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# Millennial skepticism and susceptibility to media persuasion

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Millennial Skepticism and Susceptibility to Media Persuasion

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Departmental Honors Thesis

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Communications

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## I. Introduction

It should come as no surprise that the generation with the most options as to its sources of news and entertainment also bears a striking difference from past generations in their consumption habits. Millennials are less likely than past generations to get their news from traditional sources, and many attribute this to their recognition of the corrupt political economy of the mass media (Walker, 2014). This awareness and overall distrust of government and corporate entities has, to some extent, contaminated millennial susceptibility to all forms of media.

In spite of their distrust for traditional news sources, studies consistently report that millennials ironically get the majority of their news from social media sites like Facebook and Twitter (How Millennials, 2015), where there is *less* accountability in the consumer-source relationship to ensure credible news coverage. The popularity of these digital platforms may be seen as a millennial backlash against traditional news media outlets which have been accused of emphasizing certain issues while underrepresenting, misrepresenting, or even neglecting others.

A good example of this is the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement in which, amidst the anger against multiple recent incidents of police brutality, many millennials turned their rage toward the news media, citing their tendency to portray black males as “thugs” and minimize or “whitewash” law enforcement corruption. According to the agenda-setting theory, these tactical portrayals may contribute to setting the general public opinion and are therefore powerful (McCombs, 1972). Digital platforms like Twitter exploded during the peak of this movement with common themes--

criticism of media representation and dissemination of “insider” (sometimes factual, sometimes fabricated) information.

Herein lies the problem with millennials’ use of the internet and especially social platforms as a source of news. It is impossible to calculate or even estimate how much of the information online is false, and the Internet boasts a substantial amount of factual information from verified, credible sources. However, with over 1 billion active websites--many of them being blogs or private domains--false information spreads quickly and easily if readers do not take the time to examine the credibility of sources and check the facts of a story against multiple credible platforms. Since (most) social platforms act as free public forums, the likelihood of coming into contact with inaccurate, out of context, or biased information is higher (Mendoza, 2010).

By rejecting traditional news media, millennials put themselves in a position to have to weather the misleading, misquoted, out-of-context, or even fully fabricated articles to get to the truth they seek. While their search for truth is commendable, millennials’ *actual* media consumption habits may reveal a disconnect between their skepticism toward the mass media and their susceptibility to false media messages.

As the youngest millennials near voting age (all millennials will be eligible to vote in the 2020 presidential election), how this generation consumes and filters news is an increasingly important topic. For millennials to protect themselves from false information from any medium, they must evaluate their media consumption habits and adjust accordingly. Otherwise, the false sense of skepticism could render (and in many modern case studies *has rendered*) this generation more susceptible to false, misleading, or even manipulative media messages.

While falling for a mild but humorous internet hoax can be embarrassing, it is nothing in comparison to having one's opinions, ideas, and beliefs, shaped by false, misleading, or out-of-context information like what may be one click away from any well-intended Google search. As millennials grow older and gain political, financial, and socio economic power, a generation fueled by things they read on Facebook and Twitter is a scarier thought.

One factor that could play into a false sense of security in news consumption habits is the *othering* of peers and (especially) other generations. Othering is the tendency of a human to view or treat "other" groups or individuals as being inherently *different* from themselves, almost to the extent of foreign or alien beings; this process both further divides people groups and further solidifies an individual's own behaviors and cultural characteristics (Canales, 2000).

An extension of this, the Third Person Effect, suggests that individuals evaluate others as being more "gullible" or more susceptible to mass media messages than themselves (Davison, 1983). Judgment toward others as a distraction from self evaluation is a concept so old even the Bible warns of it (Matthew 7:5 English Standard Version). If millennials' media consumption habits are, in fact, out of line with their skeptical nature, an overestimation of others' susceptibility may be a further hindrance.

For that reason, this study will address millennial news media consumption habits against their own self-evaluations of skepticism toward the media and their evaluations of others' skepticism toward the media. By doing so, this study will provide a platform for the evaluation and critique of any inconsistencies between millennials' evaluation of their own skepticism and their neglect for credibility in their news consumption habits. In

addition, this study aims to reveal millennials' overestimation of *others'* susceptibility in comparison with their own, as explained by the Third Person Effect.

## II. Literature Review

### **Millennials: Who Are They?**

Millennials, also commonly referred to as Generation Y, are roughly defined as the generation of individuals born between 1980 and 2000 (Rainer & Rainer, 2011). For consistency, this study will refer to them only as millennials. These digitally literate teens and young adults are between the rising Generation Z and the aging Generation X. According to Howe and Strauss, who coined the term “millennial,” this generation tends to be more politically and socially liberal, and less traditional in their religion and cultural views (Howe, & Strauss, 2009).

Numbering 80 million in the United States alone, millennials more than triple the population of Generation X. Personality-wise, they are typically perceived as narcissistic and entitled, at the supposed fault of Generation X parents who put (perhaps too much) emphasis on building their children’s self esteem (Stein, 2013). They also tend to be more outgoing, experience more anxiety and distress (but are quicker to seek help), and prefer thorough guidance and instructions over new experiences (Twenge et. al, 2012)

Although the digital revolution technically began in the 1950s with the invention of digital computers, cellphone and internet technology didn’t start affecting the family unit until the 1980s. This makes millennials the first generation to “grow up” with digital technology. Older generations that adapted to digital technologies are, therefore, considered “digital immigrants,” while millennials and coming generations are considered “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001).



Because of their extensive experience with technology, millennials may tend to consider themselves to be “ahead” of past generations when it comes to informed media consumption (Serazio, 2008). It has been argued that millennials’ confidence solely in their know-how (i.e. they know how to get quick answers using Google) creates a disconnect between their perceived and actual information literacy (i.e. they don’t know how to balance credibility with content to assure the accuracy of their findings) (Joint Information Systems Committee, 2008). In addition, millennials are not as civically engaged as they are *vocal* about their political ideologies (Twenge et. al, 2012).

Millennials are known for their fast-paced lifestyles, extensive sense of entitlement, and--most relevant to this study--distrust of everything. Surveys report that Millennials don’t trust the stock market (Millennials don’t trust stock, 2015), traditional advertisement (Engaging millennials, 2014), and certainly not the media (Cillizza, 2015).

One trend millennials are leading is that of micro-blogging (Lenhart et al., 2010). Blogs, online opinion-based platforms hosted usually by individuals or small groups, were a trend that started in the late 1990s and were usually referred to as e-Journals and usually averaged between 300 and 500 words per post. Easy-to-maintain blogging platforms such as Blogger (1999), Xanga (1999), and eventually Wordpress (2003), which were considered a prelude to social media platforms, made blogging a staple to millennials’ digital lives in the late 90s and early 2000s.

