

# The Impact of Media Choice on Political Knowledge

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## ABSTRACT

In an era of civic ignorance among young people, adolescents are turning to their choice of media to educate themselves about politics. In order to address this, the researcher asks, “How do the differing forms of media affect the political awareness of people between the ages of 14 and 25 in Massachusetts?” A correlational study using a quiz and survey was conducted, looking for patterns between participants’ choice of media and their general political knowledge. Generally, participants who indicated that they used television to receive political news displayed the highest level of political knowledge, indicating that television has the most politically educated audience out of the three types of media that were explored. It was also found that participants who mainly used social media were the least politically educated, scoring the lowest on the quiz. This has strong implications, considering that many teenagers use social media as news outlets.

## Introduction

A history teacher once voiced her concerns to the researcher’s class about the lack of civic understanding among the modern American youth. She pointed to the deprioritization of civic classes in schools as a cause, and when the researcher inquired further, she referred her to a study published in 2020 by scholars from Boston University and Tufts University. The study used surveys and interviews to collect data from teachers in Massachusetts about the understanding and implementation of the 2018 History and Social Science HSS Framework. This Framework was a “landmark shift” in Massachusetts education that “increase[d] emphasis on civics across all grade levels Pre-K through 12”, including a course for 8th graders on the “United States and Massachusetts government and civic life” (Tichnor-Wagner, et al. 1). One of the key findings that resulted from this study was that, of the teachers that were aware of the Framework, “20% [had] heard of the Framework but [did not know] the details” (Tichnor-Wagner, et al. 2). Teachers who are unsure about the content they are teaching can only produce students who are not confident in the topic either.

The researcher eventually started looking at this dilemma of civic ignorance through a different lens. Adolescents, when a topic is not taught in school, tend to self-teach through media, primarily social media. The internet is full of unreliable sources and influential figures that could supply an individual with inaccurate information. It is often said that the internet is an untrustworthy and biased place, but the same could be said about other forms of media, like televised news or printed newspapers. It is important to know how well the media an individual chooses is educating them on important issues like politics, especially with the heavy influence that politics have on America as a whole.

## Literature Review

Contextualization

Author and journalist Irving Fang writes in her book *A History of Mass Communication* about how, in America, the printing press did not really catch on in the eighteenth century until the printers discovered the newspaper. The pioneers, across the sea from their homeland and living in areas of low population, felt disconnected from the rest of the world, causing the newspaper industry to flourish (Fang 51). When the industry did start to boom, newspaper corporations wanted to please as many people as possible with their writings, so they tried to cater to every possible political leaning. This created what is called objective writing, prioritizing fact over opinion (Fang 53). Objectivity is what many news outlets aim to achieve in their reporting, or at least a reputation of objectivity.

When discussing the topic of objectivity, audiences of major news sources can look no further than Ad Fontes Media's Media Bias Chart. Ad Fontes Media, founded by Vanessa Otero places a large number of news sources on a chart, depicting each source's respective degree of political bias and reliability. Their political bias is measured in numbers, from "Most Extreme Left" to "Most Extreme Right". Reliability is also measured in numbers, from "Contains Inaccurate/Fabricated Information" to "Original Fact Reporting" (Otero). Ad Fontes Media uses its team of analysts and a complex methodology to analyze the content of individual articles and shows. In this way, they claim they are able to present unbiased examinations of the content from each source (Otero).

The bias and reliability of a source an individual chooses to visit could affect the individual's understanding of the content they are consuming. Social media is especially susceptible to being biased and unreliable, due to the fact that people posting on social media do not have to fact check or edit their posts. There is nothing preventing people from posting and spreading false information. According to Hunt Allcott, Associate Professor of Economics from New York University, and Matthew Gentzkow, Professor of Economics at Stanford University, "62 percent of US adults get news on social media" (Allcott 212), and "the most popular fake news stories were more widely shared on Facebook than the most popular mainstream news stories" (Allcott 212).

