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# Remotivating the Black Vote: The Effect of Low-Quality Information on Black Voters in the 2016 Presidential Election and How Librarians Can Intervene

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Andrew P. Jackson (Sekou Molefi Baako), Denyveta Davis, and Jason Kelly Alston

## ABSTRACT

In a phenomenon that was surprising to many, given the racially charged nature of the 2016 presidential election, black voter turnout was significantly lower than the previous two elections. Donald Trump's victory is attributable to many factors, one of which was the lower participation of black voters in several swing states. To a lesser extent, black support for third-party candidates also aided Trump's victory. The lower black turnout itself is attributable to several factors, but one factor specifically in the LIS realm was the prevalence of low-quality information and rhetoric and a susceptibility that some black voters had to this low-quality information and rhetoric. Librarians have a stake and a role in black voter participation. This article will present two specific tactics and other general methods for how librarians can better inform black voters and help motivate them to participate in the process.

It was one of the most LIS-relevant callouts of an athlete ever. While discussing San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick's decision not to vote in the 2016 presidential election, ESPN commentator Max Kellerman said that Kaepernick appeared to be "susceptible to low-quality information" (Russo 2016, "Stephen A. Smith Rants" at 5:54). Kellerman spoke about how Kaepernick, a biracial quarterback who identifies as African American and has used his platform to bring awareness to social justice issues affecting ethnic minorities, used rhetoric that basically equated presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Kellerman went on to say:

You have to make a choice. You have to weigh the evidence, weigh what's in front of you, and make a choice, even if the choice is suboptimal. Because if you're waiting for everything to be perfect, it's the enemy of the good. The perfect is the enemy of

the good. Just make the best choice you can. If it means incremental change, that's fine, whatever. . . . The Internet means we have a lot of information. But if you don't have the faculties, if you don't have the ability to process it and sift out what's good-quality information from low-quality information, you are susceptible to the kinds of conclusions that Colin Kaepernick has drawn. (Russo 2016, "Stephen A. Smith Rants" at 5:27–6:07)

Kellerman went on to use facts about the track records of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, and their political allies, to illustrate clear differences in their approaches to "the systematic oppression of black and brown people" (Russo 2016, "Stephen A. Smith Rants" at 6:18). Kellerman also used the term "idiotic" to describe Kaepernick's inference that the two opposing political camps are virtually identical.

Unfortunately, Kaepernick's intellectually lazy equivalence of all candidates emerging in our political system resounded with a contingent of the typically Democratic-leaning black voting bloc. And Kaepernick himself has some influence, whether merited or unmerited, on black conversations, as athletes and celebrities are at least thought to enjoy an amplified status as role models and public voices within the African American community compared with other cultures within America (May 2009). The results of Kaepernick's rhetoric, and other rhetoric polluting black discussions on social media and elsewhere during the 2016 presidential election, may have been at least partially responsible for a significant decrease in black voter turnout. There was an 11.4% reduction in black votes from 2012 to 2016 (Ellison 2016).

Much of the other rhetoric being spread throughout the black political discourse was also symptomatic of either low information or low-quality information. Virtually the same arguments and quotes were pervasive throughout social media conversations among black potential voters during the 2016 campaign season. One of the biggest attacks on Hillary Clinton from black voters during both the Democratic primaries and the general election was that Hillary Clinton's husband, former president Bill Clinton, was responsible for the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (Riddell 2016). Commonly referred to simply as the "1994 Crime Bill," this piece of legislation is often argued to have had a devastating effect on black communities and to have led to lopsided prosecution of black men (Frank 2016). Hillary Clinton's vocal support for the 1994 Crime Bill led many black voters to deem her unfit for a 2016 presidency and prompted many to ally with her only viable challenger in the primaries: Bernie Sanders.

However, allying with Sanders in the primary in an attempt to spite Hillary Clinton may have been a direct product of making political decisions while not being fully informed. Hillary Clinton offered vocal support to the 1994 Crime Bill, but she did not serve in the federal legislature at the time of its passage, and she never had an opportunity to vote on the legislation. Sanders, however, did vote for the Crime Bill as a member of the House of Representatives (Williams 2016). It is not possible to know why it was so trendy for so many social media commen-

tators to identify the Crime Bill as a deal breaker for Hillary Clinton but not for Bernie Sanders. But the possibility is very real that the legions of black “Bernie bros” who declared dedicated nonsupport for Hillary Clinton during and even after the primary just never bothered to learn of Sanders’s support for the Crime Bill. A better informed black electorate probably would not have used the Crime Bill as a justification to support Sanders, because his role in bringing about the Crime Bill was arguably tantamount to that of Hillary Clinton’s.

