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West Virginia Participant 1 (White/male/22), interviewed October 25, 2021

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"West Virginia Participant 1 (White/male/22), interviewed October 25, 2021" (2021). *0873: The Fake News and Information Literacy Project*. 3.

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Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

The Fake News and Information Literacy Project

Stephen M. Underhill, PhD, Principal Investigator

	Marshall University IRB	
	Approved on:	9/17/21
	Expires on:	9/15/21
	Study number:	1779793

Key Information

You are invited to participate in a research study. Research studies are designed to gain scientific knowledge that may help other people in the future. You may or may not receive any benefit from being part of the study. Your participation is voluntary. Please take your time to make your decision, and ask your research investigator or research staff to explain any words or information that you do not understand. The following is a short summary to help you decide why you may or may not want to be a part of this study. Information that is more detailed is listed later on in this form.

The purpose of this study is to understand the Appalachian experience with fake news and how people determine what is/not credible online. We expect that you will be in this research study for one hour. Though you will be anonymous and your identity will be kept secret, a redacted copy of your interview transcript will be posted online on Marshall University's Digital Scholar website (https://mds.marshall.edu/oral_history/).

You will be asked 64 questions. Your dialogue will be recorded on Microsoft Teams and housed on Marshall University's OneDrive, which is password protected. The recording will be destroyed at the end of the semester (during finals week). To protect your privacy, you will be identified by your state of residence, race, sex, age and participant number. For example, the Digital Scholar website will catalogue your interview with a pseudonym like "Kentucky Participant 5 (White/Male/65), interviewed on October 5, 2021." Please avoid mentioning your name or other identifying information in the interview. Your name will not be on the transcript. The name of the interviewer will not be included in the transcript or otherwise on Marshall University's Digital Scholar website. All identifying information will be removed before transcripts are posted online. But once transcripts are posted on Marshall University's Digital Scholar website, they will be permanent. We will not be able to remove them.

How Many People Will Take Part In The Study?

About 24 people every semester people will take part in this study. A total of 24 subjects are the most that would be able to enter the study per semester.

What Is Involved In This Research Study?

You will be asked a series of 64 open-ended questions about your thoughts and feelings on fake news and disinformation online. You will be asked about your opinion of sensitive social questions like issues of race, class, religion, etc.

With your consent, this interview will be recorded. You will only be identified as "you" during the interview. The Microsoft Teams recording, which will be with the camera turned off, will be stored on Marshall University's OneDrive and will only be shared with the FYS small group, the FYS graduate assistant and the professor. These people will use the recording to verify consent and make a

Subject's Initials _____

redacted transcript. Definitized transcripts will be uploaded to Marshall University's Digital Scholar website (https://mds.marshall.edu/oral_history/).

What Are Your Rights As A Research Study Participant?

You may choose to not take part in the study. You may leave the study up to the point that the interview is complete. Once the redacted transcript is posted on the website a participant may not withdraw. Refusing to participate or leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. If you decide to stop participating in the study we encourage you to talk to the investigators or study staff first.

The study investigator may stop you from taking part in this study at any time if he/she believes it is in your best interest; if you do not follow the study rules; or if the study is stopped.

Detailed Risks Of The Study

Because the recording will be destroyed at the end of the semester, and because the only a deidentified redacted transcript will be posted online, there is no foreseeable risk in the study.

What About Confidentiality?

We will do our best to make sure that your personal information is kept confidential. However, we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Federal law says we must keep your study records private. Nevertheless, under unforeseen and rare circumstances, we may be required by law to allow certain agencies to view your records. Those agencies would include the Marshall University IRB, Office of Research Integrity (ORI) and the federal Office of Human Research Protection (OHRP). This is to make sure that we are protecting your rights and your safety. If we publish the information we learn from this study, you will not be identified by name or in any other way.

What Are The Costs Of Taking Part In This Study?

There are no costs to you for taking part in this study. All the study costs, including any study tests, supplies and procedures related directly to the study, will be paid for by the study.

