

**Social Media and Citizenship**  
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The number of people who depend on social media for their news is growing steadily. According to the Pew Research Center, 44% of Americans get their news from Facebook. And Twitter is on the rise. The problem is that social media are not a reliable sources of news. They allow for the rapid spread of what is called fake news, but even more worrisome is that they elevate gossip and rumor to the level of news. Why should stories that are more popular than others—stories which are “trending”—be seen as more important or more reliable than stories that are not getting much attention? The traditional media (now attacked for being the “establishment media”) always struggles with bias, but it has traditions and processes designed to temper bias and give truth a chance. The social media are popular precisely because they do not have these filtering systems. They are fresh, vibrant, and fast, because they do not demand of themselves that they live up to standards set by editors and publishers.

Consider these examples. Beginning in October of 2015, when Trump’s presidential campaign was taking shape, a false quotation of Donald Trump began to circulate. The quotation was supposedly taken from an interview he did with People Magazine in 1998. The fake story claimed that Donald Trump had said: “If I were to run, I’d run as a Republican. They’re the dumbest group of voters in the country. They believe anything on Fox News. I could lie and they’d still eat it up. I bet my numbers would be terrific.” Clearly, this fake story was designed to hurt Trump’s standing with the Republican Party. But the interview never took place and the quotation was entirely fake. CNN reported that the source was probably a liberal Facebook page called “The Other 98%.”

Here’s another example. The New York Times reports that the day after the presidential election, Eric Tucker, a businessman with about 40 Twitter followers, was in Austin for a Trump rally and noticed a number of busses parking nearby. He decided that these busses held paid protesters being brought in to disrupt the Trump rally. He posted pictures of the busses along with his story, which ended up creating a conspiracy theory that was posted 16,000 times on Twitter and 350,000 times on Facebook. He tweeted that “Anti-Trump protesters in Austin today are not as organic as they seem. Here are the busses as they came in.” The busses were actually bringing in people for a conference of 13,000 for a company called Tableau Software.

Mr. Tucker was not intentionally lying. He believed what he posted on Twitter. But because he was not part of the establishment media, he did not have to go through the tiresome and laborious process of doing research and confirming to his editors that the story was credible.

Some checking by the New York Times showed that Mr. Tucker’s tweet was picked up by a user on Free Republic, a conservative discussion group, and this was picked up by Facebook pages like the Robertson Family Values page and Donald Trump Commander in Chief 2020. The conservative blog Gateway Pundit posted the story and then on November 10<sup>th</sup>, president-elect Donald Trump himself picked up the story and posted this: “Just had a very open and successful presidential election. Now professional protesters, incited by the media, are protesting. Very unfair.” Did Donald Trump actually believe the story, or was he spreading it to promote his own political agenda. There is no way to know. But in this case we have a completely false story—one which could have been eliminated by just a little research—spreading across the country within a day’s time and being confirmed by the president-elect of the United States.

Our republic depends for its existence on active citizens who know to weigh and balance competing claims of ideas, candidates, and office holders. In Federalist 71, Alexander Hamilton says that “the republican principle demands that the deliberate sense of the community should govern the conduct of those to whom they entrust the management of their affairs.” But he makes a distinction between the “deliberate sense of the community” and “every sudden breeze of passion” or “every transient impulse which the people may receive from the arts of men.” Today’s social media threatens to undermine citizenship by encouraging people to succumb to sudden breezes of passion and transient impulses.

For the last two hundred years, the most fertile ground for the development of good citizens has been liberal education, which has always focused on the development in its students of critical thinking skills. These skills don’t emerge from workshops, online programs, or the large lectures that one might encounter at major universities. They depend on a slow process of reading original texts with mentors who know their students and challenge them to think in ways that they have never thought before. Liberal education is a great preparation for career, but its main goal is to help students learn how to think for themselves—to be skeptical of what they hear and what they read and to ask probing questions about what is trending in society. In other words, in the tradition of Alexander Hamilton, liberal education seeks to teach students to be deliberate.

Social media today offer unparalleled opportunities for quick and stimulating communication, but they also invite citizens to shelve their critical skills and become passive receptors of falsehoods. Today we need liberal education more than ever.

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