In 2002, however, came the launch of Friendster, the first “social media” platform, which allowed one of the earliest forms of micro-blogging. Friendster was followed by LinkedIn (2003), MySpace (2003), Facebook (2004), Twitter (2005), and finally Google+ (2007). All of these platforms support their own forms of micro-

blogging--short online postings--which has become the staple of millennial digital media usage.

### **Millennial News Consumption**

Advertisers both revere and dread the millennial market; a wealth of studies have been conducted on innovative tactics in selling to this so-called “Enigma Generation” that outpaces past generations in consuming and contributing media content (Fromm, 2011). However, when it comes to millennials’ actual news consumption habits and the credibility of news information consumed, not much research exists. Despite that, there are a few things that *can* be gleaned from previous research.

Millennials voice a distinct distrust for traditional news media outlets and generally agree that the bias and political agenda of these organizations skew the messages considerably (Cillizza, 2015). Although these concerns are legitimate considering a handful of corporations own most if not all of the news consumed by the general public (The Dashboard, 2012), millennials tend to “throw the baby out with the bathwater” in their rejection of traditional sources and their credibility.

Millennials actually rely heavily on the internet--specifically social media platforms--for news. Most millennials admit to getting news from Facebook on a regular basis (Gottfried, & Barthel, 2015). Further, 68% of Millennials get the *majority* of their news from social media (Millennials and News, 2013). This should come as no surprise since technological adaptations have put information at this generation’s fingertips; they can have information when they want it, how they want it, in any place, at any time. The seemingly limitless nature of the internet as well as the luxury of instant information

makes it the perfect solution for millennials; however, there are dangers in the blind trust of internet sources.

As with any platform that allows *anyone* to create content, defining and determining “credibility” is an obvious issue. Upon searching any given 2 to 3 word phrase, Google could deliver millions or even billions of results. For millennials who aren’t confident in their ability to decide which sources to trust, this information overload can certainly cause confusion and careless fact-grabbing (Palfrey, & Gasser, 2008). This generation is already known for its fast-paced lifestyle, commonly referred to as the “fast food” or “microwave” culture. Millennials know what they want; they know exactly how they want it; and they want it immediately (Burstein, 2013). Unfortunately, skimming articles and paying little attention to source credibility can leave millennials even more susceptible to mass media persuasion and, more dangerously, manipulation.

Not surprisingly, one past study found millennials ill equipped when it came to overall media literacy (Considine et. al, 2009). Consider this *due* to the immense amount of information at their fingertips or in spite of it; either way, a disconnect appears to exist between millennials’ voiced skepticism and their ability to exercise a healthy skepticism when searching out credible sources. However, heavy research studies aren’t the only credible examples we have for millennials having a difficult time separating truth from fiction, even when the facts are as easily accessible as the fabrication.

Consider what is quite possibly the largest-scale hoax of the millennial generation--Kony 2012. On March 5, 2012, a compelling short film was released by Invisible Children, Inc., titled “Kony 2012.” The video detailed the horrible war crimes and child abductions of Ugandan cult and militia leader Joseph Kony and begged viewers

to support the charity “Stop Kony” by sharing the video and making donations. Needless to say, the video went completely viral, gaining 31 million viewers in the first 24 hours.

It wasn’t long before information contrary to the film’s claims started to surface. As it turned out, not only had Joseph Kony been living off the grid for years, but it had been 6 years since *any* member of the “Lord’s Resistance Army” had set foot in the country (Pflanz, 2012). Despite the fact that leaders and reporters in Uganda started coming forward with clarifications less than 24 hours after the video was published, Invisible Children, Inc. still managed to raise \$13 million over the next 3 months, in donations and merchandise purchases (Invisible Children, 2012).

Although Invisible Children has not addressed the inconsistencies in their story, their public website now claims the video was “an experiment” in social media video campaigning. They are also very up-front about the way donations were spent--mostly on management, travel, and other filmmaking expenses.

Since millennials made up the majority of likes, shares, retweets, hashtags, and most importantly donations surrounding the “Stop Kony” campaign, it makes sense to examine their quick response as an example of extremely poor credibility-checking in media consumption. Millennials watched the heart-wrenching video, felt connected to the story, and simply clicked “Donate.” The amount of *money* raised--which indicates a high level of commitment--is disconcerting to think about in terms of millennials’ true susceptibility to media hoaxes and especially manipulation.

While Baby Boomers, like previous generations, tend to consult libraries and scholarly sources for information; Millennials usually default to a quick Google search or asking their friends (Connaway, 2008). In the Kony 2012 situation, even a quick Google

search would have revealed enough information to raise questions and probably stop most from sharing the video or making a donation. However, it seems most millennials didn't even do the minimal fact-checking before making their contributions to "Stop Kony." Unfortunately, in most situations, merely "Googling" and skimming headlines is *also* a poor method for determining the accuracy of certain information (Sundin, & Francke, 2009), leaving millennials susceptible even in their efforts to fact-check.

### **News Sources**

Print newspaper's predecessors date back all the way to the Roman Empire's *Acta Diurna* (Daily Acts), which were carved in metal or stone and displayed publicly (Giffard, 1975). As they have evolved, print newspapers have come to be generally considered more trustworthy because of the amount of time they take to print and distribute in comparison to other sources. Less emphasis is placed on timeliness and being the one to "break" a story, as in TV news; for this reason, more care may be given to complete accuracy as is the general perception.

A study conducted by Retale, a mobile shopping app, found that only 29% of millennials *ever* read a newspaper and 55% are *unwilling* to pay *any* fee for news content, including annual fees or monthly subscriptions (Print or Digital, 2015). Millennials' desire for *instant* information makes print news a less attractive option, contributing to the major decline in newspaper sales.

The wireless systems that combine electricity and magnetism to broadcast sound waves came together to be known as radio in 1910. As with any medium, the ability to do more than entertain was recognized and the first news-focused radio broadcast aired in

1920 on Detroit's 8MK station. With the ability to disseminate information *instantly* comes the pressure to "break" a story (be the first to release information), which *may* logically lead to a *less thorough* process fact-checking.

Following the invention of the first primitive television in 1923, the first regularly scheduled television news broadcasts in 1940 were hosted by NBC's Lowell Thomas, about 10 years before TV started making it into the average American home. TV news stations today are, ironically, clearly divided by political affiliation--MSNBC siding liberally and FOX News siding conservatively (Mitchell et al., 2014)--adding to consumers' perception of bias in TV news.

