged news outlet would ignore the potential danger of right-wing extremism and implicitly say that "Islamist terror is a bigger problem, why are you not focusing on that?", which in turn can also have several levels of further ideological connotations. Other imagined examples could be "why does the media focus on the persecution of Rohingya Muslims over the persecution of Egyptian Christians", "why does the media focus on animal cruelty against dogs raised for consumption in parts of Asia instead of animal cruelty in western slaughterhouses" and so on. While it might be relevant and important to criticize media's chosen topics of coverage, it can be problematic if it is used as a way of deflecting legitimate arguments and of trying to take attention away from other serious topics. This could result in further political polarization.

6.5 Potential for further media fragmentation

If one recalls the quote by Katherine Hayles in Chapter 3.1, that “no one narrative is likely to establish dominance as *the* explanation, for the interpretive possibilities proliferate as databases increase” (Hayles 2016: 181), one might suspect a further increase in new and upcoming media outlets which utilize social media to spread. As could be seen from the analysis of the major U.S.-based media outlets in Chapter 6.1, there are significant discrepancies between the type of narrative being presented, but even together they do not form an exhaustive coverage of everything that might be deemed newsworthy. It was seen that they generally focused on domestic American news, that most were opposed to Trump’s presidency (with the clear exception of Fox News) and that a large amount of the total content was soft or medium news. Crime reporting and most international events were left to American local news outlet and international news outlets to cover, respectively. It was also noted that most major news outlets did not have longer articles of a reflective, analytical nature that tried to put stories into a larger context, with the New York Times being the one outlet offering this type of material. These are just some niches of news coverage that alternative news outlets could choose to focus on. As was discussed in Chapter 4.1, newly created news outlets are now given the same platform as the major, long-established outlets, which makes it possible to quickly gain a large following. HuffPost is the primary example of a news outlet that has only existed in a digital form but has managed to make its presence online larger than many of the more established, longer-running news outlets.

The positive side of this could be that a plethora of different narratives can be established, so that, as Hayles says, no one narrative establishes dominance, as this could limit the readers’ understandings of various topics by presenting them solely in a one-sided manner. The potential negative side could be that too many opposing narratives could potentially confuse the readers, so they no longer feel like they can trust or believe in anything. With an increase in different narratives and stories being presented, the readers’ attention would also be fought over even more intensely. This could result in readers consciously making an effort to deep-read various viewpoints and narratives, or it could end up in even more hyper-reading skimming of headlines to try to maneuver in a landscape of ever-increasing amounts of information. It is also possible

that an increase in diverse media outlets would lead to even further political polarization, as people who are already caught up in informational cascades, as discussed in Chapter 5.3, will only follow the outlets who are in relative ideological agreement with the other outlets they already read. As there would be more news outlets, more stories, more information, there would be even less attention to be given to outlets presenting an opposing view.

One already sees that hyper-reading has developed as a response to an information-intensive environment to be able to quickly read, filter and absorb information that is deemed as relevant. The more information is made available, the more readers rely on “survival skills” like this. Even more news outlets could then mean even more hyper-reading and consequently even shallower reading where readers rely even more on headlines and short text extracts to get the gist of a story instead of reading deeply. An increased exposure in information could also result in a reduction of exposure to cross-ideological information, which could lead to further political polarization, as well as less exposure to information which tries to correct misinformation.

7. Conclusion & outlook

It seems evident that the processes of creating, conveying and of consuming news have changed significantly since the coming of the digital era and of social media. Digital technology has changed both how people read, as shown in Chapter 3.1, as well as how written material is created and presented. As people adapt to the literacy habit of hyper-reading, information producers consequently create content which tries to appeal to a person's hyper-reading habits. As was shown in Chapter 4.1, and 4.2, the news picture has changed from clear topological hierarchies to a more level playing field where all outlets, as well as all stories, are given an initial equal space, and depend primarily on user response to be spread and shown to a wider audience. As the economic foundation for news outlets has changed, human attention has become a much sought-after resource, since the news reader is now not only a consumer but also a commodity for the news outlets to "sell" for advertising revenue. This has led to an intense competition over who is able to create articles that get the news readers to click on them. This is a competition which seems to evolve and change quickly, as one can see from the rise and subsequent fall of clear clickbait style headlines, as mentioned in Chapter 4.5. While readers seem to have grown tired of blatant clickbait styled headlines, stories that appeal to human emotions and sentimentality still seem to spread fastest and incite the highest amount of user reactions and interactions. This was shown in Chapter 4.6, and illustrated with how sensationalist presentations of news gained a lot more reactions than non-sensationalist presentations of more serious topics. It was also shown in Chapter 5.7, about the spread of false news, where studies have shown that false news stories spread quicker than factual ones, likely because of their appeal to human emotions. It has also been argued that the competition over getting users to click on articles could lead to even more misleading and sensationalist headlines, as shown in Chapter 4.5.