Will You Be Paid For Participating?

You will receive no payment or other compensation for taking part in this study.

Whom Do You Call If You Have Questions Or Problems?

For questions about the study or in the event of a research-related injury, contact the study investigator, Stephen Underhill at 304-696-3020 or at underhills@marshall.edu. You should also contact the investigator if you have a concern or complaint about the research.

Subject's Initials _____

For questions about your rights as a research participant, contact the Marshall University Office of Research Integrity (ORI) at (304) 696-4303. You may also call this number if:

- You have concerns or complaints about the research.
- The research staff cannot be reached.
- You want to talk to someone other than the research staff.

Did you receive a copy of the consent form?

Please say Yes or No

Do you agree to take part in this study and confirm that you are 18 years of age or older?

Please say Yes or No

Have you had a chance to ask questions about being in this study and have had those questions answered?

Please say Yes or No

What is today's date?

Subject's Initials _____

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The participant agreed to the terms of the consent.

Interviewer: So, tell me about a time when you first started using social media and news started to appear for the first time on your feed like Facebook or Twitter.

Participant: I'd say I first began using social media in middle school, so probably around age 13 or so. I created a Facebook account to play games and I've never really been active on social media; however, I feel like news just started to appear within the past five or six years. I don't feel like it was there whenever I first started using it, but I could be wrong, I'm not sure.

Interviewer: OK, so how do you use the Internet on a normal day?

Participant: On any given day, I use the internet for a variety of reasons. I like to stream videos and music as well as play video games. And I work on the internet, so there's a large variety of things that I use the internet for.

Interviewer: OK, so what types of websites do you visit?

Participant: I tend to visit video and content sharing websites like YouTube and Twitch the most. Sometimes I'll get on Reddit. But other than that, I tend to stay away from social media sites.

Interviewer: In the last week, what have you searched for online?

Participant: Hundreds of things probably, but just off the top of my head, I recently found a new chicken stir fry. I really like looking online. The Internet is great for finding new recipes.

Interviewer: When you're bored, what websites do you visit to pass the time? What do you do on those sites and why do you visit those particular sites?

Participant: The previously mentioned sites YouTube, Twitch, and Reddit. Those are the ones that I go to most when I'm bored and I'm not playing video games. Those ones specifically have particular communities that relate to things that I'm interested in. Whether that be video games or sports or other content. It doesn't really matter; I look for specific content that I can view on those sites.

Interviewer: So, thinking about the previous questions, what do you think other people are doing, both people you know, and people that you don't know? How do other people pass time on the internet?

Participant: That seems like a difficult question because there's millions of people in this world that use the internet and they all use it for a variety of different reasons. Some people are like me and stick to certain sites that they're used to and that they like more

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than others. Some visit all kinds of different sites. Some use social media way more than I do for sure. And so, like I feel like it's really hard to say what others do. But I definitely know others use social more compared to me.

Interviewer: So, what types of devices do you use to access the Internet? For example, do you use phones?

Participant: I believe I use my desktop the most and my phone second for that. And really, if you have a desktop and a phone, you can pretty much do anything you need to do on the Internet.

Interviewer: OK, so what social media or forums like Twitter or Reddit do you use, when, why, or for what do you use them? And please share one that you try to avoid and why you try to avoid it.

Participant: I do use Reddit to keep up with my interests and hobbies. So that's the biggest reason I use them because of those specified communities. I tend to stay away from Facebook and Twitter. Facebook houses a lot of opinions that are unfriendly. Twitter, I've just never really been a fan of Twitter.

Interviewer: When thinking about people that you likely disagree with, what types of forums do you think that they use and why?

Participant: Facebook, probably houses the most opinions that I disagree with. But there are other very extreme platforms like Parlor that were recently in the news over the last couple of years or so. Those are way too extreme, but out of the mainstream, Facebook for sure.

Interviewer: Describe to me how you find out if something is factual and how do you think people around you find if something factual.

