

**Churchill's Argument Against  
Democracy: The Average Voter.**  
Information Levels and News Sources  
among Americans

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## Abstract

*A democracy needs an informed public. However, I investigate low levels of political awareness among Americans. I focus on whether people understand issues incorrectly or are simply disengaged and inattentive. There is an important difference between them. Those who are uninformed simply do not know, which would make it easier to turn them into informed citizens. All that would be needed is for them to access the right information. For those who are misinformed, however, it is a tougher task. They believe that their answer is right, and even though they are in fact wrong, they are more willing to fight the truth in order to validate what they feel is the right answer. I analyze this phenomenon with Public Mind Polling data from Fairleigh Dickinson University. I anticipate my results to show that less use of news media will decrease a person's level of knowledge and increase their degree of disengagement, while loyalty to a limited number of media sources is likely to increase a person's level of misinformation.*

## Introduction

“The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter.” Winston Churchill’s quote sums up what it means to have a good democracy. For a democracy to work, those who are making the decisions, the average voter, need to know what is going on. This knowledge is what is known as political knowledge, and the way it is currently done is by surveying a group of individuals that one is interested in, then looking at the amount right and wrong. The type of question varies, some being true and false, some being simple civics questions, and others being current-events related. Knowing where a group of people sit when it comes to political knowledge is great, but how do we fix democracy’s biggest problem?

I argue that it is more important to focus on how each demographic is answering the question, including on if they are answering the question wrong, or answering “don’t know.” Looking at how each demographic is answering the questions can give us a better outlook into how those in the media industry can set up the news media. Currently, most news media are accused of a predominant bias, something that is being noticed more often with the rise of “fake news.” Some people are starting to seek out real, factual news, and instead of making them watch every channel to decipher what is fact and what is false, the formula can be changed to help both keep the bias side that makes the companies money, but also help inform their specific demographic.

In order to understand the possibility of a new type of political media, it is important to know how each demographic needs to be informed. Those who are uninformed, or the ones who answer “don’t know,” should be targeted by a type of media that seeks to inform. They do not need a type of bias, they just need to be told the correct answer enough times to be confident enough to answer correctly. For those who are misinformed, or those who answer the question

wrong, it is important to help their knowledge and show why their answer is wrong. The issue right now is that those who are looking for both sides need multiple channels. By using this study and others that may come after this different media companies can use this knowledge to develop new strategies along with the methods used today to not only retain viewership, but also help the general public be more knowledgeable as well.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Start of Always-on News**

When CNN was founded, the whole world of news was flipped on its head. News was traditionally a thirty-minute to an hour on a main station such as ABC or NBC. CNN brought a whole new idea, an always-on news station, and with that, it brought something known as the CNN effect. The CNN effect describes how instead of only seeing it in a condensed form, the news is seen as it is happening, and by seeing it live, experiencing it all day, and hearing the thoughts of the anchors throughout the day leads to people's opinions changing. Along with their opinions, it provides an urge to want to help and intervene in the situation, as it is not just a retelling of the story, but live commentary. The fact that the news could be accessed as it happened lead to a more connected world, one that wants to help (Robinson, 2005). CNN was started as a channel so those who wanted the news could get it at any time of day or night.

In 1996, Fox News was created, which now is CNN's biggest rival, but when it was first created, it was intended for the more right-wing viewers wanting a point of view of their own. This led to its very own effect, the aptly named Fox News effect. This one showed that when the channel first aired in only about ten thousand towns, that the average change in voter trends went about one percent more Republican than previous. This helped drive the more conservative

viewers to the channel, and in response, CNN slowly shifted to a more liberal bias (DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2006).

Now even though CNN started off as a basic, non-biased news channel, Fox News actually planned on being biased and it is seen by the content they provide. Before Fox News, avoiding bias was more of an issue, and the main goal was to get to the facts and the up-to-date news to the public. Fox News, however, aimed to make news entertainment, and by focusing it on anchors who feel strongly about a subject and do not try to hide their bias, they changed the game of television news and politics in the media (Ackerman, 2001).