Chapters 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3 discussed how social media could potentially function as echo chambers of opinion which would in turn increase political polarization, as well as creating informational cascades that limit the users' scope of different information presented. It was suspected that various major news outlets present vastly different narratives and consequently create differing perceptions of the world for their respective readers. The analysis and

comparison of what type of content was shown by the nine major U.S.-based media outlets on Facebook in Chapter 6.2 proved what was suspected: the various outlets present their readers with different narratives and often very differing types of content related to some controversial topics. Some outlets also presented a lot of soft content, which might be entertaining or somewhat informative, but is not the type of information that leads to a comprehensive understanding of socio-political questions. A person who relies on only a few news outlets therefore risks to be severely limited in their exposure to cross-ideological content, even though the possibility of using social media as a leveling tool is present, as discussed in Chapter 5.4.

A recurring theme in this thesis is the claim that it is not only *what* is being read that affects a reader's understanding, but also *how* it is read. If people who hyper-read are less likely to reflect upon what they read and less likely to be critical readers (as shown in Chapter 3.1), then this could lead to a shallow, unreflecting reading of news. If a Facebook user relies on Facebook as a news source for most of their information about events, both domestic and globally, their reflections and interpretations of various events risks being shallow as a result of their digital literacy habits, even though the amount of information they are provided with is larger than in previous times. This is not an attempt of sentimentalizing or idealizing the news reading processes in the past as overall superior, as there are certainly many advantages to having access to digital news platforms and social media, but one should be aware of the potential downsides. The way in which social media allows the users to interact with each other and with the news outlet itself can lead to both constructive and informative debates and feedback, but also to shilling and misinformation, as discussed in Chapters 5.6 and 5.7. Using social media as a news platform appears to present a plethora of new challenges for the reader if they are to properly utilize all the potential advantages that such a platform offers.

If a Facebook user, or digital news reader in general, aspires to be well-informed about the world, they should be aware of the potentially limited scope of information they are actually exposed to. As long as news outlets on social media gain their revenue through advertisement and getting their readers to click on their articles and in turn on adverts, it seems unlikely that there will be a decrease in the amount of misleading, sentimental and sensationalist material created. The form of the content might change, but the material is still essentially appealing to human emotions over reason, and aims to get reactions, not to inform. Social media has become

an increasingly important platform for people to get their news, and if this trend continues, good digital literacy practices will become increasingly important. Just as the hyper-reading phenomenon developed as a tool for maneuvering the vast amounts of information online, so new digital literacy habits must develop to be able to separate false and accurate information, to limit spontaneous emotional reactions to sensationalism and to limit the spreading of misinformation. While hyper-reading seemingly developed as a natural response to an information-intensive environment, learning to critically read news on a social media platform will most likely require a more conscious and trained effort. This is because hyper-reading has already satisfied the desire to skim through a lot of content quickly, but to do a critical and deeper reading requires overcoming bad habits from hyper-reading. It also requires the reader to have a sense of humility by accepting one's own limited scope of understanding, as well as a conviction that reading news critically and trying to become informed on various things is better than shallow readings and having emotional reactions to (often misleading) sensationalist material.

Using social media as a news platform can lead to political polarization, the creation of echo chambers and informational cascades and can limit the type of content a user is exposed to, based on the algorithms trying to show each user content they are assumed to enjoy and react to. However, it can also be a source of serendipitous discoveries and provide exposure to a wide range of diverse perspectives and information if the social media users use the tool for this purpose.

For future research, an even larger-scale gathering and comparison of the style and content of news stories being presented on Facebook could be done, as well as comparing Facebook with other social media outlets. This would show further potential discrepancies in media representation even clearer than what was possible to do in this thesis. In addition, it would be of potential interest to compare headline information with the actual article content, and get an overview of the extent to which various major news outlets use deceiving headlines to incite readers to respond to their material.

