

Study: Fake news shows less important in learning about politics

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A new study suggests that entertainment news shows such as The Daily Show or The Colbert Report may not be as influential in teaching voters about political issues and candidates as was previously thought.

Previous studies have reported up to 48 percent of all adults and 60 percent of young voters used fake news shows as a source of campaign news in the 2004 presidential election. But researchers from Ohio State University have found reasons to discount how effective these shows are in informing the general public.

The study found that people who watch fake news shows learn far less about political issues and candidates than people who watch television news shows on networks such as CNN and NBC. However, the study also found that people watching fake news shows still learned more than people who didn't watch any political content.

People watching television news learned more about a candidate's position on issues and about political procedures compared to those watching the fake news shows, while fake news shows primarily taught viewers about a candidate's personal background.

"Both news and entertainment media seem to promote some knowledge gain, but people who are exposed to news gain more factual information and learn more about a wide range of important topics than those exposed to entertainment media," said Young Mie Kim, co-author of the study and assistant professor of communication at Ohio State.

Kim conducted the study with John Vishak, who is a former graduate student at Ohio State.

The findings, which were recently published in the *Journal of Communication*, suggest that fake news shows are influential in forming impressions about a candidate based on their background, but are not as useful in learning about the issues and political procedures central to an election.

Kim said these differences in knowledge gain may be due to how people are using fake news shows versus television news. Once people sit down to watch a show, they may have already decided how and if they will use the information presented in each segment.

"Entertainment shows may not be the best choice to learn about candidates or issues or political procedures because people use them to pass time or relax. So they may not be paying attention to all the details. On the other hand, news is meant to be for learning something new, so people try to remember more of the information shown," she said.

The study involved eighty-five people in a Midwestern city who were shown 20-minute video segments on the nomination of John Roberts for chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court in 2005. Participants ranging from 18 to 64 years old viewed segments from either the NBC evening news and CNN or *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart. Both segments contained information about the nomination procedure, John Robert's personal background and issue positions, and reactions from Congress, political parties and issue advocacy groups.

A third group was shown a science documentary of equal length, to compare the effects of both news and entertainment shows to other forms of media without political content.

Before the study began, the participants in all three groups were similar in terms of their interest in politics and their viewership patterns when watching news and the fake news programs.

Participants from the groups were then asked to write down, point-by-point, what they had learned in the videos. They then rated all the points as to whether they were positive or negative to the person or group mentioned.

The participants also took a 29 question test probing their knowledge of Roberts, the nomination procedure, the nominee's issue positions and reactions to his views, and Roberts' personal background.

Finally, they were asked to rate how much they liked John Roberts on a scale of -50 to +50.

The results showed that people who watched the NBC and CNN news segment were able to recall more details about all topics than those who watched The Daily Show clip. They also averaged two more questions correct in the test. The real news clip led viewers to learn about who the nominee was and where he stood on important issues, while also increasing their understanding of political policies and issues.

In contrast, people watching The Daily Show remembered details about the nominee's college choice and family members, but were less informed on important political issues and the nominee's stance on those issues.

"Your voting decision should be based on factual information on many topics. The problem with entertainment media is you might feel politically confident when you watch these fake news shows, but if the information you have is not true or doesn't show all of the facts, then you're making a judgment based on incorrect or incomplete

information," she said.

Overall, results showed people watching the fake news segment tended to use only portions of the information they learned in the segment – whether fact or opinion -- to update their opinion on Roberts, creating a sort of mental tally of the positives and negatives. Without remembering who said what about the candidate or the specific details about the candidate's personal background and party affiliations, people would evaluate the candidate and update their impression based on what they liked and disliked.

"Say in the beginning you are slightly positive toward John Roberts, but you don't think about why. Then you're exposed to some new information saying that liberals are really against him, and you're a liberal and now you don't like him. You slightly liked him before the exposure but when you're exposed to such information, you just update your overall attitude in real time," Kim said.

But news shows were used much differently. After viewing the news segment, the viewers concluded how much they liked John Roberts overall based on all the factual information they had learned about the nominee.

The end result was people used fake news shows to update their impressions of the candidate immediately, while news shows promoted learning about the candidate, issues, and procedures. People who watched the news shows will presumably use the knowledge they gain over the long-term to develop their opinions about candidates and issues, she said.

And while the study suggests that entertainment news shows are less important to gaining political knowledge than traditional news, fake news shows may still be beneficial, Kim said.

People who watched The Daily Show segment still gained information about Roberts' background, which is important in forming impressions. More importantly, people who watch entertainment news learn more than people who don't watch any political content.

"A lot of young voters and a lot of people in general watch these shows so we have a lot of entertainment media consumers. Entertainment media may not be ideal for learning about political issues and procedures, but it is still better than nothing," she said.

Source: Ohio State University

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