Now that we know about the channels, why does Fox News seem so much more biased than everyone else? This has to do with how we perceive bias, and to understand this is essential to knowing how it can lead to false knowledge. Firstly, it has been shown that the more someone is active in politics, the better they are able to perceive bias. By being active in politics, the person usually cares about the topic more than someone who knows nothing about politics, and when someone cares more, they are more likely to feel that another news source is biased against them. Another additive to feeling biased by the news media is something that just emerged recently, social media. Before social media, one had to call or write or even talk to someone in person to discuss ideas. Now, all one has to do is go online and they are surrounded by like-minded individuals. By talking about the bias, they are able to reinforce that the news media of question is biased. In this article social media is referring to message boards and instant messaging services, which were starting to get popular around 2003. (Eveland & Shah, 2003). Media as a whole has evolved into an always-on world that if you are not by a television, it does not matter. The internet makes it easier than ever to access news and politics, however by accessing them that fast with their bias, it can lead to misinformation.

## **The Rise of Misinformed Voters**

The news and its always-on style today from both television and social media leads to the question, how does the constant influx of news effect people's knowledge? An 'uninformed voter' is one that has no knowledge of what is going on. A "misinformed voter" on the other hand is one that feels they know the right answer but is wrong. They could be basing it on the political ads, which often are slanderous and not fully truthful, or maybe they are only following a biased channel, and are only hearing the perspective of one side. I argue that if someone only draws their news and political insight from a single channel, then they are going to be misinformed. According to a study done by Dan Cassino, what channel someone watches influences how much they know. According to his study, those who watched Fox News or MSNBC scored lower on average than those who watched no news at all (2012). I am using the same data, however he focused more on individual news channels, as I am looking at the information levels as a whole, with the number of channels viewed as one of my independent values.

The news media nowadays are forming to "preach to the choir" or to reinforce the idea of the side the channel is bias towards. By not providing both sides of the story, it not only helps produce misinformed voters, but produces ones that feel they are very informed. Bartels shows that it does have an influence on the elections, and that it is very important that the voters are well informed (Bartels, 1996). This study was before the rise of the internet and social media, but even back then the bias of the channels made it easier for false knowledge to appear, and with the always-on nature of today, it has only gotten worse.

In today's world, more and more options appear for accessing the news by the day. There are apps, various websites, video clips, and full news programs that are accessible any time

someone wants it. Because of this, the traditional media is forced to change how they go about providing the news. First it was the shift to always-on news channels, and now it is the move into twitter and social media. The media's main goal is to make money, and now they have access to those who would never watch news before. This expansion has caused traditional news to start to fall to the wayside, as people can find the news reported by people who share the same views as them. As this shift is happening, the outlets want to take advantage of this as well, so they are evolving to a more biased news site to get the key demographic they want, and more importantly, get the money they want (Sutter, 2000). This article again is from the beginning of the social media revolution, and because news is as easy to find as a simple Google search, it is easier to confirm your own beliefs. As news outlets try to stay mainstream, they are adapting how they are presenting news, and one of the ways is provide an outlet for one view, adding to the false knowledge of voters.

### **Miller and Orr on the Don't Know option**

Currently, political knowledge is gauged multiple different ways. In the data that I am using, they are using current event type questions, which focuses on how much the person pays attention. There are other types, some being true and false based questions, and others that are based off civics-type questions. The current style that is typically used is have the multiple options for the question, and a "don't know" option for those who are unsure. One study that I looked at focuses on the "don't know" category, and suggests that those giving the survey are being too lax. Miller and Orr use the same separation as I use, distinguishing those who are uninformed and misinformed, and they also add another separation, which is those who demonstrate partial knowledge. The partially informed are those "who are not certain of the correct answer," (Miller & Orr, 2008).

