

Survey: Few people believed campaign rumors about Obama, McCain

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About nine in 10 Americans heard the rumor that Barack Obama is a Muslim, making it possibly the most prevalent rumor of the 2008 presidential campaign, according to a nationwide survey. However, only 22 percent of those surveyed said they actually believed that Obama is a Muslim.

The results can be viewed as both good and bad, according to R. Kelly Garrett, one of the leaders of the survey and assistant professor of communication at Ohio State University.

"On the one hand, only a fraction of the people who heard the rumor that Obama is a Muslim actually believed it," Garrett said.

"But on the other hand, almost a quarter of Americans did believe it was true, even though everyone from the news media to John McCain himself was consistently saying the rumor was false."

Garrett and James N. Danziger, a professor at the University of California, Irvine, commissioned a representative national telephone survey of 600 Americans to learn about the role of the Internet in spreading rumors about the presidential campaign. The survey was conducted the two weeks following the election (November 6 to 20) and has a margin of error of 4.4 percent.

The Internet played a key role in the dissemination of rumors, the researchers found. More than two-thirds of respondents got information about the campaign online, and two-fifths got such online information virtually every day. These proportions are nearly double the corresponding numbers during the 2004 campaign.

In addition, the proportion of Americans who said they received campaign news in e-mails from friends and family more than tripled in just one year. About 53 percent said they received news from e-mails in 2008, compared to 16 percent who

responded to a similar question in a Pew Research Center survey in 2007.

Nearly one in three Americans got campaign information from video sharing sites such as YouTube. And it wasn't just the young: the average age of individuals who said they got campaign news from online video sites on a daily basis was 40 years old.

For the survey, the researchers chose eight prominent false statements circulating via e-mail during the 2008 election cycle as compiled by two fact-checking websites, FactCheck.com and Snopes.com. The statements were selected based on their prevalence and the strength of the evidence that they were false.

One of the surprises from the survey was that only two of the eight rumors had been heard by more than half of those surveyed. Those were the rumors about Obama being a Muslim and the rumor that Obama is not a natural-born citizen of the United States (heard by 59 percent).

The most-heard rumor about the Republican ticket was that vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin had banned several books from the local library while mayor of Wasilla, Alaska (heard by 40 percent of those surveyed).

"Rumors were not as widespread as you might have believed if you saw the fact-checking sites or the media coverage about them," he said. "Most people weren't aware of any but the most high-profile rumors."

The most-believed rumor was the claim that Obama is a Muslim, accepted by 22 percent of the total people surveyed. The other seven rumors were believed by 3 percent to 20 percent of respondents.

One piece of good news is that many of the people

who heard rumors about the candidates also encountered evidence contradicting the false claims. For example, the majority of people who heard the rumor that Obama is Muslim also heard the rumor challenged. Overall, the most widely known rumors were also most widely disputed.

As might be expected, people were more familiar with rumors about the candidate they opposed, and more likely to believe those rumors, as well. For example, Obama supporters believed almost none of the Obama rumors, while McCain supporters, on average, believed just over one rumor about Obama.

In addition to asking about the eight rumors, the researchers also asked about two true statements heard during the campaign. One was the statement made by Democratic vice-presidential candidate Joe Biden that wealthy Americans who pay higher taxes are being patriotic. The other was that John McCain had divorced his wife of 15 years and married 25-year-old Cindy five weeks later.

Less than half of the respondents said they heard either statement during the campaign (39 percent heard the Biden quote and 48 percent heard about McCain's divorce). Only about half the respondents who heard either statement said they believed it. Still, Garrett noted that higher proportions of respondents believed the true statements than believed the false statements.

"Perhaps the reason Americans weren't more aware of the two factual statements is that these just weren't decisive issues for them," he said.

Overall, the results support the notion that the Internet makes it easier to spread rumors about candidates, Garrett said.

Respondents who reported above-average online news use heard an average of 3.2 of the eight rumors, while those with below-average online news use heard an average of 2.5 rumors.

However, the results showed that heavy online news users also were more likely than others to hear challenges to the rumors. Even more importantly, heavy online news users were no more

likely than others to believe the rumors.

"When people looked for accurate information on the Internet, and they often did, they could find it. Ultimately, the Internet did not have much influence on what people believed," he said.

"Our results suggest that the Internet does not pose the kind of threat to public knowledge that some have imagined."

Garrett said he and Danziger will use the data from the survey to perform a more detailed analysis of the role of the Internet in spreading rumors during the 2008 election.

Source: Ohio State University

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