When the switch from printed newspapers to television first appeared, it allowed news to become more accessible. Professor Ralph Schroeder from the University of Oxford writes about how television provided news to a broader audience and required less literary skills to understand (Schroeder 32). However, after the late 1970s, the rise of cable and more recently social media lead to more options of what to watch. When provided with this choice, more people began to choose entertainment over news, resulting in less people who were knowledgeable about politics and current events (Schroeder 33). As a group of anthropologists put it in their book *How the World Changed Social Media*, "social media is more associated with entertainment and social bonding than with serious issues such as politics" (Miller et al. 153).

## Previous Research

The aforementioned Professor Schroeder from the University of Oxford writes in the chapter called "Media systems, digital media and politics" from his book titled *Social Theory after the Internet: Media, Technology, and Globalization* about a study that looked at the evolution of media systems by comparing two pairs of countries, the United States compared to Sweden, and China compared to India. He raises the question of whether social media differs in terms of agenda-setting compared with traditional media, stating that the agendas set by social media tend to be more responsive towards social issues and what the public is generally talking about than to topics similar to economics or foreign affairs (Schroeder 43).

In the same chapter, he also discusses both the dangers and opportunities presented by digital media. One of the positives of digital media is that it has the potential to provide a platform for issues that may have struggled to gain notable attention. However, it also has the potential to provide skewed representations of demands because of its unregulated nature (Schroeder 43). Schroeder claims that a combination of the two possibilities would not result in polarization as one might expect, but in an influx of content and diversity in content. However, he recognizes that the outcome could be the opposite: the political atmosphere of digital

media could stay the same, especially “if the level of interest in politics is the same or declines, or if media become more responsive to extreme political forces” (Schroeder 44).

In a different chapter titled “Digital media and the rise of right-wing populism” from the same book, Professor Schroeder makes the argument that “retrogressive mainstream political forces... have been the single most important political change in at least three of countries examined [in the chapter]” (Schroeder 60). Schroeder looks at the rise of right-wing populism through digital media by comparing four right-wing populist movements: Donald Trump in the US, Narendra Modi in India, the Sweden Democrats, and the Chinese nationalists. When looking at Donald Trump, Schroeder focuses on his relationship with social media app and website Twitter. He describes the populist, rural culture of the supporters Trump gained during his campaign, and the “disproportionate amount of attention” (Schroeder 63) he received from media outlets due to his controversial tweets. He says that Trump’s usage of Twitter was decisive in his becoming the Republican nominee, due to the United States’ tendency to focus on the personal media attention of the candidates, rather than parties or policies (Schroeder 65). After examining and comparing the other movements, Schroeder concludes that social media provides politicians with a more “direct linkage to the people” (Schroeder 81), in comparison to different media systems. This directness provided by social media creates a certain relationship between the public, politicians, and the politics themselves.

In the book *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm: News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises and Public Opinion*, published by the Amsterdam University Press, German media scientist Vivian Roesse writes a chapter titled “You won’t believe how co-dependent they are: Or: Media hype and the interaction of news media, social media, and the user.” She takes an in-depth look at how co-dependent social media, news media, and users are in relation to each other. Classic news media is being increasingly required to reach their audiences through social media, and points out how printed newspapers struggle with being behind on reporting news that had already been covered online (Roesse 314). She inspects examples of social media posts that don’t seem to be something that traditional news media would report on but still went viral online, and classifies them as “accidental media hypes” (Roesse 317). She examines the structure of the media hype, as well as how the algorithm that made it go viral works (Roesse 323). Roesse concludes that “an accidental media hype can be triggered by any kind of emotion, regardless of its actual news value” (Roesse 313). This difference between the behavior of the media systems could drastically affect an individual’s understanding of political information they might see online compared to other platforms.

Associate Professor Jessica T. Feezell from the University of New Mexico, in her article titled “Agenda Setting through Social Media: The Importance of Incidental News Exposure and Social Filtering in the Digital Era” for the *Political Research Quarterly* tests whether or not mainstream media can influence the public agenda through social media, and if being exposed to political information through Facebook increased a participant’s perceived importance of certain issues (Feezell 483). She uses a longitudinal experiment and a pre-post survey design to gather data (Feezell 486). She found that participants who were shown political information through Facebook had an increased awareness of issues than the participants who weren’t (Feezell 488). She also discovered that agenda-setting was most effective on participants who, prior to the study, had low political interest (Feezell 489).