To test how the DK (don't know) effected respondents, they set up three random web surveys of undergraduates at Bowling Green State University in Ohio during 2006. The three different surveys used different forms of using DK. The first used the standard form that they called DK-encouraged, which is when the surveyor would reassure the respondent that it is okay to answer "don't know" and that not that many people know the answer. The second type was DK-discouraged, where the surveyor would press the respondent if answered "don't know." They would push them to see if they at least wanted to guess, in a way to make sure that the respondent actually did not know. Thirdly, there was the DK-omitted version, where "don't know" just was not an option. What they found is that with both DK-omitted and DK-discouraged, the amount correct went up, but so did the amount incorrect. More research is needed, but their first studies showed that the DK-encouraged option does produce less correct answers, and that the don't know option can be used as a crutch. For my study, I argue that if a way is found to test "don't know" by accurately getting rid of the so-called crutches, then DK is a suitable option and one that can be used to understand how to educate a targeted demographic.

## **The Data**

The data I am using is from a survey conducted by the PublicMind poll based out of Fairleigh-Dickenson University in New Jersey. The original survey was conducted by Dan Cassino and was used in his paper "What you know depends on what you watch: Current events knowledge across popular news sources." The data contains the answers of 1185 people from across the United States, and contains various questions concerning political knowledge and amount of news watched. Some of the more useful questions in the data set are the nine political knowledge questions, and the twelve various media questions, all which ask the respondent if they have used the type of media in the last week. The type of media varies from specific

channels such as CNN and Fox News to more open media such as local news broadcasts and a national newspaper. The dataset also contains multiple demographic questions, including age, political party, and gender. Using the political knowledge questions, I have compiled three different indexes, one of the amount of answers each person got right, one of the total number of times the person answered “don’t know”, and the last one with the amount of times a person answered wrong. This data will help look at the differences between those who answer wrongly compared to those who just do not know, and see if there is any connection to looking at political knowledge through this variation instead of just looking at if the person got the answer right or wrong.

## **The Research**

First of all, in a comparison of individuals, those who access more types of news media are less likely to have answered “don’t know” than those who access less types of news media.

[Table 1]

The table shows that where eleven percent of people who have low consumption of news media answered “don’t know” to all nine political knowledge questions, only two percent of those who have high consumption answered “don’t know” for all nine questions. Conversely, twenty-nine percent of those who had high consumption of news media never answered “don’t know” whereas only a little less than five percent of those who had low consumption did so. This confirms that the more news media you access, the more likely you are to at least think you know the answer. Those who have low news consumption are more likely to be uninformed, and therefore would not know how to answer, and therefore take the “don’t know” option. Inversely, those who have high consumption are more likely to be informed, or at the very least have enough confidence to answer the question.

There might also be a connection to political party. In a comparison of individuals, those who consider themselves Democrats will have watched less news than those who label themselves Republicans.

To try and figure out which demographic is the best to target by simply teaching them the right information, it is possible it could depend on age. In a comparison of individuals, those who are younger are more likely to answer “don’t know” than those who are older.

[Table 2]

The means test confirms this hypothesis, as those in the 18-29 age range answered “don’t know” about 1.75 times more than the total average. This shows that this age range does not pay attention as much as the other age ranges, or that they are less confident in the news media to answer confidently one way or the other. On the other hand, those aged 60 and higher only answered “don’t know” a little more than three times on average, showing that they either are confident that they have the answer right because of the amount of news they watch, or their years have made it so they are more confident in their answer, right or wrong. To test this further, I also will look at the amount of news media consumed by age group, as a way of answering the first posed possibility. I hypothesize that those who are younger watch less news media than those who are older.

[Table 3]

Even though the hypothesis is confirmed, the amount differing the youngest age group from the oldest is only .42, which is not a lot comparing the difference between the previous table. By looking at both table 2 and table 3, it shows that it news consumption is not always the reason to why those answer “don’t know” answer that way. Each age group consumes a similar

amount, yet those in the youngest age group answer “don’t know” a lot more. More studies are needed to see why this is the case, and explore other options such as the suggestion by Miller and Orr that having the “don’t know” option is a hurdle to those with lower confidence.