To further test whether hyper-reading articles can increase political polarization it would be possible to design experiments in which readers are given articles regarding various political topics. The reader would be told to read these slowly and carefully or quick and shallowly and

afterwards one could see if the different reading methods affects how the readers respond to the information they have read. It would also be of interest to gather further data on perceived media bias and how users of social media themselves report the quality and diversity of the news information they are shown online. It is suspected that political polarization will decrease if news readers are made more aware of both their own and their preferred news outlets' biases, and of how shallowly they consume the majority of information that they are shown. A comparison between people who are very aware of how they are potentially exposed to very one-sided information versus people who are less conscious of this could also provide interesting insights. It seems reasonable to suspect that people who are aware of media bias, their own potentially shallow reading, as well as social media's algorithms for showing content one agrees with, would be more likely to resist strong reactions to novel and often misleading information. Further, readers who are conscious about the potential downsides of hyper-reading might be more inclined to do deeper readings of material related to serious topics.

This thesis will hopefully contribute to raising awareness of the potential positive and negative sides of using social media as a news platform. It has been shown that the various major media outlets differ significantly in what narratives they present. Together with seeing how hyper-reading headlines and skimming articles can often lead to an insufficient understanding of events covered by the news, this should encourage people to be more conscious about their usage and reliance on social media as a way to access their news. It should also make people more aware of their own pre-understandings and how these have been shaped and how they affect how people interpret new information. Proper utilization of social media as a news source can make it a tool for spreading factual information and exposing readers to a diverse range of topics and opinions. This requires the social media users to possess a level of digital literacy where they are able to balance their hyper-reading for efficient information withdrawal with their ability to read deeper and more reflectively to avoid being misled.

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Appendix

1: Trump calls his presidency 'consensual,' Twitter responds

Sub: US President Donald Trump has deleted a tweet citing his "consensual presidency" after the typo was caught by the Twittersphere

<http://edition.cnn.com/2018/01/08/politics/trump-consensual-twitter-typo/index.html?sr=fbCNN010818trump-consensual-twitter-typo0557AMVODtop>

2: In a highly controversial move that critics say threatens peace in the Middle East, President Donald J. Trump has officially recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital. [HuffPost]

#Video #Domestic-International #Hard #TrumpNeut #Israel

3: How I paid off \$24,000 in credit card debt in just 15 months

Sub: She hit "financial bottom" — and had to get out.

http://www.businessinsider.com/how-i-paid-off-24000-in-credit-card-debt-in-just-15-months-2018-1?utm_content=buffer7a74b&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer-bi&r=US&IR=T&IR=T

#Medium

4: Amazon Prime members are obsessed with this 7-in-1 kitchen appliance

Sub: The Instant Pot was huge in 2017.

http://nordic.businessinsider.com/instant-pot-is-most-wished-for-item-on-amazon-prime-2018-1?utm_content=bufferc219a&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer-bi&r=US&IR=T

#Soft #Technology

5: McDonald's is bringing back one of its most expensive failures — but there's a catch

Sub: The Arch Deluxe was a major flop for McDonald's.

http://nordic.businessinsider.com/mcdonalds-tests-archburger-after-90s-flop-2018-1?utm_content=buffer88f51&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer-bi&r=US&IR=T

#Soft #Food

6: 9 things you never knew about Disney parks, according to a man who played Goofy for 20 years

Sub: Characters are cliquy, and there's a hierarchy with "cool" characters at the top.

http://www.businessinsider.com/disney-parks-secrets-from-former-cast-member-2016-12?utm_content=buffer04d49&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer-bi&r=US&IR=T&IR=T

#Soft

7: 24 mind-blowing facts about Warren Buffett and his \$77 billion fortune

Sub: He bought his first stock at age 11.

http://www.businessinsider.com/facts-about-warren-buffett-2016-12/?utm_content=buffer469ff&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer-bi&r=US&IR=T&IR=T

#Domestic #Soft

8: 150: 21 people are dead and 450 under arrest in Iran's bloody week of protests

Sub: An 11-year-old boy was added to the death toll overnight.

http://www.businessinsider.com/at-least-20-people-are-dead-in-irans-bloody-week-of-protests-2018-1?r=US&IR=T&utm_content=buffer6edcc&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer-bi

#Hard #International

9: The most popular beer and liquor for the fans of every NFL team

Sub: Bud Light is the top beer choice for Browns and Bengals fans.

http://www.businessinsider.com/the-most-popular-beer-and-liquor-for-the-fans-of-every-nfl-team-2016-1/?utm_content=bufferb7e5d&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer-bi&r=US&IR=T&IR=T