In the 1980s, the invention of the computer started becoming accessible to everyday people and making its way into the homes of Americans. The internet as we know it has brought massive changes to the way everyone, especially millennials, consume news and information. An already-massive library of (mostly free, all-encompassing) information is a few key clicks or screen touch away from the 84% of Americans that have internet access (Perrin et al., 2015).

All major print newspapers and television news stations have online publications that expand upon, complement, and often precede the publication of print articles and TV stories. Waiting until the 6 o'clock news to "break" a story is no longer realistic; with the instantaneous nature of publishing online, the race to be *first* has increased in speed *and* made room for more errors, typos, lack of verification, and even the likelihood of falling for a blatant hoax, as with the ACORN hoax (Dreier & Martin, 2010).

News aggregators are common trends now that consist of websites and cellular applications that syndicate web content including online newspapers and blogs to provide

consumers with content they define as relevant to themselves. These sites essentially have no credibility of their own because the majority of their own because they rarely create or own the content they distribute. Although useful for finding information relevant to one's interests, aggregators' lack of accountability to readers may make them a less-than-ideal source of information overall.

Finally, with the advancements in social media to include a "posting" feature, *everyone* is a journalist. Many television and even print news sources see fit to run stories complemented by a "public response" segment as told by Twitter feeds and Facebook comments. While the amplification of the public's voice is a benefit of this newer, easier "citizen journalism," the ease of spreading false, misleading, or inaccurate information has increased exponentially. And, although some false information is spread maliciously, much of it is spread due to a lack of fact-checking.

### **Perception of Credibility**

Credibility is usually defined as how much one can trust a source based on general assumptions (Tseng & Fogg, 1999). Although credibility is a perceived measure, credibility can also be measured in general terms by the overall reputation and analyzed history of a particular source.

When it comes to credible news outlets airing or publishing false, misleading, or unconfirmed information, it's safe to say that "all have sinned and fallen short..." However, credibility can be recovered and maintained by these outlets' speed and accuracy in *correcting* mistakes (Abdulla et al., 2002). Needless to say, the New York

Times should *probably* be more readily trusted than an anonymous blogger or even aggregated sources like BuzzFeed or Huffington Post.

Wikipedia, which is typically the first link to appear in a Google search, is generally accepted by millennials and the digitally literate as a credible source. These articles contain all the “need to know” information about any person, location, item, concept, or even situation, and they even boast properly cited scholarly sources at the bottom of each page. What people may not take into account is that Wikipedia’s pages are created and edited by the public and contain unforeseeable amounts of “personal knowledge” that can’t be confirmed. Researchers have found that 13% of Wikipedia articles contain considerable mistakes (Chesney, 2006). Also to be considered is the fact that “Wikipedian experts” are anonymous, meaning they have no concern for reputation or personal credibility, and they are typically not experts in the topics they write about (Wray, 2009).

Anyone caught buying into internet hoaxes is likely to be taunted with statements like, “Well, if it was on the Internet, it must be true.” This is obviously sarcasm; given the nature of the internet, information taken from typical web sources like blogs should be backed by another (more “credible”) source. The internet is, without a doubt, the most regularly consulted source of information on the planet. It is important to remember, however, that this is because of its convenience and speed, not because of its accuracy.

Information found on the Internet can fall virtually anywhere on spectrums of accuracy and validity. Although no studies have been done to estimate the percentage of false information being propagated across the web, information found on a personal blog or a commercial or unrecognized website should be considered as likely to be false as it is



to be true. It is important to consider that the Internet is essentially a public forum on which *anyone* can share content. Anyone can design a website, purchase a “.com” domain, and even have their content shared by news blogs using paid third-party public relations distributors like PRWeb.

### **Theory and Foundations**

Sociologist W. Phillips Davison hypothesized the third person effect as an explanation for German journalists’ overestimation of the “average person’s” ability to be persuaded by Japanese propaganda during World War II. The third person effect predicts that people typically perceive others as being more heavily influenced by mass media messages than themselves (Davison, 1983). This effect manifests itself in the overestimation of a person’s own skepticism toward the media and underestimation of a person’s evaluation of others’ skepticism.

A case study was conducted by Douglas McLeod and others in 1997 examining the third person effect in perceptions of the influence of rap music on consumers’ violence and misogyny (McLeod, 1997). Accordingly, the participants were found to be most likely to estimate a high degree of influence on others and a lower degree of influence on themselves.

Studies of this nature have been conducted across multiple topical lines to suggest that individuals, in general and specifically when self-reporting, will consider themselves less susceptible to persuasion and overall more knowledgeable and savvy. However, news consumption is a topic that has been revisited again and again, because of its implications.

The concept of “othering,” which usually relates to the false dichotomies of cultural, gender, or racial differences, is a contributing factor to an intergenerational third person effect. The temptation of humans to evaluate those who are not like or similar to oneself as innately un-intelligent, underdeveloped, or naive is a strong, long-standing psychological bias (Canales, 2000).

If millennials self-evaluate into the realm of self-deception--wildly overestimating their own skepticism of the media, overestimating others’ susceptibility, and hypocritically consuming news from sources that lack credibility--it is possible for an vaccination-like effect to take place. By taking on an egotistic self confidence about their own awareness, they may, in the long run, make themselves *more* vulnerable.

### **III. Hypothesis**

This study will examine the hypothesis that a disconnect exists between millennials’ perceived skepticism of the media and their actual media consumption habits with regards to credibility and fact-checking. This disconnect will be identified by millennials’ self evaluations of their own skepticism and the self reporting of actions they take in regards to considering credibility and verifying facts. Respondents will be asked to evaluate their levels of overall skepticism *and* evaluate their actual habits of news media consumption. Assuming participants will accurately self report, a correlation between high self-evaluated skepticism and poor self-reported consumption habits will confirm this disconnect.

In addition, this study will examine whether or not millennials exhibit the third person effect in their self-evaluation of skepticism toward media and their evaluation of others’ skepticism toward media. Participants will be asked to evaluate “others” in three

roughly-generational groups defined as peers, parents, and grandparents. It is anticipated that these cohorts will be reported as being somewhat skeptical (peers), somewhat susceptible (parents), and very susceptible (grandparents). However, any correlation between the idea that one is highly skeptical of media and the idea that others are less skeptical will identify the presence of such an effect.

### **Operational Definitions**

For the purpose of this study, *millennials* will be considered those between 18 and 35 years of age in 2015. Although the millennial generation as a whole technically includes those who were 15 to 18 at the time of this study, participants in that age range have been omitted to avoid the participation of minors. The results of this study should not be applied to any other generation, as millennials are historically more diverse, liberal, and self-expressive than past generations.