Next, I have two regression analyses, one that has my three indexes: amount answered right, “don’t know” and wrong. These are the dependent variables for this regression, and tests it with multiple independent variables to see if there are any that have a bigger impact than the other. The other looks at the two types of questions, international and domestic, and how many of each were answered “don’t know” based on the independent variables. Gender is a dummy variable where male is 0 and female is 1. Party Identification is a 1-to-5 scale, with the lowest being Democrats and 5 being Republicans. Age is from 18 and up, and education scale goes from no high school diploma as 0 to post-undergrad at 5. Finally, there is the amount of media consumed, which starts at 0 and goes up to 12, which was every media option that was asked in the survey.

[Table 4 and 5]

Overall, as seen in table 4 and table 5, the “don’t know” option is the most statistically significant, showing that despite other factors playing into it, in this study it is the best way to determine a certain demographic and decide if they are uninformed and misinformed. This is important because it was possible that the don’t know option could of just been an outlier, as this is for those who are not sure. This also shows that of those surveyed, a good amount were not confident enough to even give an answer. Hopefully by focusing on the don’t know and targeting those demographics that eventually that number will go down, along with those who answer wrongly.

From this data, we see that Democrats are more likely to answer “don’t know” than republicans, as for this regression, 1 equaled Democrat and 5 equaled Republican. From this, I can hypothesize that Democrats will consume less news media than Republicans, as Table 1 showed that the more media that is consumed the less likely someone is to answer that option.

[Table 6]

In this means test, the opposite is actually true. Despite the thought process that democrats are typically a younger audience, one that does not watch traditional news, they actually consume more types of news than does Republicans. Along with this, we know the average news consumption for a respondent puts them into the medium consumed category, showing that the last two tests can be used for people as a whole as well as for the categories. By knowing the amount of news consumed per ideology, it is more capable of predicting which one is more likely to be uninformed instead of misinformed. In this test, because only .5 separate the means of Democrats and Republicans, the findings are harder to use this as a way of predicting, yet applied in other facets it is possible.

Now knowing that Democrats use more news media than Republicans, now we can compare the amount of questions that each party gets right to see if there is a correlation between the number of questions answered correctly and the amount watched. As they are less likely to answer don’t know, as shown in table 1, I hypothesize that in a comparison of individuals, those who are Democrats will answer correctly more times than those who are Republicans.

[Table 7]

In this case, even though the Democrats had about .5 points higher in types of media consumption, the Democrats actually got the least amount of questions right out of the five descriptors, and Republicans got the second-most right on average, with those leaning

Democratic earning the highest. The hypothesis is therefore incorrect, but the data does show something else interesting that may help describe what is happening. Those who are not solidly a Republican or a Democrat, or those who are “leaning Republican” and “leaning Democrat” averaged a higher score than the overall average of the test, showing that those who are deciding between the two are more willing to absorb more knowledge than those who are decidedly Democrat or Republican. This explanation does not show why Republicans also answered correctly more often than the average, but adds to the study to decide how to get a certain group more informed.

## **Discussion**

Overall, my findings suggest that those who are younger are more likely to answer “don’t know” along with those who are Democrats. Also, it is more likely for women to answer don’t know as well. As suggested by Miller and Orr, it is possible that these were impacted by other factors, and don’t know was used as crutch, so more studies are needed to analyze these possibilities. A DK-discouraged survey would be a solid first step in the right direction, and overall more actions can be taken to eliminate other factors that fall into answering “don’t know.” Overall, however, this study shows that the demographics differ on how they are answering wrong, and by looking at this data different news outlets can use them to help those demographics by possibly tweaking their current system.

