



SchwartzReport

Adult illiteracy and the distortion of American culture

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The SchwartzReport tracks emerging trends that will affect the world, particularly the United States. For EXPLORE it focuses on matters of health in the broadest sense of that term, including medical issues, changes in the biosphere, technology, and policy considerations, all of which will shape our culture and our lives.

Something very insidious is going on in our world today. Something that is directly eating away American democracy. I am speaking here of adult illiteracy, dropping education levels amongst children, and the weaponization of misinformation trends that collectively have combined to create an alternate reality with alternate facts. When the Founders created the First Amendment in 1791 they understood the power of misinformation. Someone spreading a false rumor in a bar, a printer distributing flyers filled with misinformation. A charismatic speaker spewing lies to a crowd in a square. The amendment's wording itself reveals their thinking. "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."¹

The idea of an internet containing social media read each day by tens of millions, who carry around a device about the size of snuff box, was nowhere in their minds. A technology of misinformation devoured by the citizens, adults spending on average two and a half hours,¹ while the young spend an average of 4.8 hours a day². Girls spending nearly an hour more on social media than boys, 5.3 vs. 4.8 hours, respectively³. Much of that time they absorb misinformation instead of facts, and that shapes their thinking and their trust in their government.³ Do we have any actual data on that? We do.

The Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH), a non-profit that fights misinformation, surveyed this issue in depth and found, 49 % of Americans agree with at least four statements which align with common conspiracy theories, including myths relating to white supremacy, antisemitism, vaccines, and climate change. Belief in conspiracy theories was even more common amongst 13–17 year olds (60 %), and higher still (69 %) among teenagers who are heavy social media users. Adults, supposedly more educated, were not much better, (49 %).⁴ This is particularly significant with the parents of children. They are similarly indoctrinated instead of being factually educated and that may help explain while unvaccinated parents have unvaccinated children.

This social media misinformation has profoundly harmful effects, particularly on teens who spend more than 5 hours a day on social media were 60 % more likely to express suicidal thoughts or harm themselves, 2.8 times more likely to hold a negative view of their body, and 30 % more likely to report a lot of sadness the day before. In this study⁵, these mental health problems were only associated with YouTube and TikTok. Body image problems show significant effects associated with time spent on YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp, but not the other platforms studied here.

So Let's be clear here. The weaponization of lies is not an abstraction. It has profoundly damaging, even lethal consequences. I will give just one of the many examples of how the weaponization of lies and social media have changed American culture.

Vaccination. The science of vaccinations is one of the most highly tested aspects of medicine, precisely because a mistake can kill thousands of people. Before a vaccine is approved for distribution it undergoes multiple trials. And the public recognition of the importance of vaccinations and their effectiveness was, until the Covid-19 pandemic, a given in public health policy. As the World Health Organization explains, Jonas Salk "...tested his experimental killed-virus vaccine on himself and his family in 1953, and a year later on 1.6 million children in Canada, Finland and the USA. The results were announced on 12 April 1955, and Salk's inactivated polio vaccine (IPV) was licensed on the same day. By 1957, annual cases dropped from 58,000 to 5600, and by 1961, only 161 cases remained."⁶ Most Americans under the age of 50 have never seen or even thought about polio, a disease of children that once terrified the nation and the world. It is one of the standard vaccinations a child must have to attend school. You may remember getting yours, or maybe not. It is that universal.

In stark contrast consider what happened with Covid-19, a disease that according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has killed over a million Americans (1148,691) as of 14 October 2023.⁷ When you dig into this terrible number, what you find is an enormous disparity between Republicans and Democrats. (See Fig. 1)

Now why is there this disparity? It's not the science. It is weaponized misinformation for political purposes and the level of education a person has. Although it is rarely discussed, there is a connection between the two. The data are clear: the more education an individual has the more wellbeing oriented an individual's worldview is likely to be. Or,

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¹ That led me to wonder what the effect of this ignorance had on voters. That produced an even more alarming revelation. See Fig. 3.

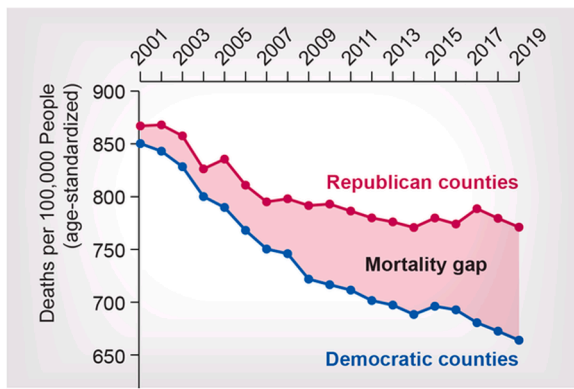


Fig. 1.

translated into what I think is really relevant, the more you learn to think and assess facts the more likely you are to support programs that foster wellbeing, and the more likely it is that you will be a Democrat.⁸ In terms of Covid, conservatism has translated into an anti-science, anti-vaxxer, anti-mask movement that is the core of what amounts to an American death cult. NPR tracked political affiliation with whether a person was vaccinated or not. They reported in December 2021 that there was dramatic difference between conservatives/Republicans and liberals/Democrats.

Source: Scientific American Fig. 1

ACASignups.net, from its own research, reported the same thing the NPR found, and noted, "...new cases are now running 2.71x higher per capita in the reddest tenth of the country than the bluest tenth."⁹ A confluence of the social and neuro-science research has presented us with findings that describe a pandemic response amongst a definable group. Republicans driven by some combination of fear, racism, heterosexual male dominance and misinformation about what are, in fact, objectively verifiable scientific facts. I believe history will come to see this as a tragedy created by the politicization of misinformation made possible by social media. It is changing American culture, and not for the better as hundreds of research studies from longevity to medicare objectively verify.