Participant: Let's see. When attempting to find out as something is truthful or factual. It's best to independently research that topic and try and find multiple sources that support the same fact. And also find trustworthy sources that have been around for a while and have established reputations. But some people just use social media as a source and I don't think that's right because anybody can post on social media.

Interviewer: So, everyone comes across things that surprised them on social media and advertising news or commentary. Describe for me a time whenever you came across something that you doubted was trustworthy or made you distrust the author or its purpose.

Participant: The past couple years have really been surprising when it comes to information on social media, well information from social media or news sites. It doesn't

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really matter. So, you come across that kind of content all the time. There's constant vaccine disinformation on Facebook and other social media sites. And it's kind of easy to spot and it makes you distrust that person who shares something like that and that they think that way. It's scary in a way.

Interviewer: Have you ever come across content that you've distrust on the news?

Participant: For sure. Fox News spouts vaccine disinformation constantly and it's not safe.

Interviewer: What about conspiracy theories? Have you come across any of those that you have distrusted or doubt it if it was truthful?

Participant: Yeah, I never really found one that I believe in. I mean, as days go on there is going to be more and more conspiracy theories just because it's easy for anybody to get online.

Interviewer: Have you discussed such content with your family? And have you or your family came across something that you believed was true, but then later found was not?

Participant: Yes, I do talk to my friends and family, specifically my girlfriend and my mom and dad about the things that are online and on the news, and there have been times where you see things that you immediately know is not true, and you can all discuss it. And it kind of makes you wonder how other people don't see it.

Interviewer: Has there ever been a time when you have shared something that you knew was not true?

Participant: No, I've never willingly shared anything that would be false on purpose. I mean, that's just immoral, and that's trying to swing people and lie to people, so I mean, you really shouldn't do that.

Interviewer: A lot of people in their day-to-day lives use Google and Yahoo. Tell me about a time when you have used either of those websites and they gave you a result that they thought you were looking for based on something that you have already searched.

Participant: Search engines like Google, they always take your previous searches, your search history and other information to give you tailored results. And it's become more present over the past ten years than it previously had been. However, just for example, yesterday I was looking up sports stats, football stats. And I type in the first name of a player, and it automatically assumes this is who I'm talking about, this football player. Well, it does that by using my previous searches. If I hadn't been searching for football stats before, it might have given me somebody else with that first name. So

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that's just a time where I've noticed that it gave me something it thought I was looking for based on what I already searched for. But there are plenty of other times, I'm sure.

Interviewer: When sharing personal information on the Internet what do you provide? And how do you try to protect your personal information online? What do you think other people do to try and protect their personal information?

Participant: I try to be as cautious as possible when giving up my information online. Signing up for every website, once you sign up for an account, and that usually consists of an email address and phone number and name or something, try and avoid giving out my address phone number. Obviously, don't give your Social Security number out to a random website that you're not sure of. Just overall, I urge my family too use the rule of common sense. Like if you're not 100% sure it's safe, then don't share your personal information. Because it can be used against you, and it can be used to steal your identity. I mean, there's tons of things that can be used for. And I'm sure there's other people who don't care as much, but they definitely should.

Interviewer: Have you responded anyway to Internet companies trying to customize or control what you see on their platforms like in Google searches and what have you heard others discuss about this?

Participant: I would say that I haven't done anything specific to respond to these companies, trying to customize what we see. Over the past years, though, I have become more skeptical of these tailored search results and become more cautious just because it's kind of worrisome. I hear other people discussing all the time about you always hear certain crowds complaining that they're censored or something. Although I'm not sure about that, I don't know the extent in which that goes.

Interviewer: If you were trying to explain to your friends or family how false information is spread and how it can be found on the Internet or how to avoid false information, what would you say to them?