## Finding the Gap

Most of the studies done on the topic of the relationship between politics and media has been focused on specifically social media and its effects. This makes sense, considering social media is a relatively new phenomenon, and has greatly affected the politics of America. However, it is just as important to learn about the effects that other forms of media have had on the United States’ political atmosphere. Television and printed news may have been around for a while, but that does not mean they no longer contribute to their audience’s political awareness. The studies conducted so far in this field also generally did not focus on specific parameters, like

age groups or location. For these reasons, researchers must ask the question: “How do the differing forms of media affect the political awareness of people between the ages of 14 and 25 in Massachusetts?”

## Methodology

The researcher chose to approach the question with a correlational study, using the results from a survey asking about where each participant received their political news, as well as their results from a short quiz about American politics and looking for patterns between the two. This form was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and deemed to be ethical.

The method chosen by the researcher was not modeled off of other studies, it was more inspired by general academic tests and quizzes. In the educational world, tests and quizzes are given to students to measure their understanding of material, so a logical assumption was made that a quiz would be an effective way to assess participants’ political knowledge.

This form was posted on a group website along with the researcher’s classmates’ surveys that were sent out to schools in Massachusetts. Because the website was set up through the school, persons under the age of eighteen were required to fill out an informed consent form and have a parent fill out a parental consent form before they could participate in the study. The researcher also posted the link to the survey and quiz on the social media platforms Snapchat and Instagram. The researcher has people from varying areas of Massachusetts following her social media, and therefore it provided a relatively accurate representation of the state of Massachusetts.

All participants were taking part in the study of their own free will, and were able to discontinue participation at any time if they chose to. Participants were also assured that they would remain completely anonymous in the reporting of their survey and quiz results.

## Demographics and Survey Section

The form that participants filled out began with asking for the age and gender of participants and for their consent that the information collected in the form could be used in a high schooler’s AP Research project. The survey they filled out next first asked, “How do you typically get your political news? (check all that apply),” and gave the options of TV stations, social media, printed newspapers, and a space for “other” in which they could write in their own response. This “other” space was added so that if a participant did not use any of the mediums the research is focused on, they did not feel like they had to choose one of the three and possibly create false data.

The next question said, “If you said TV stations, please check which stations you usually watch for political news”. The options presented were CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, ABC News, CBS News, NBC News, and a space for “other” in which they could write in another station. These stations were listed as options because these stations were the top six news-related “most-watched networks of 2020 (by total viewers)”. The most popular television stations would likely be the ones that most participants watch.

The next question said, “If you said social media, please check which apps or websites you usually use for political news”. The options for this question were TikTok, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, or “other”. These sites and apps, in the researcher’s experience, were the most commonly used social media platforms by her peers and people she knew.

The last question in the survey section of the form said, “If you said printed newspaper, please enter which newspapers you usually read,” and provided a write-in answering option. The researcher did not offer options to choose from because there are a very large number of newspapers that participants could potentially read after factoring in the location of the participant and what they could be subscribed to.

## Quiz Section

In the 15-question quiz, there were three types of questions: civics questions (Table 1), questions about specific people (Table 2), and election-related questions (Table 3) that were all shuffled into a random order. Having different types of questions of varying specificity about American politics would supply the researcher with a summary of the participants' general political knowledge. Each question, in addition to the multiple choice options, had a "not sure" option. This was added in order to avoid the chance of a participant guessing the correct answer without knowing the correct answer. The other multiple choice options were added to disguise the correct answer.

Questions	Multiple choice answer options*
How many votes are there in the Electoral College?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 435</li> <li>• 100</li> <li>• <b>538</b></li> <li>• 370</li> </ul>
How old does an individual have to be to run for President of the United States?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 32</li> <li>• 30</li> <li>• <b>35</b></li> <li>• 37</li> </ul>
How many Vice Presidential debates are there during an election?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>1</b></li> <li>• 2</li> <li>• 3</li> <li>• 4</li> </ul>