However, as I dug deeper into this research I asked the question: why are Americans, particularly American adults so easily manipulated by misinformation? How did misinformation about Covid-19, for instance,

so easily manipulate adults not to get vaccinated, or to let their children get vaccinated, and why was this so politically biased? Why did it turn into a Republican death cult? The more I researched this issue, it became clear that one of the major reasons this happened is that American adults are astonishingly illiterate.

The National Center for Education Statistics, surveyed adult basic reading skills and discovered, for a number of sometimes overlapping reasons, 48 million American adults struggle to read basic English. That may leave them unable to find and keep a decent job, navigate the signage on city streets, follow medical instructions *and vote*. (emphasis added) They are vulnerable to scams and face stigma and shame."¹⁰ The Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy studied this issue and reported, "More people are affected by low literacy in the United States than are diagnosed with cancer or heart disease. 1 in 5 adults in the U.S. struggle to read basic sentences."¹¹ As a result they reported there are multigenerational, economic and health consequences from the literacy crisis, as the vaccination issue demonstrated.

Digging even deeper into the research literature, I discovered not only are 48 million adults functionally illiterate, according to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 32 million, or 16 % of adults, "do not have sufficient comfort or competence with a computer to find a recipe, make a retail purchase, or file taxes online."¹²

Think about that for a minute, as I did. Tens of millions of Americans, adults and children, are completely indoctrinated by misinformation from social media and networks like Fox. Tens of millions more adults, i. e., potential voters, are so illiterate they have trouble reading a street sign or a ballot.

Then consider this. Regardless of party affiliation, according to the U. S. Census Bureau as of 16 February 2023, of adults 25 years and older only 37.5 % had a bachelor's degree.¹³

But that isn't all. For several decades now, since the Reagan administration, we have been dismantling our public education system, particularly in Red states, even as the cost of college has been skyrocketing. It has created a complete reversal of education and literacy between the Republicans and Democrats; something that few commentators even talk about. Twenty five years ago, Republicans were more educated than Democrats. Today the exact opposite is true. In 2017 Pew Research Center looked into this and tested and interviewed 10,000 adults, and discovered that more democrats have Bachelor Degrees than Republicans, a change that has occurred in just the last 25 years. After analysing their data, Pew reported, "37 % of registered voters identified



U.S. adults lag in reading, math skills

Adults in Japan and Finland scored highest in an international test measuring life skills such as reading, math and problem solving, while those in the United States scored below average.

READING SKILLS	MATH SKILLS	PROBLEM SOLVING
1. Japan 296	1. Japan 288	1. Japan 294
2. Finland 288	2. Finland 282	2. Finland 289
3. Netherlands 284	3. Flanders-Belgium 280	3. Australia 289
4. Australia 280	4. Netherlands 280	4. Sweden 288
5. Sweden 279	5. Sweden 279	5. Norway 286
Average 273	Average 269	Average 283
16. U.S. 270	21. U.S. 253	17. U.S. 277

NOTE: Tests scored on a 500-point scale. U.S. scores are based on nationally representative sample of 5,000 adults between 16 and 65 years old.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education

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Fig. 2.

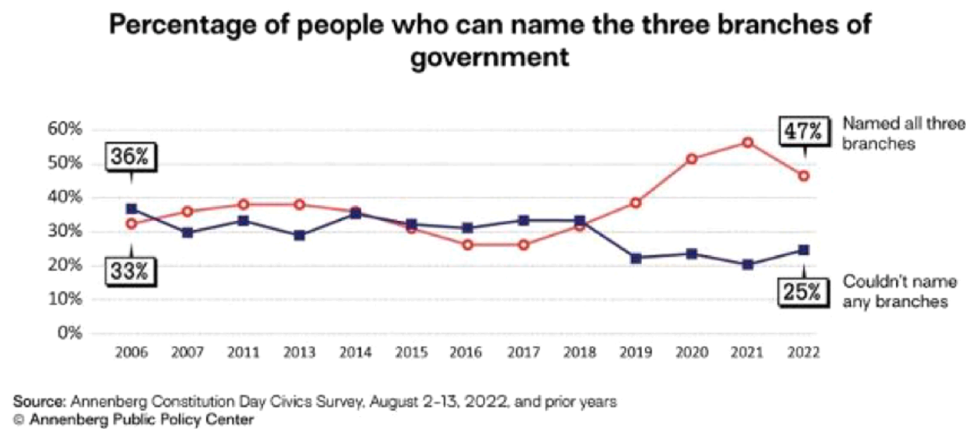


Fig. 3.

as independents, 33 % as Democrats and 26 % as Republicans. When the partisan leanings of independents are taken into account, 50 % either identify as Democrats or lean Democratic; 42 % identify as Republicans or lean Republican.

“The 8-percentage-point Democratic advantage in leaned partisan identification is wider than at any point since 2009, and a statistically significant shift since 2016, when Democrats had a 4-point edge (48 % to 44 %).¹⁴ This literacy disparity also has direct political consequences. “According to the U.S. Department of Education, 54 % of Americans ages 16 to 74 now rank below a sixth grade reading level. The youngest generations are showing further declines, and numeracy scores are similarly dismal. If America continues at this pace, and power is your only goal, solidifying your base among the poorly educated might actually make a lot of sense — consequences be damned.”¹⁵

In the second decade of the highest technology age in human history, what are the effects of both this switch in education between Republicans and Democrats, and how do Americans compare with Adults of other developed nations? The answer turned out to be quite alarming. When I compared American adults with those in other countries I was astonished to discover just how badly Americans compared in tasks involving math or even thinking how to solve problems.

Look at Fig. 2.

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