And though there were other examples of low-information rhetoric, one final piece of not-so-brilliant rhetoric to mention here came in the form of a popular meme. It pictured both presidential candidates and requested that the reader convince others to vote for Hillary Clinton without mentioning Trump.<sup>1</sup> Not merely a symptom of low information, this meme actually takes the odd tactic of begging for limited information. Two-party-system elections are elections in which people are to learn the most about their two options, weigh the candidates against each other, and make a determination based on the available information as to who is the better choice. Voting is relative, and any one candidate may appear outstanding compared with one opponent but inadequate compared with another. At no point should voters seek to make their voting decisions in a vacuum and assess one candidate with total disregard to what that candidate is up against. But this meme held a prominent place in the rounds of social media political discourse, and quite a few of those in the black electorate applauded its vapid sentiment as profound.

That black voter turnout sharply decreased during an election in which racially charged rhetoric was a recurring campaign theme is disconcerting. But if information gaps and low-quality information had a role in the drop-off in black voter turnout, then librarians have a role in restoring black voter turnout by bridging information gaps and combating low-quality information. Brainstorming must continue on how librarians can engage black voters, but here are two suggestions to push immediately:

1. Create and distribute sourced memes and other online materials countering pervasive low-information and low-quality-information rhetoric.
2. Partner with individuals and organizations who hold rapport in the black community to distribute information.

As odd and unprofessional as this sounds, librarians may need to swallow some of their professional pride and engage information consumers in the same manner that those spreading low-quality information do. In the present age, this may mean generating memes that present snapshot information and hook audiences, because many information consumers currently learn things through memes. However, memes produced by librarians should also have a source for the content listed in the meme and two additional elements: (a) a recognizable

1. “Convince me to vote for her . . . WITHOUT mentioning him! And . . . GO!” Sizzle, accessed May 1, 2017, <https://onsizzle.com/i/convince-me-to-vote-for-her-od-without-mentioning-him-1550154>.

stamp saying something to the effect of “librarian approved” and (b) verbiage encouraging readers to contact their local library for additional sources and more information. A contingent of practicing librarians, if not ALA itself, would do well to come up with a recognizable watermark or similar image that can be placed on librarian-generated memes to show that these memes have passed librarian vetting.

In addition, librarians can distribute these memes through social media channels and post them wherever low-quality information is being spread and entertained. This would require vigilance on the part of librarians, however, to be aware of what is being said and where it is appearing, so that countermemes can be shared in the same locations where problematic rhetoric and low-quality information appear. As an example, countering the aforementioned meme requesting that people provide reasons to vote for Hillary Clinton without mentioning Donald Trump could involve a series of memes sporting the title “Know them both, learn their differences,” wherein each meme in the series notes a distinct difference between the candidates on issues pertinent to black voters and provides a source for the difference.

Within the black community, credibility and rapport cannot possibly be understated. Partnerships and outreach, therefore, are going to be the modes by which librarians can escape the confines of library as place and reach the people where they are. However, the difficulty of community partnerships when trying to promote sound political information is that many who have a rapport with black voters will have a pointed political objective of their own. As such, many churches, civic organizations, and other groups that would often be enlisted for partnerships to reach black voters cannot always be relied on to give librarians a platform to promote quality information if that information is not tailored to their own agendas. A compromise, however, would be for librarians to request to partner with individuals and organizations who hold rapport in the black community to distribute information on, for example, voter registration, polling places, resources to aid voters in getting to the polls, voter ID laws, and misinformation about voting that is often targeted to the black community, such as whether people can vote in a particular state if they are convicted felons or have outstanding warrants. While the primary goal of the partnership will be to advance this information, librarians can also use the platform to share election LibGuides produced by university libraries and to refer voters to such helpful resources as [Ballotpedia.org](http://Ballotpedia.org). The key is not to package the partnership as a means to advance one candidate or another but rather to quell misinformation spreading through the black community, including by those who wish to obstruct black voting.