Currently news outlets use bias as a way to make money, but as the each side of the spectrum views the other side as fake, then slowly the divide will grow to the point where the news is only saying what that specific side wants to hear. By using this study and others that are produced, news media will be able to tweak their formula to help combat with this alienating factor of bias. The spin will still be there, as bias is the cornerstone to viewership, but the end

goal of informing that demographic will appear. This study helps open the door to show what each demographic needs in terms of being able to be fully informed citizens, and even though these stations still focus on making money, at the end of the day, journalism and political media exist to inform the public. The current media set up does not seem to be helping increase the general knowledge of the public, and as Winston Churchill implies in his quote, without an informed public democracy cannot succeed. I feel that in order to switch his quote, the news media must change and focus on those who are either uninformed or misinformed. Once that happens, then it could be said that the best argument for democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter.

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## Tables

Table 1

### Number of questions answered "don't know" and news consumption

	Low Consumption (0-3)	Medium Consumption (4-7)	High Consumption (8+)
0	12 4.6%	81 13.7%	43 29.1%
1	28 10.7%	92 15.5%	27 18.2%
2	24 9.2%	83 14.0%	23 15.5%
3	14 5.3%	67 11.3%	13 8.8%
4	36 13.7%	67 11.3%	6 4.1%
5	21 8.0%	54 9.1%	9 6.1%
6	32 12.2%	46 7.8%	16 10.8%
7	37 14.1%	30 5.1%	7 4.7%
8	29 11.1%	44 7.4%	1 0.7%
9	29 11.1%	29 4.9%	3 2.0%
Total	262 100.0%	593 100.0%	148 100.0%

Chi-Square: 123.139

Somers' d: -.196

Table 2

**Report**

How many different news media consumed in the past week

Political Ideology	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Democrat	5.39	280	2.402
Leaning Democrat	5.89	96	2.301
Independent	5.24	127	2.626
Leaning Republican	5.30	123	2.061
Republican	4.90	201	2.069
Total	5.29	827	2.315

Table 3

**Report**

How many different news media consumed in the past week

Range of age	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
18-29	4.77	163	2.397
30-44	4.97	308	2.349
45-59	5.48	328	2.375
60+	5.19	337	2.197
Total	5.16	1136	2.330

Table 4

Independent Variables	Right Index	"Don't Know" Index	Wrong Index
Gender	-1.162***	1.427***	.125
	(.146)	(.178)	(.101)
Party Identification	.085	-.166**	.076*
	(.045)	(.055)	(.031)
Age	.030***	-.039***	-.002
	(.004)	(.005)	(.003)
Highest Level of Education	.620***	-.596***	-.211***
	(.069)	(.063)	(.047)
How many different news media consumed	.252***	-.376***	.062**
	(.032)	(.040)	(.022)
Constant	-1.032	9.285	2.012
Adjusted R-Square	.261	.302	.028

\*p< .05, \*\*p< .01, \*\*\*p< .001

Std. error in parentheses

Table 5

Independent Variables	International Questions	Domestic Questions
Gender	.745***	.572***
	(.100)	(.098)
Party Identification	-.054	-.121***
	(.031)	(.030)
Age	-.017***	-.017***
	(.003)	(.003)
Highest Level of Education	-.250***	-.318***
	(.047)	(.046)
How many different news media consumed	-.179***	-.187***
	(.022)	(.021)
Constant	4.072	4.870
Adjusted R-Square	.229	.225

\*p< .05, \*\*p< .01, \*\*\*p< .001

Std. error in parentheses

Table 6

**Report**

Amount of questions answered correctly

Political Ideology	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Democrat	3.24	288	2.380
Leaning Democrat	3.86	97	2.239
Independent	3.28	133	2.395
Leaning Republican	3.72	124	2.206
Republican	3.82	208	2.394
Total	3.53	850	2.356

Table 7

**Report**

Amount of questions answered "don't know"

Range of age	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
18-29	5.53	130	2.754
30-44	4.26	288	2.631
45-59	3.22	277	2.692
60+	3.03	313	2.653
Total	3.76	1008	2.799