**Table 1.** Civics questions and answers (\*Correct answer in bold)

Questions	Multiple choice answer options*
Who is President-elect Joe Biden's choice for Treasury Secretary?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elizabeth Warren</li> <li>• <b>Janet Yellen</b></li> <li>• John Kerry</li> <li>• Avril Haines</li> </ul>
Who is the newest addition to the Supreme Court?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brett Kavanaugh</li> <li>• Elena Kagan</li> <li>• <b>Amy Coney Barret</b></li> <li>• Sonia Sotomayor</li> </ul>
Who is the current Speaker of the House?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Nancy Pelosi</b></li> <li>• Steven Mnuchin</li> <li>• Mitch McConnell</li> <li>• Lindsey Graham</li> </ul>
Who is currently a Massachusetts Senator?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Ed Markey</b></li> <li>• Stephen Lynch</li> <li>• Joe Kennedy</li> <li>• Richard Neal</li> </ul>
What is the name of the plan for addressing climate change proposed by Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Sen. Ed Markey?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Climate Plan</li> <li>• <b>The Green New Deal</b></li> <li>• The Clean Power Plant</li> <li>• The Paris Climate Agreement</li> </ul>

How long has President-elect Joe Biden been involved in politics?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 43 years</li> <li>• 45 years</li> <li>• 51 years</li> <li>• <b>47 years</b></li> </ul>
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**Table 2.** Questions about specific people and answers (\*Correct answer in bold)

Questions	Multiple choice answer options*
Who was elected president in 2016?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Barack Obama</li> <li>• Hillary Clinton</li> <li>• <b>Donald Trump</b></li> <li>• Joe Biden</li> </ul>
Which state had what was considered a “close race” in the 2020 election?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New York</li> <li>• <b>Georgia</b></li> <li>• Alabama</li> <li>• Colorado</li> </ul>
What was one of the questions on the 2020 Massachusetts ballot?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Create Ranked-Choice Voting</b></li> <li>• End Diversity Ban</li> <li>• Longer Appointed Judge Terms</li> <li>• Legalize Marijuana</li> </ul>
In which state did the Trump campaign file a lawsuit related to the 2020 election?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utah</li> <li>• New Mexico</li> <li>• Missouri</li> <li>• <b>Michigan</b></li> </ul>
What percentage of voting-aged American citizens is the average voter turnout for recent presidential elections?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Around 57%</li> <li>• Around 54%</li> <li>• Around 71%</li> <li>• <b>Around 63%</b></li> </ul>
Who was the Green Party’s candidate in the 2020 presidential election?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elizabeth Warren</li> <li>• <b>Howie Hawkins</b></li> <li>• Jo Jorgensen</li> <li>• Spike Cohen</li> </ul>

**Table 3.** Election-related questions and answers (\*Correct answer in bold)

## Limitations

The researcher used an online quiz in order to gather as many responses as possible. However, using this format also presented certain limitations.

The researcher had no control over the participants themselves and how they were taking the quiz. The participants could have cheated, but the researcher attempted to combat this by deliberately asking them, in the subtitle of the form, to use only the knowledge they already held. The quiz was also not timed, which resulted in both positive and negative outcomes. One result of the quiz not being timed was that the participants would not feel a sense of urgency or stress when taking it. However, it created some disparities in the data collection. When time is not accounted for, it can be difficult to assess a participant’s knowledge. Most academic tests or exams are timed for this reason, but the researcher felt that the positives outweighed the negatives.

## Data Review

## Grouping Responses

To begin the process of reviewing data, the researcher split up the responses into groups, categorized by the type of media the participant indicated that they used to receive political news. This broke down into seven groups: those who only watch TV, those who only use social media, those who only read printed news, those who both watch TV and use social media, those who both watch TV and read printed news, those who both use social media and read printed news, and those who do all three, watch TV, use social media, and read printed news (Table 4).

	Only TV Stations	Only Social Media	Only Printed News	TV + SM	TV + PN	SM + PN	TV + SM + PN
Fraction of responses	3/99	27/99	0/99	67/99	0/99	0/99	2/99
% of responses	3.0%	27.3%	0%	67.7%	0%	0%	2.0%

**Table 4.** Grouping Responses

These groups, after calculating the breakdown of the amount of responses in each one, were reduced to only four categories: only TV stations, only social media, TV and social media, and all three, TV, social media, and printed news.