*Skepticism* will be considered a healthy concern for the validity of factually-based media content one is consuming, based on how likely one is to check the facts of a story. This definition excludes any opinion-based materials or fictional works. Participants will be asked to evaluate their skepticism simply by indicating their general trust of certain outlets as well as how likely they are to check the facts of a story. If one is motivated to double-check or confirm the information in an article, it is safe to say they have a healthy level of skepticism toward the source. The concept of skepticism, however, relies on the consumer's level of interest in a topic. One is unlikely to exhibit habits of skepticism when the information presented is not relevant to them in any way.

*Susceptibility*, by contrast, will be thought of as the ability of a person to have their attitudes, thoughts, or opinions altered by the content of a message. Even if the

alteration is as simple as a person believing in the accuracy of a story or account, or accepting information as true, susceptibility will be considered to be present and will be measured accordingly. This strict definition of susceptibility serves to make light of the overall long-term effects of accepting and believing false, misstated, inaccurate, or out of context information. Although believing in “Kony” of the Kony 2012 scheme does not identify one as being as “susceptible” as one who donated money, any measure of misguided trust or acceptance of false information is dangerous to millennials, who are already bombarded with so much unverified information because of the nature of the Internet.

*News media* will be defined as any source of news information--digital, physical, or otherwise--that can be readily accessed by consumers. Print newspapers, TV news programs, and radio news programs will be considered “traditional” news media outlets. Social media will be loosely considered a news media outlet based on the premise that a large amount of news information is disseminated across these networks and it is the primary source of news for millennials. Social networks that will be considered in this study are Facebook and Twitter. Instagram will be omitted due to its lack of news information. LinkedIn will also be omitted, due to formal, networking-focused nature of the platform.

A *message* will be defined as any published work--print, auditory, visual, electronic, or otherwise, no matter the length--that contains facts or opinions related to facts, which may be able to inform or persuade consumers. Facebook posts, tweets, blogs posts, news articles, TV news segments, radio news segments, etc. will all be considered in this study. The definition of a message should encompass the actual content as well as

the implications, tone, meaning, agenda, and persuasive nature of the message and all other elements that may contribute to its influence on consumers.

*False information* will be considered *any* information that contains major factual mistakes, inaccuracies large enough to make a difference in the meaning of the story, misleading information, false or out of context quotations, unconfirmed information or dissemination of rumors with no factual foundation, bias in the tone or wording of a story, or one-sided accounts that demean or discredit other opinions and alternate viewpoints.

*Source credibility* will be defined as the general consensus as to the trustworthiness of a particular outlet, based on the reputation of contributing authors, the history of reliability, and the purpose and nature of the source. Minor inaccuracies, typos, and other minor errors will not be considered in the evaluations of credibility but rather biased, one-sided, false, or incomplete information that may mislead or misinform readers. The idea of susceptibility assumes that these misleading messages are usually supported by a certain political or social agenda that attempts to alter opinions, thoughts, or actions of readers.

#### IV. Methodology

The survey sample for this research study is millennial college students at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. For the sake of survey brevity, questions regarding ethnicity, gender, and other personal characteristics were omitted. Based on the university's annual census, a Caucasian-heavy demographic with 74% of students being white, 11% African-American, and Hispanic, Asian, Native Hawaiian, etc. making up the other 15% could be expected.

The surveying tool designed for this study (see Appendix A) used Qualtrics Survey Software to ask participants to self evaluate their media consumption and fact-checking habits *as well as* their perceived skepticism or trust of the media. The survey is broken into two sections--simple survey questions utilizing multiple choice questions and ranking scales and a "pathway" study.

Participants were asked to identify their age in a dropdown menu that only allowed options "18" through "30." An emboldened warning message asked them not to participate if they were not between the ages of 18 and 30. This was done both to filter out non-millennials and also out of respect for the time of respondents who may have been willing to participate but would *not* have been counted in the final results and ultimately would have wasted their time.

The rating/ranking questions, which were on a 4-point scale, omitted a "neutral" option. This was done in an attempt to heighten self evaluation. Some studies suggest that removing a neutral option results in a spike in *strong* positive and *strong* negative answers rather than affecting the *weak* positive and *weak* negative responses (Nowlis,

2002). Since, if respondents truly felt they were neutral, removing the neutral option may sway them *weakly* in one direction or the other, this suggests many who self-report as “neutral” may simply not be self-evaluating at all. Since those who may have accurately self-reported as neutral will not be properly represented by the statistics, the results may be slightly skewed by this choice.

For similar reasons, the option “other” was omitted from (two) multiple choice questions regarding news sources--one asking which news source participants got most of their news from and the other asking which participants would use to check the facts of a story. Multiple studies regarding news consumption and sources were reviewed to assure that the answers are all-encompassing. This also encourages participants to *simplify* their answers; where someone may have responded “other” because they get their news from a TV news station’s Twitter feed, they must simplify their response to whichever source (TV or Twitter) they feel best reflects their use of the source.

One small section of five true/false questions was included, which is not typical of survey research tools. This was done, once again, strategically in order to encourage the most honest response from participants. For example, it may be easier to wrongly evaluate oneself when answering a question that, when read aloud, may *feel* intrusive, such as “Do you trust the news media?” It is more difficult to imagine intrusion or judgment in self-evaluating when the statement “I trust the news media” is presented and respondents simply choose whether that statement is true or false about themselves. It is, further, a simpler tool for self-evaluation because respondents can merely read the statement, determine if they would *make* the statement truthfully, and respond accordingly.

The pathway study asks participants to identify a topic of interest and to answer, step by step, whether or not they would seek out more information after reading (in order) a social media post, a Google search, a Wikipedia article, an aggregated article, and finally a credible news article. This order was chosen to most-accurately depict respondents' journey of information consumption.

Since millennials tend to get news from social media and Google findings they see as important or worthy of fact-checking, these two steps were logical. Wikipedia is generally one of the first three sources to appear on any Google search and is, therefore, accepted as a good source of general information. Although a more credible source may sometimes come before a news aggregator source, popularity may bring sensationalized or bias-specific articles closer to the top. These sources are also ordered by perception of credibility and the possibility of finding false information. The possibility for finding more accurate information should increase as the participants continues on the pathway, thus giving a more accurate evaluation of millennials' actual consumption.

The survey also incorporated one final question which, if unexplained, seems out of place within the study; the survey asks participants to identify whether or not they know who owns the media and, if they know, are asked to produce an answer. This was incorporated as a more concrete method of evaluating millennials' news consumption. To know who (conglomerates and large corporations) owns the companies that produce the information we consume is an immense indication of healthy, educated media consumption.