Participant: I would just explain to them how to spot that information and offer general research skills. How would I? I would show them how to find a trustworthy source. What makes a source trustworthy? I would just tell them to be skeptical of everything, so you never take anything on the Internet at face value because you just shouldn't because anybody can post literally anything on the Internet. So, it's better to be safe than to just blindly trust what information is presented in front of you. I would also warn them of social media because I feel like that is where most disinformation spreads. It's where it certainly spreads the fastest.

Interviewer: So, what do you think determines what we see online or how things are spread? How does it work? Who do you think benefits from this? What do you think made this system and what do you think controls information online or in our apps?

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Participant: Every company, Facebook, Google, Twitter, they all have their own algorithms that I'm sure the companies create and I guess in a way determines what is seen and what's spread. I think a lot of them use word associations, like how two words relate to each other to give similar search results and stuff. But I don't know that for sure. But I think certain people can manipulate this, and I think it can be used to benefit them. I'm not exactly sure who or what controls the information or if it's controlled. I just know that these algorithms are developed by their companies.

Interviewer: The Internet is full of stories that divide people about things like the coronavirus, the capital riot stopped the steel Antifa, Black Lives Matter, climate change, Q Anon, and the political parties. If you were to decide, how would you like schools or the news to talk about what controls the Internet and what is saying.

Participant: I think that there's plenty of topics that can divide us. And I think some people use these topics specifically to divide us. But nevertheless, I think that schools and news organizations should report and educate on facts and not really worry about what these other people believe, because ideally, we shouldn't even entertain blatant disinformation or propaganda. We shouldn't even give it the time of day. But we also run into a problem there when you know different news organizations actually use that propaganda regarding anti-VAX and climate change and stuff to keep their viewers riled up. So, the topics themselves shouldn't even be debatable because years of science have proven that vaccinations work and that humans have caused climate change, so why should the school be worried about what it should be teaching that's truth? I mean we know vaccinations work, so why are we even entertaining the idea that they don't? It's just shameful that people think that way really.

Interviewer: Continuing with coronavirus and vaccinations, what sense do you make of the different information out there about whether people should get vaccinated and or wear mask? Why do you think we hear so many conflicting stories? What do you think causes the different opinions and where did you learn this and what does it mean to you?

Participant: It's hard to really say what you make of the different information out there because it's so blatant and ugly that it's become a very serious problem, for lack of a better word, it's "brainwashed" half the country in a way. And we hear so many different conflicting stories because there's certain people in power who parrot these ideas and it causes people to literally be pitted against each other. So, I mean in a way I just don't understand it. I mean, in short, I don't understand why people deny science like they do. And I don't understand how people allow themselves to be brainwashed the way they do. And as for where I learned this, and what this all means to me? Over the years, I've learned about the coronavirus by not taking my information from one source. If there's anything we can take from it, that's probably what we should take. I mean, there's plenty of things we can learn from the pandemic. However, the disinformation part of it has really driven a wedge in between so many different people.

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Interviewer: What content do you post online? What types of content do you try to make visible for others to see and what type of content do you try to hide from others seeing?

Participant: I don't post anything online. I mean, at the most I send stuff in Group chats with people I actually know. I don't post things on my feed specifically.

Interviewer: So, can you remember a time when you were careful about what you chose to like online because of how it might affect the visibility of other people's contributions and content in your social media feed like on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram?

Participant: I mean, if I get on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, I don't think that. No, that's a hard question. I don't get on these sites so much, so it doesn't really apply.

Interviewer: Tell me about a time when you tried to influence or change the content of what you see on YouTube, Google or social media results by searching differently.

Participant: There are certain ways that you can do that without it being bad, like if you're going out to search for a political opinion that agrees with yours. Yeah, that might be a bad idea, because then you're getting your information from one place. However, if you're trying to find a specific result, sometimes you have to change the way you word something on a Google search or YouTube search. Just to be more specific or something, and that's just a result of the algorithms really not being human, so they only are working with what information we give them, so sometimes we have to be more or less specific depending on what's needed.

Interviewer: How do you decide if an online source of information is reliable or credible?