## Overall Quiz Results

When comparing the groups' overall scores, the group who watched TV, used social media, and read printed newspapers (referred to as "TV + SM + Printed News" in Fig. 1) had the highest average score, an average of 11.5/15 correct answers, or 76.7% correct. The next highest scoring group was those who only watch TV (referred to as "Only TV" in Fig. 1). These participants had an average of 68.7%, or 10.3/15 correct answers. The third highest score came from the group that both watches TV and uses social media (referred to as "TV + SM" in Fig. 1), with an average of 60.7%, or 9.1/15 correct answers. The final group that had the lowest overall score was the participants who only use social media (referred to as "Only Social Media" in Fig. 1). This group had an average of 49.3%, or 7.4/15 correct answers (Fig. 1).

When looking at this data set, it must be noted that a limitation that appeared was the uneven distribution of participants in each group. This likely affected the results by making the groups with less participants have less replicable data.

## Civics Questions Results

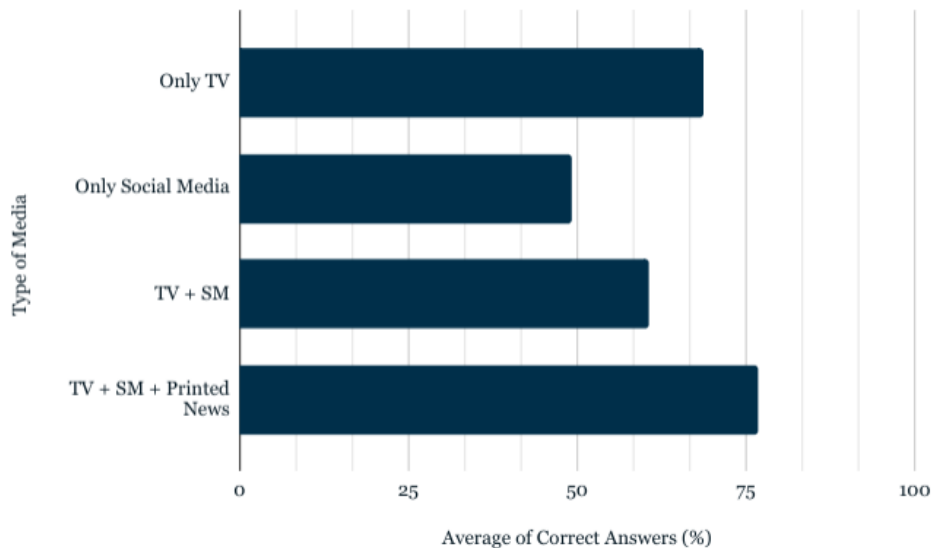
For the questions related to civics, the results differed slightly from the overall scores. The group that only used social media was still the lowest score, with an average of 50%, or 1.5/3 correct answers. Both the group of participants who watch TV and use social media, and the group of those who watch TV, use social media, and read printed newspapers had the same average score of 66.7%, or 2/3 correct answers. The highest score was produced by the "Only TV" group, with an average of 76.7%, or 2.3/3 correct answers (Fig. 2).

## People Questions Results

The results of the questions relating to specific people paralleled the results of the overall quiz. The highest average came from the group which uses all three types of media, with an average score of 83.3%, or 5/6 correct answers. The second highest was the “Only TV” group with an average of 66.7%, or 4/6 correct answers. The second lowest average was the “TV + SM” group, averaging 58.3%, or 3.5/6 correct answers. The lowest scoring group, reflective of the overall quiz scores, was the “Only Social Media” group. This group had an average score 45%, or 2.7/6 correct answers (Fig. 3).

### Election Questions Results

Similarly to the questions of specific people, the election- related questions also reflected the results from the overall quiz. The highest scoring group was the group titled “TV + SM + Printed News” with an average score of 75%, or 4.5/6 correct answers. The second highest score came from the group titled “Only TV”, which had an average of 71.7%, or 4.3/6 correct answers. Again, likewise to the overall results, the “TV + SM” group had the third highest average of 60%, or 3.6/6 correct answers. The “Only Social Media” group had, once more, the lowest average at 51.7%, or 3.1/6 correct answers (Fig. 4).