Upon receiving full approval from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga's Institutional Review Board to administer my survey, participants were sought out via



email inquiries. The instructions, informed consent release, and hyperlink were sent to professors of several sections of general education courses, including several English 1010 courses and one section of COMM 1010, asking them to distribute the information to their students and request their participation. No incentives, monetary or otherwise, were offered and no students received a grade or extra credit in exchange for their participation. Professors, likewise, were given *no* incentives for distributing the survey to their students and were not forced or coerced in any way.

By using not only an online surveying tool but also professors as a gateway, the participants remained *completely* anonymous. Not only is it unknown to the researcher if all professors asked to participate actually decided to distribute the survey to their students, but it is also unknown to the researcher which students were *in* the courses that received the surveys, much less which students opted to participate. For the purpose of the highest anonymity as well as length management, participants were also not asked to identify their name, race, gender, major, or academic year. Professors within the millennial age range may have also chosen to take the survey.

Toward the end of collecting the data, a notably smaller number of participants between the ages of 25 and 35 were recognized and several participating professors were asked to send another email, specifically targeting nontraditional students in this age range. Again, no incentives were offered. The survey responses were further carefully evaluated for completeness. Four survey responses were deleted and not considered in the final results because they were either incomplete upon submission (with responses missing) or were marked as pending and not submitted properly.

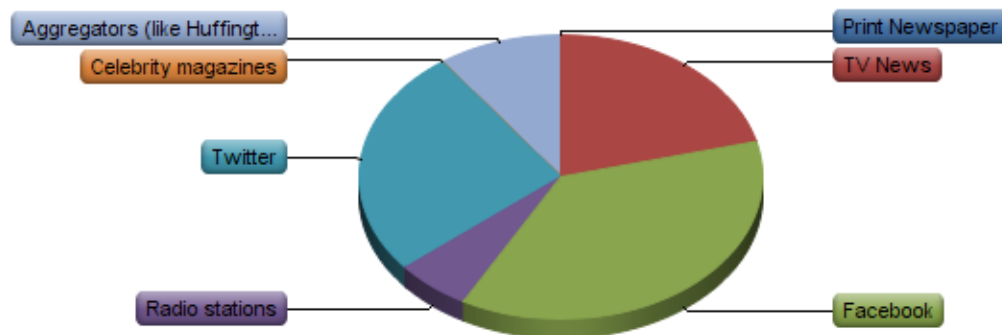
A total of 100 complete responses were collected. The results were analyzed by Qualtrics survey tool and a report was pulled from the server for careful hands-on evaluation and comparison. In the case of some of the rating scale questions where comparative responses were difficult to analyze and explain, helpful graphics were generated by Qualtrics that allowed for a more informed analysis.

## V. Findings

The first hypothesis tested by the survey is that a disconnect exists between millennials' perceived skepticism toward news media messages and their actual consumption habits. To simplify, this hypothesis will be split into two research questions: (1) Are millennials engaging in more dangerous media consumption habits (getting news from social media and exhibiting poor fact checking habits)? (2) Do millennials self-evaluate as being more or less skeptical toward the media?

### **Millennial News Consumption**

The survey affirmed previous studies in showing that millennials do not get their news from traditional news outlets, with 37% saying they are most likely to get their news from "Facebook" and 26% answering "Twitter." Following those responses closely was TV News at 21%, indicating it to be the highest used "traditional" news source among millennials, probably for its convenience (see below).



Aggregators such as Huffington Post or the Conservative Tribune were chosen by 10% of participants. No participants indicated that they were most likely to get news

from celebrity magazines; unfortunately, no participants indicated that they were most likely to get news from the *newspaper* either, formerly the most trusted source for credible news.

Sixty-seven percent of respondents said they were most likely to verify information by Googling. This is a striking difference from the 92% of respondents who said their first inclination, when they aren't sure if something is true, is to Google it.

The difference in these questions is subtle, but it could indicate one of two things about respondents. They may initially Google something they are unsure of, but filter through to credible sources or conduct further investigation beyond the Google search. Conversely, participants may have responded consciously to “verify” as a word cue by under-exaggerating their habits of using Google as a “verifying” tool.

Although not a *striking* statistic, the majority (57%) of respondents said they felt social media was “a *better* way to keep up with news than traditional news sources.” Although the term *better* could mean different things to different respondents, it has been interpreted as a general feeling that one's friends and acquaintances news-related posts on social media are, in most situations, more timely, more relevant, and (when repeated by multiple people over time) perhaps just as credible.

The last question on the survey went beyond self evaluation to actually quiz respondents on their knowledgeability of media credibility. Participants were asked to indicate whether they did or did not know who owns the media; if they said they knew, they were asked to enter their answer into an empty 2-5 word text box, to be submitted as the final component of their survey.

Forty-nine percent of participants chose “I’m not sure”, and 32% indicated that they knew but then answered incorrectly. Incorrect responses included “the government,” “politicians,” and even several irrational answers like “TV” and “social media.” Answers that were accepted as correct totaled to 19% and included “Large corporations,” “conglomerates,” and even “companies.”

### Pathway Study

The results of the pathway questions were less conclusive than the general survey. An unexpected number of respondents (38%) indicated that none of the available topics (health epidemics, celebrity news, or gay marriage) interested them. Of those who did select a topic and therefore a pathway, 18% were satisfied with a Facebook post and 26% were satisfied after glancing at a Google search’s results. 83% of respondents who chose a pathway indicated they were satisfied with the reliability of the content *before* reaching a reputable news article.

No one was expressed satisfaction upon reaching the Wikipedia page, maybe indicating a general distrust for Wikipedia as a source; rather, all who made it this far went on to express satisfaction with either the aggregator site or (17%) the reputable news article. This could also indicate that those who *do* recognize Wikipedia as a credible source would have previously indicated satisfaction with either a Facebook status or a Google search.

Two respondents were dissatisfied with the news article and requested more information. The responses varied little by topic. The table below indicates the number of respondents, by topic, who selected “That’s enough information for me” after viewing the information on each type of media outlet.

	Social media	Google	Wikipedia	Aggregator	NY Times	More
Health epidemics	0	4	0	0	1	1
Celebrity news	2	1	0	1	0	1
Gay marriage	1	2	0	1	1	0

Although the number of respondents for *this* portion are small, the numbers suggest a correlation between those who were interested in celebrity news being more likely to accept the information given to them in a Facebook status than those who were interested in health epidemics. Since assuming that an individual's level of interest in certain topics might correlate with their attention to detail or concern with credibility is viable, this is a good indication of participants' general reasonability.

