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Media, Self, and Society Reflection Essay

The Media, Self, and Society Scholars program played a large part in my decision to attend the University of Maryland. In my life media had always been prevalent, but I was never able to appreciate or understand its depth and significance on my life and people's lives around the world. What intrigued me the most about media was its ability to be a platform to tell stories, whether it took shape as a movie or a news report. However, after participating in and learning from the Media, Self, and Society program, I have realized what great power media has on so many different aspects of the world, including politics, business, communication, world culture, family life, social identity and status, and community. The takeaway from this scholarly program for which I am most grateful is that media, as beneficial to the world as it may be, has the potential to cause destruction and struggle. It was through these first three semesters that I have learned how to recognize and analyze different forms of media, and furthermore take action in telling real, authentic stories, or calling out those which are misleading and corrupt.

During this past election cycle, specifically as Joe Biden was gaining a large lead in votes over Donald Trump, my roommates and I decided to watch different news platforms – Fox and ABC – to see how they presented their information and what messages followed. The goal of this analysis was to see if there was any differentiation between a more radical network in Fox and a more moderate network in ABC. We found that the majority of the ABC News broadcast consisted of democratic and republican officials giving live commentary about the polling results. The broadcast also placed a huge emphasis on statistics and probability models that were not only displayed to viewers at home, but also explained thoroughly. Fox News, on the other hand, specifically Tucker Carlson's segment, was primarily filled with radical statements and questions. Some of these that were featured as headlines included "Joe Biden is Stealing Your Election" and "Does Joe Biden Really Know What's Going On?" While statistics were used occasionally with a map of the United States, there was a clear bias when selecting which statistics to use, as they often showed Trump's results from the past election and compared it with the present-day polls. Watching the Fox News coverage was like watching an hour of live propaganda with a transparent objective; get viewers to side with Donald Trump and strengthen any detestation towards Joe Biden.

With social media having such a strong grasp on individuals in the modern world, it can be easy to overlook what goes on beneath the surface. While many see social media for its positive characteristics – global connectivity, interaction, and communication – many are

unaware of the role social media plays for larger corporations. Data harvesting is the primary way that social media can personalize what an individual views on his/her feed, especially advertisements. When scrolling through Instagram or tapping through Snapchat stories, a database is learning about the individual, from how long he/she may stop to look at a post of a favorite sports team to when they decide to follow a classmate from school. Using this information, social media sites sell space to advertisements that are supposed to catch the eye of any social media user. Because even though it may bring many people joy to talk to friends, social media sites like Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and YouTube are businesses above all else. After many in-depth discussions in classes and viewing documentaries such as Netflix's *The Social Dilemma*, it became clear that the role of social media in my life is far different from its role in society for businesses and politicians alike.



After the election, my roommates and I went to D.C. to celebrate. It was one of the most wholesome experiences of my life.

As I have spent more time learning about media and its impact both on the world and those living in it, I have gradually shifted from being a passive consumer of media to a critical one. Something that was always taught to my Scholars group was to not take media at face value; there is always a deeper meaning that may or may not contain some form of bias. Passive viewers tend to take in information at face value – when scrolling through Twitter, a passive media consumer will read the headline of an article and believe it without even reading it or checking its sources. Critical consumers, on the other hand, question surface-level information to gain a deeper understanding of the content being presented, focusing on its validity. While the news may be the most explicit form of media that has an underlying goal of persuading viewers, this is also present in movies, streaming platforms, and other mediums that are predominantly viewed as means of entertainment.

Being in the Media, Self, and Society Scholars program presented me with challenging ideas that came from both my instructors and peers. One of the most stimulating topics from this course was the impact of deep fakes, specifically its political involvement. I can recall one class specifically in which we watched an interview with an anonymous European man whose job it was to create fake news and present that fake news to Americans. I had never before thought that an occupation like that exists, but it opened my eyes to see that it happens all the time. Particularly with deep fakes, individuals who do not fully understand the concept can be manipulated very easily, and it was shocking to think about how present misleading information is in the United States. It reminded me of our Scholars trip to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in D.C. The museum showcased an abundance of Nazi propaganda that was used to get people to back Hitler and the Nazi regime, and the idea that some of the same tactics are being used today was rather intimidating. However, with this knowledge, I was forced to think more critically when it came to the media I interact with in my daily life.



One of my first social events as a freshman at UMD, taking place at The Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center.



This is one of my first media creations I could call my own. I was recording UMD ROTC students for a video project.

My learning experience was vastly improved by interacting with my fellow Media, Self, and Society Scholars. While the Covid-19 prohibited much of the interaction we normally had with each other, my first year with this group was really great. The group projects in particular were some of my favorite, especially the Day in the Life video as well as the Tik Tok assignment. Furthermore, when we would learn about a specific topic in class, breaking out into groups offered various perspectives that often countered or added to mine. An example of this that I fondly remember was our discussion during Oscar week, in which we talked about the

messages of some Best Picture nominees as well as how Hollywood could break down stigmas in regard to race and gender. The living-learning community also allowed me to establish a good group of friends that I probably wouldn't have been able to meet as easily if I had not been involved in the program.

I've had a plentiful amount of opportunities to contribute to my Scholars program. Field trips to both the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington D.C. were some of most fascinating trips I have been on as a student. Not only was I made aware to so much new knowledge, but I was able to tie that knowledge into concepts I previously learned about in class. I think Covid-19 definitely made contributing to the program more difficult, as we weren't able to meet in person. The ePortfolio, though, was a unique way to bring together different assignments and experiences we've had during our time in the Scholars program, demonstrating how we contributed.

The lessons I have learned from my experience in the Media, Self, and Society Scholars program will be utilized in my future, both academically and routinely. I am more aware of the power the media holds over users, as well as the darker subtleties that many people don't even see. I am currently majoring in journalism but plan to embark on a career in business. Both of which will require me to know about media and utilize media.