#Soft

10: The 22 most beautiful buildings in the world, according to architects

Sub: The Parthenon is "the quintessential beautiful architectural form."

http://www.businessinsider.com/worlds-most-beautiful-buildings-2016-12?utm_content=buffercb023&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer-bi&r=US&IR=T&IR=T

#Soft

11: A record-breaking 22 women are now serving in US Senate

Sub: The 20% female US Congress lags behind the global average for women in legislatures, according to World Bank figures

<http://edition.cnn.com/2018/01/03/politics/record-women-senate/index.html?sr=fbCNN010318record-women-senate0845PMStory>

#Hard #Domestic #Feminism

12: 2017. 2018. New year, same roller coaster

Sub: The political bomb cyclone otherwise known as the Trump presidency has brought 2018 in with a roar, writes Stephen Collinson.

<http://edition.cnn.com/2018/01/04/politics/2018-trump-bannon-politics/index.html?sr=fbCNN0104182018-trump-bannon-politics0342PMVODtop>

#Domestic #Hard #TrumpNeg

13: Donald Trump's nuclear button is way bigger than yours

Sub: "From the size of his buildings to the size of his genitals to the size of his nuclear arsenal, Trump is totally and completely obsessed with being the biggest and the best," Chris Cillizza writes

<http://edition.cnn.com/2018/01/03/politics/trump-size-matters-analysis/index.html?sr=fbCNN010318trump-size-matters-analysis0756AMVODtop>

#Hard #TrumpNeg

14: Trump reiterates he wants DACA as long as it comes with border wall

Sub: President Donald J. Trump says he wants to work with Democrats to allow Dreamers to stay in the country, but only if the legislative solution comes with a long-promised border wall and changes to the immigration system

<http://edition.cnn.com/2018/01/06/politics/trump-daca-wall-immigration/index.html?sr=fbCNN010718trump-daca-wall-immigration0243PMVODtop>

#Hard #Immigration #Domestic #TrumpNeut

15: Britain's Princess Charlotte starts nursery school

Sub: All together: Awwwwwww.

<http://edition.cnn.com/2018/01/08/europe/princess-charlotte-nursery-school-intl/index.html?sr=fbCNN010818princess-charlotte-nursery-school-intl1122AMStoryLink>

#Soft

16: "The coastal elites are flat-out jealous of the performance of Houston and Texas."

Earlier on "Fox & Friends," Stuart Varney called out the "coastal elites" for criticizing Houston following the devastating floods from Hurricane Harvey. <http://bit.ly/2vQKFph>

#Video #HurricaneHarvey #Hard #Domestic

17: "A lot of these leftists agitators like Antifa are being bused in by the liberals to create this chaos."

On "FOX & Friends Weekend," Lawrence Jones III talked about the events in St. Louis after a police officer was acquitted in the killing of a black man.

#Video #Domestic #Hard #RacismWhitePerp #RacePol #LeftistViolence

18: "We have three Watergate-level scandals going on right now involving the Clintons."

On "Special Report," Charles Hurt discussed the latest allegation against Hillary Clinton amid a claim that the DNC rigged the Democratic presidential primary in Clinton's favor.

<http://bit.ly/2zfsz5Q>

#Video #Domestic #Hard #HillaryClintonNeg

19: "We now have the evidence that the FBI's investigation of Hillary Clinton did not follow normal and standard procedures." – Rep. Matt Gaetz

#HillaryClintonNeg #Domestic #Hard #Video

20: "God is not necessarily an 'Open Borders Guy' as a lot of people would think that He is."

On "Fox & Friends," Dr. Robert Jeffress talked about immigration through the lens of his Christian faith.

#Video #Domestic #Immigration #Christian #Hard

21: "I'm a former liberal and I'm NEVER going back."

On "Watters' World," Candace Owens talked about "taking the red pill" and leaving liberalism for conservatism. <http://fxn.ws/2xk4cD3>

#Video #Domestic #Medium #LiberalNeg

22: "Removing the National Anthem from America would be like removing the heart from America."