### Millennials' Self-Evaluation of Skepticism

In one section, participants were asked to gauge on a 4-point scale their skepticism or trust of certain news media outlets. While the general consensus *leaned* toward ideal credibility definitions--more skepticism of celebrity magazines, Facebook, and Twitter than traditional news sources--some of the broader distributions are worth discussing in greater depth. The results, translated numerically below, in order of most trusted to least trusted, with 4 representing "Very Skeptical" and 1 representing "Very Trusting."

*Print Newspaper*      1.77

*TV News*                      2.13

*Radio Stations*            2.31

<i>Aggregators</i>	2.41
<i>Twitter</i>	2.94
<i>Facebook</i>	3.08
<i>Celebrity Magazines</i>	3.69

Only 4% of participants said they were trusting of what they read in celebrity magazines, but 23% indicated they were only somewhat skeptical rather than *very*. With celebrity magazines' notorious reputation for fabricating stories, even these statistics are surprising.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, 8% said they were somewhat skeptical of what they read in the newspaper and 4% indicated they were *very* skeptical. This small percent of the population could likely be considered those who actually think critically in response to mass media messages. These are the audience members who go beyond asking, "Is this information true?" so much as to ask, "Can I trust this source in general?" and "Would this source have an ulterior motive for giving me false information?"

However, there is a clear disconnect between the response to this question and the response to a later question that asked respondents to identify, on a scale of "always" to "never" how often they thought media outlets' bias or hidden agendas affect how they cover news. A grand majority of respondents indicated that they thought hidden agendas and bias *usually* or *always* affected the news coverage. In addition, most people indicated that they *sometimes* or *usually* question what they hear in the news. The results are expressed numerically below with 1 representing the response "always" and representing the response "never."

*Bias or hidden agendas affects news coverage*

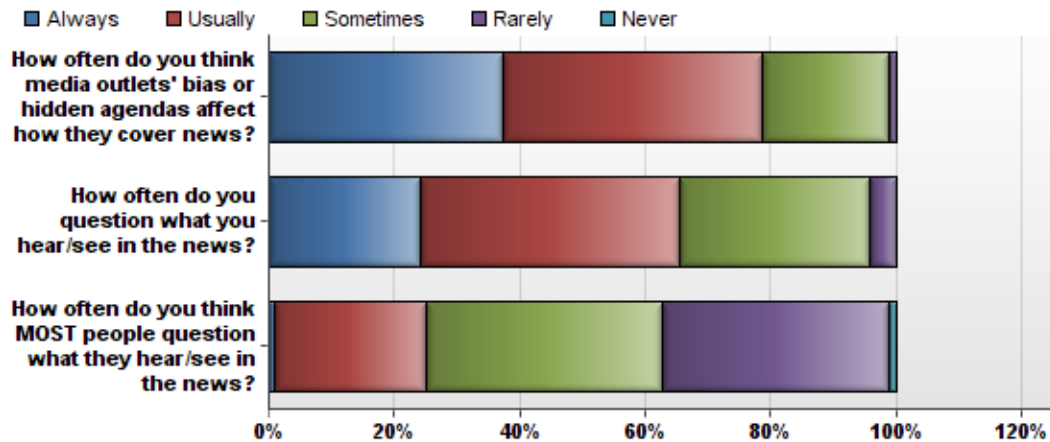
1.85

*Respondent questions what they see/hear in the news*

2.14

*Respondents think MOST people question what they see/hear in the news*

3.12

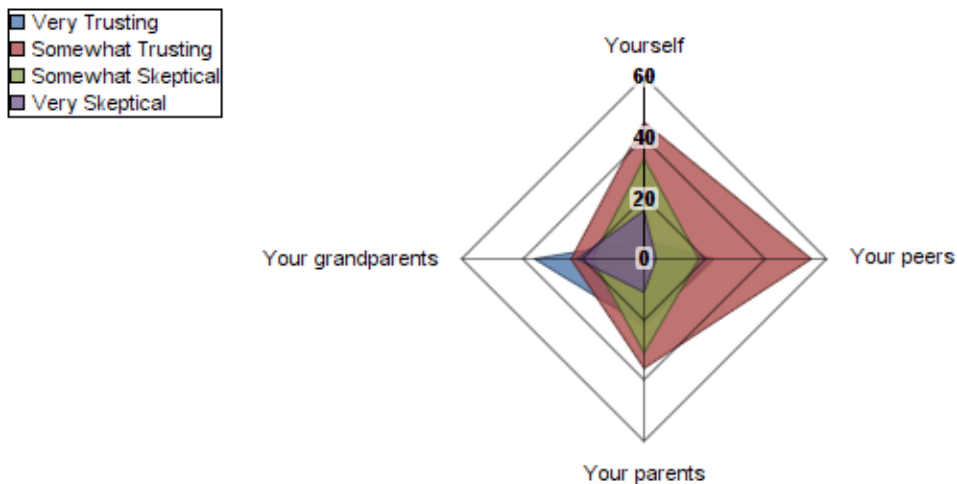


### The Third Person Effect

The third hypothesis to be tested is that millennials estimate others (peers, parents, and finally grandparents) as being *more* susceptible to mass media messages than themselves. As shown in the above chart, there is an obvious shifts between participants thinking the media's hidden agenda and bias *always* affect news coverage, saying they *always* or *sometimes* question what they see/hear in the news, then thinking most people *rarely* question what they see/hear in the news.

Although less blatantly, in one section which asked participants to rate themselves, their peers, their parents, and their grandparents on a scale of "very skeptical" to "very trusting" participants evaluated themselves as being slightly more skeptical than both peers of their generation and individuals outside their generation.





Yourself	2.59
Your Peers	2.03
Your Parents	2.31
Your Grandparents	2.25

The results of this segment (which are difficult to interpret) are represented above in a web chart *and* numeric values, ranging from 1 (very trusting) to 4 (very skeptical).

Participants did rate *themselves* as being the most skeptical of all groups. The responses to the “grandparents” option is difficult to interpret from the average since they were indicated as being both “very trusting” (36%) *and* “very skeptical” (22%), each being indicated more than for *any* other cohort group. This could be due to either generational differences or simply individual differences. However, participants tended to perceive their grandparents as being one extreme or the other, rarely anywhere in between.

## VI. Limitations

The results of this survey may have been slightly skewed by the age proportions present. Although 18 to 35 was the target demographic, there was a low percent of older respondents. Sixty percent of respondents were 18 to 21, with 30% being 18 years old; 19% were 22 to 29; and, finally, only 8% of respondents were between 30 and 35. While this may prevent the study from being generalized to all millennials, it is still likely an accurate sample that applies to *young* millennials and, more specifically, college students.