Librarians have an ever present role in engaging citizens for participation in American politics. Though written more than 30 years ago, the words of Joan Durrance (1984) still hold true today:

Recent studies in citizen participation have shown that it is often difficult for citizens to obtain the information necessary to influence the decisions made on public policy problems and issues, particularly at the local level. Yet at the same time, local, state

and federal agencies are mandated to include citizen opinion in decision making. Citizen opinion in mandated participation is most often sought too late to obtain anything but approval from ignorance or obnoxious opposition. Only informed citizens can be active participants in the decision-making process. If we assume that citizens have difficulty in obtaining some of the information they need to become informed citizens, and if we further assume that one of the mandates of the public library is to develop an informed citizenry, then the library needs to bear some responsibility for increasing citizen access to the public policy information that is difficult to obtain. (137)

### A Lesson Learned

To suppress free speech is a double wrong. It violates the rights of the hearer as well as those of the speaker.

—Frederick Douglass

If we use this election as a lesson learned, librarians inherit the responsibility of reminding our patrons that “All are welcome!” and reinforce to our diverse communities that their libraries are safe zones and our free services are here for their benefit. We must further develop our technology and design more innovative and creative programs and services to maximize our serviceability to meet patron needs. New approaches to community outreach must be designed to attract the unserved and underserved and to make technology and social media bridge the service gap using more nontraditional service ideas and innovative thinking to attract and serve millennials. Funding needs may be more uncertain these days; therefore, our level of advocacy must be increased for all libraries on behalf of our own preservation and to better serve our patrons and communities. Remember the ALA adage, “Libraries will get you through times of no money better than money will get you through times of no libraries.”

While activism is needed, librarians also must develop partnerships with community-based organizations and our elected officials to reenergize the purpose of the vote for those who found it unnecessary to participate this time. In addition, we must find ways to reach young prospective voters on the importance of making their voices heard at the polls through voter registration, but more importantly by casting their votes at the polls. Too many youths feel that their votes don’t count, so they refuse to participate in the elections. In this case, a “no” vote was actually a vote for Donald J. Trump, and according to postelection polls, more than 300,000 registered voters did not vote in this presidential election.

We have to impress on voters of all ages the significance and impact of the privilege to vote and the responsibility gained or lost when this opportunity is wasted. With this in mind, libraries as neutral zones must play a key informational role at election time. Libraries can host panel

discussions and candidate and critical issue forums, with all points of view presented, or host election process forums with question-and-answer sessions and dialogue for prospective and first-time voters.

We must also be mindful of the political generation gap. Members of the youngest generation have only known of the office of the president as held by an African American during their formative years, and their perspective is vastly different than that of their elders. Most of their elders never thought they would live to see an African American first family in their lifetime. With that in mind, it is important to share the history of the civil rights struggle and the resulting Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. This will put into perspective years of sacrifice and struggle that fostered changes in legislation. History reminds us that with each civil rights act since 1866 and voting rights act since 1898, the slow process of dismantling discriminatory state laws that disenfranchised citizens is endangered with voter suppression today, violating Americans's constitutional rights.

Registering to vote without taking a literary test, paying a poll tax, or meeting a grandfather clause to vote for a candidate of your choice without fear of reprisal is guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States. The Declaration of Independence reads in part, "all men are . . . endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Voter registration and casting a ballot for the candidate of choice is certainly every citizen's right to pursue life, liberty, and their own personal happiness.

In his 1936 poem "Let America Be America Again," Langston Hughes (1994b) wrote, "Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed— / Let it be that great land of love / Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme / That any man be crushed by one above." In his 1943 poem "Freedom's Plow," Hughes (1994a) continued that thought with these words: "America is a dream. / The poet says it was promises. / The people say it is promises—that will come true." With each passing year and especially with each presidential election, we look for and are hopeful that the American Dream will become more of a reality for all of our citizens. Yet the 2008 and 2012 elections produced 8 years of political division as a result of electing our first black president. The division following the recent presidential campaign is even deeper. No matter the results of an election, the people still hope the incoming president will represent all of America's citizens and that his or her administration, the Congress, and the Senate will successfully forge ways to work together for the benefit of the country and the world. Let this healing process begin soon and the will of the people be met.

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