On "Fox & Friends," Chris Prudhome responded to the California NAACP which called the National Anthem "racist." <http://fxn.ws/2yFdnzS>

#Video #Domestic #Medium #Racism

23: News Anchor Expertly Claps Back At Viewer Who Called Her N****r

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/news-anchor-expertly-claps-back-at-viewer-who-called-her-n-word_us_5a280a68e4b044d1672679cf?utm_campaign=hp_fb_pages&utm_source=main_fb&utm_medium=facebook&ncid=fbklnkushpmsg00000063

#Domestic #RacismNWVictim #Medium #RacePol

24: Carrie Fisher's BFF Dog Has A Perfectly Adorable Cameo In 'Star Wars: The Last Jedi'

Sub: Carrie Fisher's beloved dog snags a "Star Wars" role.

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/carrie-fisher-last-jedi-dog_us_5a28e902e4b03ece03001797?utm_campaign=hp_fb_pages&utm_source=main_fb&utm_medium=facebook&ncid=fbklnkushpmsg00000063

#Domestic-International #Soft #Entertainment

25: The Tiny But Telling Detail We Bet You Missed In 'Coco'

Sub: Did you notice this while watching "Coco"?

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-tiny-but-telling-detail-we-bet-you-missed-in-coco_us_5a27fd6de4b044d1672657f8?utm_campaign=hp_fb_pages&utm_source=main_fb&utm_medium=facebook&ncid=fbklnkushpmsg00000063

#Domestic-International #Soft #Entertainment

26: 27 Priceless Tweets About Life As A Married Person

Sub: "Protip: If your wife asks you 'How lazy can you be?' it's a rhetorical question."

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/priceless-tweets-about-married-life_us_5a25cb3fe4b07324e83ffeb4?utm_campaign=hp_fb_pages&utm_source=main_fb&utm_medium=facebook&ncid=fbklnkushpmsg00000063

#Soft #Relationships #Twitter #Domestic-International

27: Jennifer Lawrence Reveals What She Would Do If She Ever Met Trump

Sub: We're right there with you, Jennifer Lawrence!

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/jennifer-lawrence-donald-trump_us_5a283db5e4b02d3bfc37b710?utm_campaign=hp_fb_pages&utm_source=main_fb&utm_medium=facebook&ncid=fbklnkushpmsg00000063

#Soft #Entertainment #TrumpNeg

28: Trump wasn't into Roy Moore until the sexual misconduct stuff came out and then he was like "my man!" Catch new episodes of The Daily Show weeknights at 11/10c on Comedy Central.

#Video #Domestic #Medium #TrumpNeg

29: These badass girls are the first athletes to represent Nigeria at a Winter Olympics.

#Video #Soft #Sports #International #Feminism

30: The Stigma Of Doing Things Alone

Sub: "Why is it still seen as socially unacceptable to do things by yourself? And why is it always presumed that people don't want to do things alone?"

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/christina-ling/the-stigma-of-doing-things-alone_b_9239900.html

#Domestic-International #Soft #Lifestyle

31: What Are the Signs of 'High-Functioning' Depression and Could You Have It?

Sub: No. 7. Feelings of guilt and worry over the past and the future.

https://themighty.com/2017/05/signs-of-high-functioning-depression-or-dysthymia/?utm_source=main_fb&utm_medium=facebook&utm_campaign=hp_fb_pages&ncid=fcbklnkushpmg00000063

#Shared #Domestic-International #Health #Medium

32: Jesus Statue's Butt Was Hiding A 240-Year-Old Secret Message

Sub: A hidden message in an unusual place.

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/jesus-statue-butt-message_us_5a24eff7e4b0a02abe92146e?utm_campaign=hp_fb_pages&utm_source=main_fb&utm_medium=facebook&ncid=fcbklnkushpmg00000063

#International #History #Soft

33: The Funniest Tweets From Parents This Week

Sub: Too funny.

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/funniest-parenting-tweets_us_5a2096b9e4b0a02abe8ff6af?ncid=fcbklnkushpmg00000063&utm_campaign=hp_fb_pages&utm_source=main_fb&utm_medium=facebook

#Domestic-International #Soft #Twitter #Entertainment #Parenting

34: U.S. jets use warning flares to chase away Russian jets over Syria

Sub: Russian planes have been breaching U.S. airspace in Syria up to eight times a day since early November, according to a military spokesman.

https://www.nbcnews.com/news/mideast/u-s-jets-use-warning-flares-chase-away-russian-jets-n829791?cid=sm_npd_nn_fb_ma

#Hard #Domestic-International

35: Bermuda to ban same-sex marriage just months after it was legalized

Sub: The Bermuda Senate gave final legislative approval Wednesday to a measure that would permit only domestic partnerships in the British island territory. Via NBC OUT

https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/bermuda-ban-same-sex-marriage-just-months-after-it-was-n829676?cid=sm_npd_nn_fb_ma

#Hard #International #LGBT

36: Since Sandy Hook, nearly 1,000 kids under the age of 12 have died from guns

Sub: Since Sandy Hook, a child has been fatally shot in the U.S. every 44 hours

https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/sandy-hook-nearly-1-000-kids-have-died-guns-n829486?cid=sm_npd_nn_fb_ma

#Domestic #Hard

37: Opinion | Even Donald Trump wants Congress to save DREAMERS. So what's the hold-up?

