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Media plays an important role in both my personal life and greater society. I view the main purposes of media as sharing information quickly, gatekeeping information, connecting people, and promoting instant communication. For me, media serves as a connector and information source for news and sports. My time as a Media Scholars student has increased my understanding of media’s role. I am more aware of media’s greater impact media on society and the various roles it plays. While media is often viewed negatively, I believe that most people with this perception lack the true depth and understanding of media. Without media, our world would not function the way it does today.

As a college student, I witness how media content can present harm through instant information sharing on social media. Although this is social media’s key benefit, it also presents challenges such as mass and quick spread of false information. On platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, or Twitter, I have encountered people consuming false information and then sharing what they believe to be “true” with others. While a post containing false information might eventually get flagged or removed, thousands of people will have instantly consumed those false claims before that occurs. It is then up to users to further fact check that information. However, most people do not and instead end up sharing that false information. This became evident in the rise of COVID-19. During a time of constant new and developing information about the unknown, users rapidly consumed and distributed content without fact checking. This demonstrates how mass information sharing can have negative effects.

While the information sharing characteristic of social media can create harm, the freedom and ease of sharing and publishing information that media allows can prove helpful. Social platforms make it easy for anyone to share their message with the world. Within seconds, an individual can upload a video that could eventually reach millions of people globally. Media provides an outlet for self expression, which expands freedom of speech and press, allowing people to connect and collaborate. An abundance of content and information exists on these platforms, making it easy for users to connect with those who share similar backgrounds and interests. I personally experienced this benefit of media when my family and I shared photos and videos with each other virtually while we stayed home during the COVID-19 lockdown. Although we could not interact in person, we could share the same content across the globe. Via platforms such as WhatsApp, Zoom, and Instagram, my family could spend time together without actually being physically together. This ease of sharing information and instant communication brings the world together in a time of physical distancing and proves as an overall benefit of media.

I have personally experienced the ease of information sharing and freedom of speech that media provides, but in the same situations, I misunderstood the role of media in my life. Specifically, this occurred in my digestion of news coverage leading up to the 2020 election. Many claims made by President Trump were disputed by news outlets as “fake news”, which I observed in the polarized coverage across different news channels. I personally identify news channels as having their own agendas and enforcing their political beliefs to their viewers, so it was very hard to find non-biased news coverage of politics. There was only Democratic or Republican reporting, with very little unbiased opinions and neutral ground. This misunderstanding of the role media played during this time led to my confusion and mistrust in the media. Through my experience in Media Scholars, I learned new ways of approaching bias and seeking out truth. For example, I pay attention to when news outlets and social media flag content that could be false. I plan to use these skills in my future digestion of media content.

To combat such misunderstanding and confusion, I believe that it is important to be a critical consumer and producer of media, who understands the impacts that media has on society, thus using their knowledge of media’s greater impact to strengthen their consumption and production of media. Contrastingly, a passive consumer does not fully understand the content they consume, sharing and not caring about the content and media’s greater implications. I now view myself as a critical consumer and sometimes a critical producer of media. I mainly consume media, but whether I am consuming or producing media, I make sure that I critically think through the content without bias. I consider the impact that sharing both unoriginal and self-produced content might have on society at large. For example, when producing, I try to understand how the various audiences might perceive and react to the content, as well as whether or not it will positively impact my community. I actively practice critical consumption of media by fact checking news articles I read, as well as sourcing information from various media channels to ensure widespread consensus on the information. Critically consuming and/or producing media is important because the more critical people are about consuming and producing media, there more reliable media will be and the more truthful our society will be.

Being in the Scholars program has introduced me to people and concepts that have both confirmed and challenged my previous and current beliefs. Throughout my 3 semesters in the program, I have learned new information from course material and my peers. I enjoyed break out discussions and collaborating on assignments with my classmates, as I learned best from engaging conversation. One particular situation that caused me to examine and reflect on a belief or previous knowledge of mine was when the class topic was about manipulating videos and media content to look truthful and how to spot deep-fakes. After watching examples of deep-fakes, I questioned the content I previously consumed. Sometimes, the manipulation is so well done that it would take an expert to uncover the truth. I really enjoyed this topic because I now question the credibility of content I consume

My learning experience was significantly elevated by living in the same community as my fellow Media Scholars. Bonding with my classmates beyond the classroom allowed me to make new friends easily from the first days of the semester. As a result, being friends with my classmates improved the working and learning environment in classes. Living with my fellow Media Scholars allowed me to better collaborate with them on assignments and projects, which then led to genuine friendships. Some of my closest friends today were some of my first friends that I made as a result of living in Cumberland Hall and having class together. I always looked forward to walking over to the Cambridge Community Center with my entire floor and getting to see friends I hadn’t seen that often, and then getting dinner together after class.

I had many opportunities to be active and further contribute to my scholars community. One particular opportunity was service day. I believe this experience was a great way to get involved in the community, as well as an additional bonding experience beyond the classroom setting. I think a great idea would be one required service day for each semester, not just the sole service day at the start of the fall semester. I really enjoyed my service day as it was a fun and rewarding experience that I will greatly value and remember. Having more frequent, yet not mandatory, opportunities throughout the semesters to gather volunteers for different projects would increase active contributions by scholars students to the scholars community.

I have gained valuable skills and experience from being in the Media, Self, and Society Scholars program that will better serve me in the future. Various lessons about fact checking and doing further analysis and research beyond the media consumed is an important skill that can be applied to any scenario in the future. I have learned to be more vigilant and critical of information and data that I see, particularly if I come across it on social media. The more educated one is on a topic, the better they can speak about it and share that information with others. One of the most important skills that I learned throughout my time in Scholars is collaborating and working with others that have different or opposing viewpoints. Learning how to incorporate various perspectives into a project and discussing alternative solutions to issues in a group setting has served me well already beyond the classroom. I can now implement this important skill into my everyday life and it will be crucial to discussing and collaborating with others, especially in world that seems polarized and constantly changing every day. This skill will help me tackle the unknowns of the future and will help me better tackle challenges and issues that concern my community and myself.