**Figure 1.** Overall Quiz Results



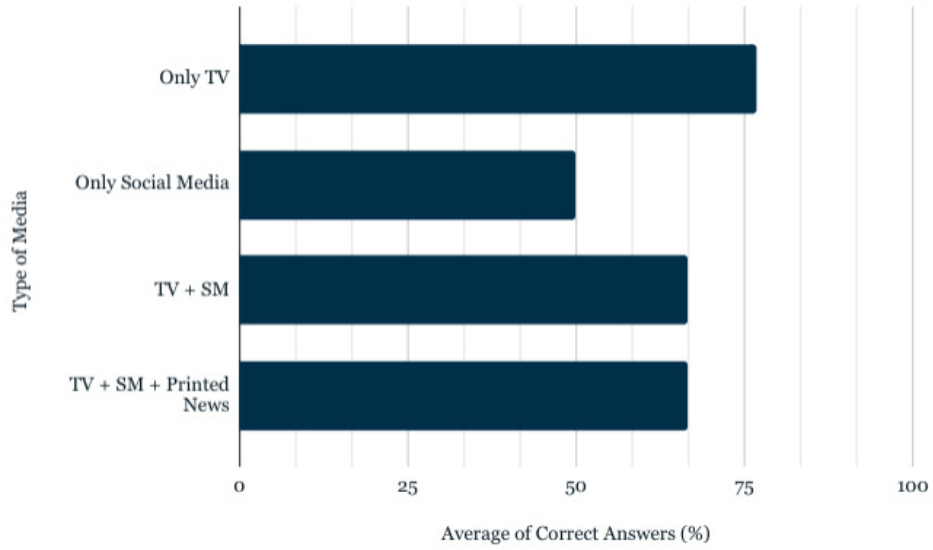


Figure 2. Civics Questions Results

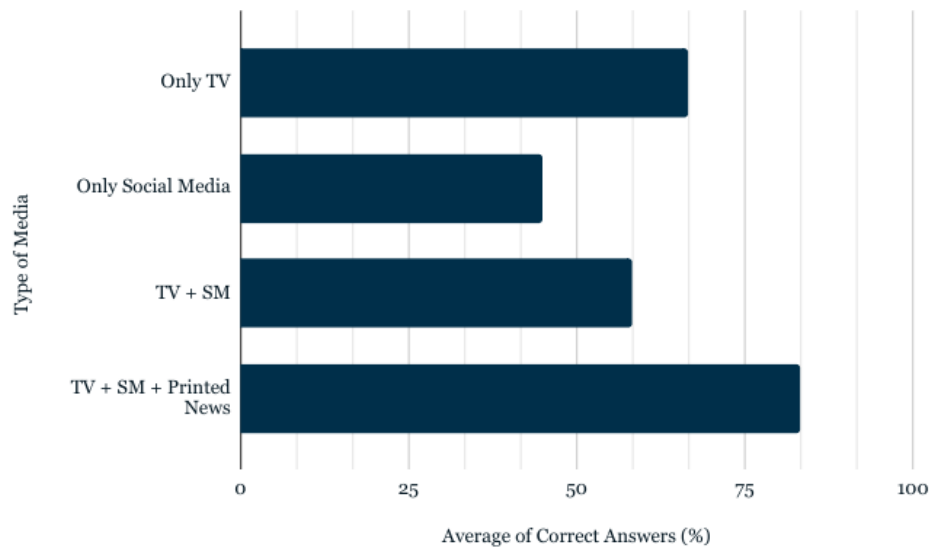
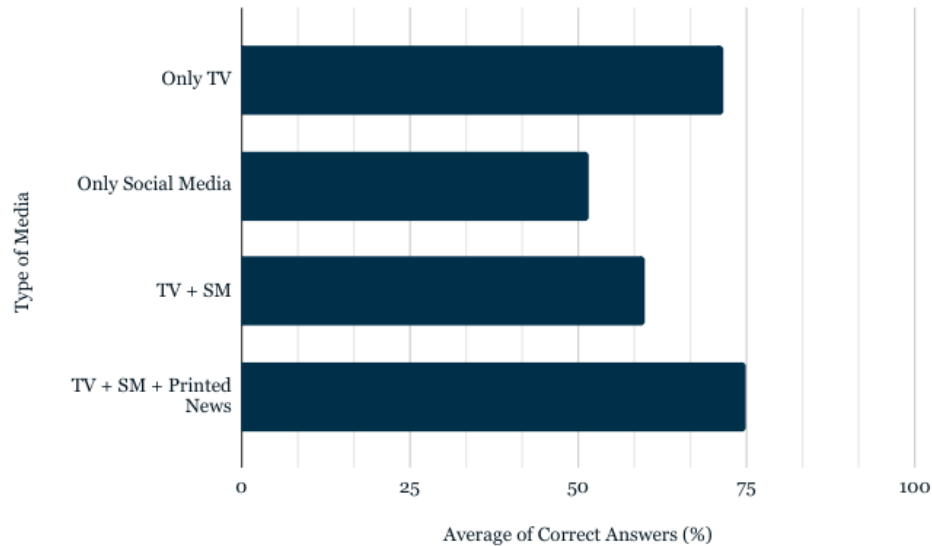