Sub: "Congress needs to pass a replacement for DACA before it adjourns for this year. Thousands of people are counting on us."

https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/even-donald-trump-wants-congress-save-dreamers-so-what-s-ncna830246?cid=sm_npd_nn_fb_ma

#Domestic #Hard #Immigration

38: Golden Globes snubbed 'Girls Trip' because Hollywood cannot handle black joy

Sub: Opinion essay | Aramide A. Tinubu: "Historically black-cast films and black actors are only acknowledged as 'worthy' with awards if suffering (or slavery) stands at the center."

https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/golden-globes-snob-girls-trip-because-hollywood-cannot-handle-black-ncna829271?cid=sm_npd_nn_fb_ma

#Medium #Entertainment #RacePol

39: Size matters: Your wine glass is getting bigger

Sub: People are boozing it up more than ever and British researchers think they have a handle on one reason why.

https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/size-matters-your-wine-glass-getting-bigger-n829366?cid=sm_npd_nn_fb_ma

#Health #Soft

40: What did we search Google for the most this year?

Sub: Not a single political topic made the list of the top 10 Google searches around the world in 2017 — not even the golden-haired elephant in the room.

https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/what-did-we-search-google-most-year-n829591?cid=sm_npd_nn_fb_ma

41: Bon Jovi, Nina Simone among five 2018 Rock & Roll Hall of Fame inductees

Sub: Bon Jovi, Dire Straits, the Moody Blues, Nina Simone, and The Cars will be inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, organizers said.

https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/music/bon-jovi-nina-simone-among-five-2018-rock-roll-hall-n829226?cid=sm_npd_nn_fb_ma

#Soft #Entertainment

42: WATCH: Celebrations erupt as this high school student learns that he has been accepted to the college of his dreams...

MORE: <http://on.today.com/2zdt2VJ>

#Video #Soft

43: Supreme Court Allows Third Version of Trump's Travel Ban to Take Effect

Subhead: Breaking News: The Supreme Court let the third version of President Trump's travel ban take effect as challenges proceed.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/04/us/politics/trump-travel-ban-supreme-court.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur>

#Domestic #Hard #TrumpNeut

44: Five Strongmen, and the Fate of the Arab Spring

Subhead: The fate of 5 Arab strongmen: One is in exile. One is under house arrest. One leads a ruined country. And two died violently

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/04/world/middleeast/ali-abdullah-saleh-strongmen.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur>

#International #Hard #ArabSpring

45: Can a Jew Love France?

Sub: From The New York Times Opinion Section: "I inherited a French dream. But things are not so dreamy for Jews today in France."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/16/opinion/can-a-jew-love-france.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur>

#International #Medium

46: Help us find off-beat communities

Sub: If you're part of a community that you'd call "offbeat", we want to hear from you.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/11/30/multimedia/surfacing-subcultures-off-beat-communities-and-beyond.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur>

#Soft #Domestic

47: The Best Theater of 2017

Subhead: Yes, Bruce Springsteen's Broadway show made our critics' list. Here are the shows that made our critics breathless.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/05/theater/best-theater.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur>

#Domestic #Soft #Entertainment #Culture

48: Hold on tight! We're taking you on a break-neck backstage tour of the The Metropolitan Opera, with cameos by Misty Copeland, American Ballet Theatre and a snow yak.

An annotated guide to the video: <http://nyti.ms/2Aq8Cd3>

This was one of our most-viewed videos on Facebook this year.

#Video #Soft #Domestic #Culture

49: Opinion | No Wonder Millennials Hate Capitalism

Subhead: The New York Times Opinion Section: The Republican tax plan would gift young Americans an even more unequal society than the one they were born into.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/04/opinion/millennials-hate-capitalism.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur>

#Domestic #Hard #Economy #TaxReform #RepublicanNeg

50: Trump Is a Racist. Period.