Participant: There's many different things that you can do to see: the age and the reputation of the source or the general guides. So, if there's a news organization that's been around for 200 years, and you know it has a good reputation as being a neutral news organization. And then that's good if you can read an article from somewhere, from a source and it's obviously biased, even if that bias agrees with you, you really should be careful of it because it could be less credible or reliable information if it has a bias.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about a time when you double-checked information online to verify if it was credible and what steps did you take in making that that information was correct? What made you suspicious in the first place to have to check the website and how did you feel about your findings?

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Participant: Just off the top of my head regarding the coronavirus and the vaccinations and stuff.

There's been a lot of disinformation parroted around that. Vaccinated people are still dying from the coronavirus, when in reality after searching it up and reviewing different sources of information it's clear that the people suffering from coronavirus these days are those who are unvaccinated. Ninety-nine percent of those who are vaccinated aren't getting the coronavirus. And if they are, then it is less severe. So that's just, I think within the past couple months that I've had to double-check because it seemed ridiculous, and it is.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about a time when your friends or family distrusted a website or information on a website? And do you know if they double-check the information or try to see if it was credible?

Participant: It's hard to recall these events because it happens very often these days. I mean it actually happened for a long time with things like Hollywood, so my girlfriend the other day was telling me about how a certain celebrity did some crime and it's like okay, well that's being reported by a tabloid, and she thought she should check that and, I agree. I mean, that's just good. It's good to be skeptical. So, even if it's not a serious topic, even if it's a topic about entertainment or something, it's still good to verify that the information you're getting is accurate.

Interviewer: The term fake news seems to me everywhere right now. What are your thoughts about it? For example, what is it? Where is it at? Who is targeted by it? Who is vulnerable to it? What does it mean for democracy? Is a real problem? What are the politics of it all and what new laws or constitutional amendments might we need for the Internet age?

Participant: Fake news is everywhere. It targets susceptible individuals, and the biggest reason why is it generates clicks. Why write a serious story when you can write a fake story and it gets you twice the amount of advertising money?

It's a serious issue because people were essentially brainwashed into creating these cult-like followings. I mean, it can be bad for democracy because people can show distrust in different forms of each other. They can show distrust in our government. I'm not saying you should trust everything blindly, but it's a real problem for democracy and part of the reason why is because certain people in power like politicians use it to their advantage to literally brainwash folks. Propaganda, I mean.

As for new laws or amendments for the Internet age. In my opinion, we need to update a lot of the laws here in the United States. Not just for the Internet age, but all kinds of other sectors of our Constitution as well. It's hard to say, but there should definitely be repercussions to just spreading blatant disinformation.

Interviewer: Can you offer some examples of where you have seen fake news and who

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were the people that published it and what are they trying to get from it? And do you think anything should be done about it?

Participant: An example that's always sticking in my head is how Fox pushes vaccine disinformation constantly. I think they should have some form of punishment for it. I mean, more than 600,000 have died from COVID-19. And even though over half a million people in our country have died, Fox continues to push dangerous narratives that vaccines don't work and that this is about government control, when it's not. They use it to keep their viewers in a constant state of anger. Something should definitely be done about it. It should not be legal and I just think it's disgusting that they use a pandemic like this, where over half a million people have died just in America and use it for their own benefit, it's just gross to me.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Participant: Not really. I enjoyed our interview. Be careful what you do online. Never take anything at face value. That's the biggest thing.

Interviewer: Thank you, I've also enjoyed the interview. I have a couple more questions for you and my questions are what is today's date?

Participant: Today is October 25th of 2021.

Interviewer: And what is your state of residence?

Participant: I live in West Virginia.

Interviewer: What is your age?

Participant: I'm 22 years old.

Interviewer: And what is your gender?

Participant: I'm male.

Interviewer: What about your race?

Participant: White.

Interviewer: And then what is your highest level of education completed?

Participant: I have completed a bachelor's degree in mathematics.