Figure 3. People Questions Results



**Figure 4.** Election Questions Results

## Discussion

### Conclusions and Implications

The groups titled “TV + Social Media + Printed News” and “Only TV” had the highest scores in every category of questions, except for the civics questions, in which the “TV + Social Media + Printed News” group and the “TV + Social Media” group tied, leaving “Only TV” with the highest score. This indicates that television has the most politically educated audience out of the three types of media that were explored. On the contrary, social media has the least politically educated audience. The group that used only social media continually scored the lowest for each type of question.

Using multiple sources results in the highest level of political knowledge. One can see in the data collected that the addition of reading newspapers produced higher scores. The group that used both social media and watched television did not produce very high scores, but the group that did both and in addition read newspapers performed considerably better than other groups, except on the civics questions. Perhaps this could mean that newspapers don’t report on many things that require a previous knowledge of civics.

The “Only Social Media” group scored low across the board, but they scored especially low on the questions related to specific people. This likely is due to the nature of social media and its complicated algorithms. Specificities such as names that don’t hold enough interest to garner attention online would not go viral, and therefore would not reach many social media users. This is assuming that the name in question was not related to some sort of scandal that would be interesting to the public, and even if that name did gain notoriety, they would then be more known for their scandal than for their position in government.

One of the most prevalent real world implications that emerged from these conclusions was the lack of understanding in social media users. Many teens and young adults are present on social media and consume much of the content that is online. The large amounts of political content someone sees online could make them feel confident in their political knowledge, when in reality, the internet is full of false information and their political knowledge may not be as strong as they may be led to believe.

### Limitations

As previously stated, there were a couple of limitations in the research process that could have affected the data that was collected, and therefore potentially affected the conclusions. To reiterate, the researcher was not able to proctor or time the quiz given to participants due to the form being online. These were necessary sacrifices to make in order to distribute the form to as many people as possible. The other limitation that was briefly mentioned was the uneven distribution between the groups that the responses were separated into. This could have impacted the data because calculating the average scores of groups that have varying amounts of responses in them makes the data less replicable.

## Future Research

Similar studies to this one should be conducted in other states or regions. In Massachusetts, where this study was conducted, schools already have the HSS Framework in place that increased civic education, as mentioned in the Introduction. Taking this into consideration, it would be interesting to see how young people do on a politics and civics quiz in places that do not have that emphasis on civic education.

In addition to changing the location of this study, the age group being investigated should also be changed or expanded. Making the age group larger would likely result in a more even distribution of participants across groups. One of the reasons the groups were so unequal in this study was because the focus was on young people and most of the participants were teenagers. Teenagers generally spend more time online and on social media than reading the newspaper, so a wider age range would produce more participants who watch television stations and read the newspaper.

The last thing that the researcher would like to see done more research on is the issue of misinformation on social media. Despite the fact that the purpose of social media is to entertain, not educate, many people use it as a place to educate themselves, and many other people use it to spread information and educate others. Separating out misinformation from influencers who are genuinely credible sources can be difficult, especially for the young audience that is present online. Doing research to find a way to make those distinctions would be helpful to people of all ages across the globe.

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