Sub: Charles M. Blow writes in The New York Times Opinion Section: "Racism" and 'racist' are simply words that have definitions, and Donald J. Trump comfortably and unambiguously meets those definitions."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/14/opinion/trump-racist-shithole.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur>

#TrumpNeg #Hard #Racism

51: Opinion| Bill Clinton: Americans Must Decide Who We Really Are

Subhead: Former President Bill Clinton writes in The New York Times Opinion Section: "All too often, tribalism based on race, religion, sexual identity and place of birth has replaced inclusive nationalism, in which you can be proud of your tribe and still embrace the larger American community."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/04/opinion/bill-clinton-travel-ban.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur>

#Domestic #BillClintonPos #Medium #Speculation

52: "No human being was protected more than Bill Clinton was...and no human being was more harassed and ridiculed and trashed as Bill Clinton's victims were."

Juanita Broaddrick, who accused President Bill Clinton of sexual misconduct, said it "is a little bit too late" for Democratic women to come out against the former president.

<http://bit.ly/2yUj60P>

#Video #Domestic #Hard #SexualScandal #DemocratNeg #BillClintonNeg

53: Deported Repeatedly, Man is sentenced to 35 yers for Attacks on 2 Oregon women

Sub: The case drew the attention of the Trump administration as it has tried to crack down on undocumented immigrants.

#Domestic #Hard #TrumpNeut #Immigration

54: In a city where breaking a sweat often feels more like breaking the bank, here are some ways to get fit for free.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/09/nyregion/new-york-today-getting-fit-for-free.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur>

#Soft #Health

55: 14 Reasons You're Tired All the Time

Sub: Experts reveal common bad habits you should avoid.

http://motto.time.com/4226581/bad-habits-drain-energy-2/?xid=time_socialflow_facebook&utm_campaign=time&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social

#Domestic-International #Soft #Lifestyle

56: Watch This Guy Propose to His Girlfriend 365 Times Without Her Knowing

Sub: Witness an epic proposal one year in the making.

http://time.com/3736803/man-proposes-to-girlfriend-365-times/?xid=time_socialflow_facebook&utm_campaign=time&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social

#Domestic #Soft #Relationships

57: The Top 10 Movies of 2017

Sub: How many have you seen?

http://time.com/5045566/top-10-movies-2017/?utm_campaign=time&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&xid=time_socialflow_facebook

#Domestic-International #Soft #Entertainment

58: You won't believe where sugar is hiding.

#Video #Soft #Health

59: Kids interview the cast of Star Wars: #TheLastJedi and the answers are hilarious ??

Watch more here: <https://people.tv/2AkigxS>

#Video #Domestic #Soft

60: From Taylor Swift to Kesha to Lorde.

Sub: These are the top 10 albums of 2017

http://time.com/5034987/best-albums-2017/?utm_campaign=time&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&xid=time_socialflow_facebook

61: Prince George Had the Cutest Role in His School's Nativity Play

Sub: Adorable.

http://time.com/5051909/prince-george-school-play/?utm_campaign=time&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&xid=time_socialflow_facebook

#Soft #International #RoyalFamily

62: Best Buy Is Selling a 60-Inch Smart 4K TV for Under \$500 Today

Sub: But you'll have to act quickly.

http://time.com/money/5051869/best-buy-doorbuster-deal-smart-4k-tv/?utm_campaign=time&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&xid=time_socialflow_facebook

#Domestic #Soft #Business

63: North Korea has launched its first ballistic missile in months. Thought to be its most powerful weapon yet, the missile could put Washington and the entire eastern U.S. seaboard within range. <http://ti.me/2i1asqD>

#Video #International #Hard #NorthKorea

64: Tens of Thousands Stranded as Bali Volcano Closes Airport

Sub: Authorities raised the volcano's alert to the highest level early Monday.

http://time.com/5037202/bali-volcano-mount-agung-eruptions/?utm_campaign=time&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&xid=time_socialflow_facebook

#International #Hard #BaliVolcano

65: See Who You're Most Likely to Marry Based on Where You Live

Sub: Those who choose a spouse born in a different state tend not to look very far.

http://time.com/4705099/marriage-wedding-states/?xid=time_socialflow_facebook&utm_campaign=time&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social

#Soft #Relationships

66: Belly Fat: 12 Reasons You're Not Losing Weight

Sub: Understand your body before trying to lose weight.