For the sake of shortening the survey, no personal questions were included related to gender, race, religion, or other identifiers that could help determine the generalizability of the sample. However, sampling students from general education courses likely exposed the survey to a diverse group of students. Since this information was not collected and the sample was a *convenience* sample, a completely accurate representation of college students or even University of Tennessee students is unlikely.

Unfortunately, as disappointing as the results of the media ownership question are alone, it is possible that the section of COMM 1010 students who participated may have skewed the percentage. The average COMM 1010 student should be expected to know, on a basic level, who owns the media, and therefore any participants who may have been COMM 1010 students would have an advantage over the “average” general education student.

Another obvious limitation is the inaccuracy of self-evaluation. If, at any point, a respondent’s awareness of the *implications* of the survey questions is heightened (for example, if a survey respondent becomes increasingly aware that the survey is evaluating

their media consumption habits, they may feel pressure to report modified or improved behaviors in accordance with the Hawthorne effect, which suggests that people may act differently when they know they are being observed (McCarney, 2007).

The results of the pathway study questions may have been skewed by misunderstandings about the purpose of these questions. Although each set of questions attempts to recreate the process of exposure to information and seeking out additional facts for clarification, there is no completely reliable way to recreate this process and accurately measure a participant's response to new information. For this reason, it is important to compare these results to case studies and examples within this study that show a large number of millennials responding *without skepticism* to false, inaccurate, biased, or misleading information.

This study also assumes that participants consume news. With all respondents being college students, the odds of an outlier who does *not* actually engage in active news consumption taking part in the survey are slim but existent, especially since none of the questions asked participants to evaluate the *extent* of their news consumption. If the study were replicated, this would certainly be an important factor to measure.

One issue, which was unforeseen in the survey design, was that of millennials who may consume news generated by "traditional" news media outlets on digital platforms. For instance, many television news stations and print newspapers now have online archives and even social media pages. It is unclear, therefore, whether millennials are simply receiving news from their friends' Tweets and status updates or if they are reading from credible sources *on* these social media platforms. This may still present a

danger since news outlets' social media outlets are more likely than their newspapers, TV spots, or even online articles to be less carefully vetted or even managed by interns.

Finally, the findings of this study cannot be applied to millennials in underdeveloped parts of the United States, Third World countries, or in any other circumstances that limit their access to digital content. Further, since the survey was *only* available online, it is likely that respondents represent a population of millennials *more apt* to consume news digitally, since they both have access to the survey and willingly spent additional time online to take it.

For these reasons, the findings are, at best, only generalizable only to millennials in First World countries with access to the Internet and digital media sources. Realistically, the results *may* be applicable to *college students* in First World countries *who consume news*.

## VII. Discussion

Although the overall results of the study do not unanimously indicate an extreme overestimation of millennial skepticism toward the media, a trend can be identified at the least. The participants in this study tended to consider themselves more skeptical than others and reportedly acknowledge the hidden agendas and bias of news corporations, yet they did not self report notably *good* media consumption habits when it came to credibility and fact-checking.

A small percentage of participants, when seeking to verify the details of a story found on a social media site, made it to a credible news source before saying “That’s enough information for me.” Minor mistakes like briefly believing false information or publicly sharing false information can be patched. But what about making important decisions based on false or misled information?

Taking the time to carefully fact-check, evaluating credibility along the way, is simply not conducive to the millennial “microwave” culture and, if the fast-paced nature of their search for information is not met soon by a renewed zeal for assuring depth of accuracy and refusing to tolerate misleading or biased information, millennials will plunge further into media illiteracy. The more that faulty information agrees with one’s point of view, the more one is likely to neglect to fact-check or confirm questionable information (Vidmar and Rokeach, 1974).

A mere 1 in 5 participants knew *who* (conglomerates and large corporations) owns the news media, possibly making it difficult for them to intelligently evaluate the bias they know exists in news outlets’ reporting. If millennials want to be as aware,

informed, and savvy as they evaluate themselves to be, a strong foundational understanding of news media ownership is imperative and perhaps should be incorporated into higher education requirements.

Participants' responses supported past research in implying that millennials typically get their news from social media sites like Facebook and Twitter which, as with any open forum, increases their vulnerability to false or misleading information. The print newspaper may, indeed, be a dying medium for millennials due to its inability to provide instant information, and any medium that falls behind in this race *to inform* will undeniably be at risk.

Based on this study, millennials may exhibit the third person effect (TPE) both intra-generationally and, to an even further extent, inter-generationally when it comes to evaluating skepticism toward media messages. Participants in this study typically evaluated themselves as being the *most* skeptical and reported skepticism decreasingly for peers (millennials), parents (Generation X), and grandparents (Baby Boomers), in that order.

To be the first generation of digital natives is both to the advantage and disadvantage of millennial news consumers. We now have more information at our fingertips than we might have ever had within a thousand-mile radius *before* the invention of the Internet. However, with this information comes the responsibility to critically evaluate information rather than taking it at face value.

By 2020, all millennials will be of legal voting age, which puts the results of this study at an exponentially higher level of importance. Presidential candidates in the modern digital era endure their fair (increasing) share of false information being spread

on the internet that *can* and *does* affect voters' decisions. A generation that sits out debates, rallies, and traditional news coverage of the election will be a generation that reads countless rumors and may not have the time or motivation to sort through them and make an educated choice when election day comes.

It is wildly unrealistic, if the Internet is to remain a public forum with a number of *free*, open blogging and microblogging platforms, to imagine an Internet with *no* false or misleading information. In fact, false and misleading information on the Internet is not the problem at all. Millennials have, for too long, lent their "share" and "retweet" buttons to the epidemic of falsehood. It is time for *the* digital generation to lead the revolution of educated news consumption in the modern era.

### VIII. Conclusion

In conclusion, there may be a slight disconnect between millennials' perceived skepticism and actual media consumption habits. The Internet is definitely millennials' tool of choice for news seeking; how they use the web *and* social media to consume news is another important aspect that should be further explored. Although there is more false and misleading information on the Internet than in your average newspaper, it can't be taken for granted that their media consumption habits are poor--more dangerous certainly, but not necessarily poor!

There are also substantial grounds to study the Third Person Effect in millennial news consumption, as this study showed a substantial correlation between participants' lofty self evaluations and understated evaluations of others. What role this disconnect may play in the health of millennials' overall consumption habits is yet another question for future researchers.