http://time.com/86287/belly-fat-stubborn-weight-loss/?xid=time_socialflow_facebook&utm_campaign=time&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social

#Soft #Health

67: Here's what more Americans are doing to combat loneliness

Sub: "Everyone at some point needs someone else." #ad

http://time.com/intentional-communities/?utm_campaign=time&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&xid=time_socialflow_facebook

#Soft #Lifestyle #Repost

68: Charles Jenkins, former U.S. deserter to North Korea, dies at 77

Sub: Jenkins called his desertion a mistake that led to decades of deprivation and hardship.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/12/12/ex-u-s-deserter-north-korea-dies/943379001/>

#Domestic-International #Medium #NorthKorea

69: Akayed Ullah, 27, strapped an improvised, low-tech pipe bomb to his body with Velcro and zip ties and detonated it near New York's Port Authority, police say. The suspect suffered burns and other wounds and is in the hospital. <https://usat.ly/2BTAILO>

#Terror #Hard #Domestic #Picture

70: 'The Rock' announces he's expecting a baby girl in adorable Instagram post

Sub: Dwayne The Rock Johnson is welcoming another girl into his "mana"!

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/entertainthis/2017/12/11/rock-dwayne-johnson-baby-girl/943102001/>

#Soft #Entertainment

71: 'Outlander' Season 3 finale recap: Claire and Jamie take on Geillis

Sub: Well, that was A LOT.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/entertainthis/2017/12/11/outlander-season-3-finale-recap-claire-and-jamie-take-geillis/935412001/>

#Soft #Domestic

72: How to choose the best smart speaker for you: shopper's guide

Sub: Which Amazon Echo, Google Home or Sonos speaker is for you?

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/talkingtech/2017/12/11/how-choose-best-smart-speaker-you-shoppers-guide/933136001/>

#Soft #Technology

73: How to buy gifts online without loved ones knowing

Sub: If you're unsure how to cover your technological tracks, here are a few suggestions.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/columnist/saltzman/2017/12/09/how-cover-your-online-shopping-tracks/933967001/>

#Soft #Technology

74: 'Piece of meat': Trump sexual misconduct accusers appear with Megyn Kelly on 'Today'

Sub: "I had just turned 20 years old, and I just felt so gross."

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2017/12/11/trump-sexual-misconduct-accusers-megyn-kelly-today/939683001/>

#Hard #Domestic #TrumpNeg #SexualScandal

75: 'Piece of meat': Trump sexual misconduct accusers appear with Megyn Kelly on 'Today'

Sub:

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2017/12/11/trump-sexual-misconduct-accusers-megyn-kelly-today/939683001/>

#Domestic #Hard #SexualScandal #TrumpNeg

76: Women in Germany's east earn close to what men do. Can we thank socialism for that?

Sub: The gender pay gap for Germany's formerly socialist east has been one of the lowest in the world.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/12/08/women-germanys-east-earn-close-what-men-do-can-we-thank-socialism/933784001/>

#International #Hard #Speculation #WageGap

77: Educate Your Relatives This Holiday Season With A 'F*ck Your Racist Grandma' Sweatshirt

Sub: "You can love your grandma," says 19-year-old designer Olatiwa Karade. "But you also need to be saying, 'You know, grandma, black people are human.'"

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/political-sweatshirts_us_5a21972fe4b03350e0b68789?utm_campaign=hp_fb_pages&utm_source=main_fb&utm_medium=facebook&ncid=fbklnkushpmsg00000063

#Soft #Domestic #Racism #Fashion

78: After Blowback, CNN Gun Expert Explains His 'Full Semi-Automatic' AR-15 Comment

Sub: Beware the #fakenews...

https://www.dailywire.com/news/27669/after-blowback-cnn-gun-expert-explains-his-full-james-barrett?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social&utm_content=062316-news&utm_campaign=benshapiro

79: CNN Proves It's An Activist Outlet On Gun Control, Not A Journalistic One

Sub: They're activists, and they should simply say that they are.

https://www.dailywire.com/news/27673/cnn-proves-its-activist-outlet-gun-control-not-benshapiro?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social&utm_content=062316-news&utm_campaign=benshapiro

80: "What Donald Trump has done most effectively is expose the media bias." - Michell Malkin.

Subhead: On "Watters' World," Michelle Malkin talked about President Donald J. Trump's greatest accomplishments in the year since his election. <http://bit.ly/2hSc4mr>

#TrumpPos #Domestic #Medium #MediaNeg