This study brings up many questions that will be important to examine as the youngest millennials come of age to vote and as this generation makes its transition to financial, social, and political power. Since millennials' news media consumption habits will ultimately shape the news media of the future, it couldn't be of greater importance to explore and explain their habits for the purpose of self-correction.



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**Appendix A**

1. What is your age?  
**If you are not between the ages of 18 and 30, you are NOT in the generational group being studied. Please discontinue the survey. Thank you.**  
 (Choose 18-30)
2. Indicate the source you are most likely to get news from.
  - a. Print Newspaper
  - b. TV News
  - c. Facebook
  - d. Radio stations
  - e. Twitter
  - f. Celebrity Magazines
  - g. Aggregators (like Huffington Post or Conservative Tribune)
3. Select a topic you personally care about.
  - a. Health epidemics (See Appendix B)
  - b. Gay marriage (See Appendix C)
  - c. Celebrity news (See Appendix D)
  - d. I do not care about any of these topics.
4. Indicate your GENERAL TRUST of news you hear on the following media outlets.

	Very Trusting	Somewhat Trusting	Somewhat Skeptical	Very Skeptical
Radio Stations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Celebrity Magazines	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
TV News	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Twitter	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Print Newspaper	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Aggregators	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Facebook

5. In your opinion, how much do you think the FOLLOWING PEOPLE trust the media?

	Very Trusting	Somewhat Trusting	Somewhat Skeptical	Very Skeptical
Yourself	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Your peers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Your parents	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Your grandparents	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

6. If you want to verify the details of a story, where are you most likely to go for information?

- a. Newspaper
- b. TV News
- c. Facebook
- d. Radio station
- e. Twitter
- f. Celebrity magazines
- g. Aggregators (like Huffington Post or Conservative Tribune)
- h. Search engines (like Google or Bing)
- i. Public documents

7. Answer the questions on the following SCALE.

	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
How often do you think news media outlets' bias or hidden agendas affect how they cover news?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How often do you question what you see/hear in the news?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How often do you think MOST PEOPLE question what they see/hear in the news?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## 8. Indicate whether the statements are true or false, about YOURSELF.

	True	False
I think social media is a better way to keep up with the news than traditional news sources.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If I'm not sure something is true, my first response is to Google it.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have, at some point, checked public records to verify the facts of a news story.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think most people trust the news media.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I trust the news media.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## 9. Based on your current knowledge, who do you think owns news media outlets (TV, newspaper, radio, etc.)?

- a. Answer: \_\_\_\_\_
- b. "I don't know."



## Appendix B

On social media, imagine that you read the following post, by one of your friends:  
Another one of Donald Trump's companies just went bankrupt... and he thinks he can turn this nation around?

- That's enough information for me.
- I need more information

A google search of "Donald Trump bankruptcy" reveals several articles have been written recently, related to the topic. You read that the sources are Wikipedia, Huffington Post, and the New York Times. All of the articles have titles related to your search.

- That's enough information for me.
- I need more information.

You open the Wikipedia page and find the following information:

Donald Trump has experienced four bankruptcies throughout his career,[2] the most recent being the AXA Financial Center, owned by Trump Organization.[3]

- That's enough information for me.
- I need more information.

The next article on Google's search engine is an article on the Huffington Post. The following information is on the website:

**Donald Trump's Latest Financial Failure Proves Him Unfit for Presidency**  
After Trump's AXA Financial Center in Manhattan closed down over financial troubles, conservatives are finally doubting him. Trump is, as expected, calling the failure a “smart business decision.”

- That's enough information for me.
- I need more information

The next article on Google's search engine is an article by the New York Times. The following information is on the website:

## Trump Financial Decision Raises Questions

AXA Financial Center, owned by Donald Trump but run by his children, announced today that they sold the company for \$9.2 million. Trump said this was the best decision after the company experienced some financial trouble this year.

- That's enough information for me.
- I need more information.

### Appendix C

On social media, imagine that you read the following post, by one of your friends:  
When are they going to find a cure for ebola?! I just saw where two more people in Chattanooga caught it, and they're in the hospital.

- That's enough information for me.
- I need more information.

A google search of "Ebola outbreak Chattanooga" reveals several articles have been written related to the topic. You read that the sources are Wikipedia, Huffington Post, and the New York Times. All of the articles have titles related to your search.

- That's enough information for me.
- I need more information.

You open the Wikipedia page and find the following information:

In the Fall of 2015, three cases of Ebola virus disease were detected near Chattanooga, Tenn.,<sup>[2]</sup>leading to concern about the possibility of an outbreak of Ebola in the U.S.<sup>[3]</sup>

- That's enough information for me.
- I need more information.

The next article on Google's search engine is an article on the Huffington Post. The following information is on the website:

#### With New Ebola Case Confirmed, U.S. Vows Vigilance

New shortcomings emerged this week in the nation's response to the Ebola virus after it was revealed that three new cases of Ebola were reported in Tennessee, months after the virus was said to have been contained.

- That's enough information for me.
- I need more information.

The next article on Google's search engine is an article by the New York Times. The following information is on the website:

## Ebola Isn't Over Yet

Recent news from the United States Department of Health revealed that, despite the number of new Ebola cases falling, two new cases in Jasper, Tenn., are being investigated. The individuals have been quarantined, but local hospitals are taking additional care to make sure the virus doesn't spread.

- That's enough information for me.
- I need more information.

### Appendix D

On social media, imagine that you read the following post, by one of your friends:

The Senate just voted to require ALL government buildings to fly the gay pride flag!!!

Now I truly am proud to be an American!

- That's enough information for me.
- I need more information.

A google search of "Senate rainbow flag" reveals several articles have been written recently, related to the topic. You read that the sources are Wikipedia, the Conservative Tribune, and the New York Times. All of the articles have titles related to your search.

- That's enough information for me.
- I need more information.

You open the Wikipedia page and find the following information:

Government buildings will start displaying the LGBT Pride flag[2] due to a unanimous Senate[3] vote last week.

- That's enough information for me.
- I need more information.

The next article on Google's search engine is an article on the Conservative Tribune. The following information is on the website:

One Nation Under... the Rainbow?

The Senate's most recent infringement on religious freedom was a vote to force all government buildings to display the LGBT Pride flag, just below our own sacred flag.

- That's enough information for me.
- I need more information.

The next article on Google's search engine is an article by the New York Times. The following information is on the website:

Senate Votes to Allow Federal Buildings to Display Rainbow Flag

This week, the Senate voted to allow the LGBT pride flag to be displayed inside federal buildings. The vote amended previous laws that restricted political symbols from federal buildings.

- That's enough information for me.
- I need more information.