SOCIAL MEDIA, THE INTERNET, AND POLITICAL PERCEPTIONS: CHANGING COMMUNICATIONS THROUGH THE LENS OF THE MEDIA DEPENDENCE THEORY

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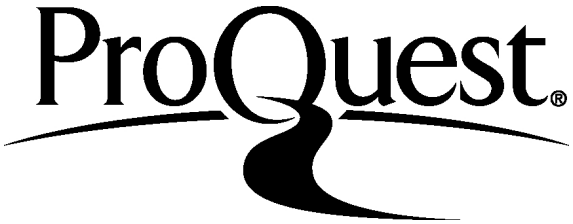

We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.

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Abstract

Access to information, news, and technology has created a large impact on how people communicate with each other and with the world. Such is the case with social media. It allows people to connect that otherwise would never have, like politicians and constituents. Facebook and Twitter feeds are riddled with news articles – some of questionable accuracy, and the politicians themselves promoting platforms. This research seeks to find out how these types of social media and alternative news sites affect voters using the media dependency theory by examining two, small focus groups of different ages. One was younger, and the other older. The media dependency theory essentially holds that consumers seek out information to gratify a need. In this case, a need to have political views reinforced. Using live coding, the groups were engaged in open discussion and the findings recorded using note taking. Once interpreted, the research found that the younger group, especially, sought out news media sources that reinforced their political leanings and gratified that need.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1

Social Media and Political Perceptions

For over thirty years the media systems dependency theory has been used to describe how media influences consumers in a cognitive and behavioral way (Riffe, Lacy, and Varouhakis, 2008, p. 1). Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur developed this theory in 1976 (communicationtheory.org). It turned the idea of media influence on its head by considering the audience an interactive part of the communication process. It posited an internal link between media, the audience, and a larger social system that fulfilled a need for information that could not be fulfilled by face to face communication (communicationtheory.org).

While this theory does excellent work at explaining the relationship between media and individuals at a micro and macro level, it could not be prepared for the type of growth the Internet would bring to media. Riffe, et al cite Ball-Rokeach in 1998 argued that "The Internet thus intrudes on traditional relations by being integrated into an expanded media system that may expand the reach of understanding, orientation, and play goals that individuals, groups, and organizations may attain through media dependency relations" (2008, p. 2). Nearly twenty years have passed since those words were written, though, and the dependency of the average American on media and information is likely greater than could have ever been predicted –over sixty percent of adults aged 18-49 report using the Internet as a means of gathering political information (Dimitrova & Bystrom, 2015, p. 2).

Importance of Study

While the evolution of technology means information is available in a broader sense than at any time in history, social media and alternative news sites or blogs are changing the landscape of traditional communication. Emily K. Vraga (2011) describes it as "repurposing

mainstream news content…where readers manage multiple sources of information with a single posting" (p. 795). This new form of communication is largely unstudied compared to forms of media that have been around for decades, and create added complexity due to their ability to be interactive and global. This research is important because the use of the internet, social media, and blogging is activity that has taken news and information dissemination by storm in the last decade, and helps to better understand how the media dependency theory explains the way these forms of media shape the current political landscape.

Political views are an arena of information that could be affected by media. News media has followed political campaigning for years, and with the advent of smart phones and the internet, anybody else can post information online as well. From a political campaign standpoint, it is important for those organizing them to understand how people find, receive, and process information about politics. This study reveals how people use social media and the internet to learn and discuss politics with other people.

Statement of the Problem

Given the complex social media landscape and the various ways audiences engage with it, how does one make sure the right message comes across? This is a critical issue for politicians, specifically those participating in the current 2016 presidential election. This thesis seeks to examine, through focus groups, how people in two different age groups use media and how their perceptions of politicians are formed.

Definitions of Terms Used

Blog: regularly updated webpage run by an individual or small group.

Constituent: Voting member of a community or organization.

Facebook: Facebook is a social networking site used globally. Users can share personal, professional, and other identifying information and communicate with others.

Media: main means of mass communication.

Media Dependence Theory: theory developed by Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin Defleur that posits an individual will become more dependent on media if that medium satisfies a need for him/her.

Politician: Any person running for political office.

Propaganda Theory: a model of communication by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky focusing on what they say is an inequality of wealth and power and its effects on media.

Social media: websites and applications that allow users to create and share content.

Twitter: Twitter is an online social media platform utilizing 140 character messages called "tweets."

Organization of Remaining Chapters

The remainder of this thesis will be organized in the following way: First, there is a review of the literature that includes philosophical assumptions, theoretical framework, literature already existing on the topic, rationale, and research questions. Chapter three includes the scope, methodology, and focus of the research. Following that is the data analysis portion along with validity, reliability, and ethical considerations taken before conducting the research. Chapter 4 includes the actual research introduction, study results, and discussion. Chapter 5 summarizes the

study with conclusions, limitations of research, and suggestions on further recommendations along with concluding thoughts.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Hashtags, posts, tweets, and likes are all terms that have taken on new meaning in the last ten years. With the rise of social media and continued development of the Internet, mass communication has evolved at warp speed. This warp-speed development can possibly be seen most in the area of politics and political participation. As noted by Dimitrova and Bystrom (2015) a Pew research poll concluded in 2012 that twenty-five percent of Americans gained political information via the Internet, which is nearly doubled from 2004 (p. 2). It is clear, then, that determining how social media influences voters and shapes candidate image is an area of relevance when considering how to understand political communication. The following is a brief summary of the research and literature found in this area.

Philosophical and Ethical Assumptions

Cecile Paris, et al., (2013) cite a 2011 Pew Research study that found 65% of Americans use social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. Ethically, this has caused an information crisis within the government and media; two groups forced to adapt to the changing technological tide. Issues of information management, confidentiality, and other legal issues that occur when these types of outlets attempt to create a meaningful presence online (p. 302). Allegiance to a certain politician, political party, or political movement can be explained by philosophical underpinnings that align to deeply held beliefs and thoughts. Joseph Schumpeter suggests that the political exchange is one that can be analogous to economics where votes equate to profits and governmental policies are goods

and services (Ian Shapiro, 2003, p. 202). Ethically, then, the media takes on some amount of responsibility to ensure the exchange of politics and news is done fairly.

On one hand it could be said that every citizen has a responsibility to examine media sources and confirm their authenticity. Several studies cited below examined partisan political blogs and found that much of their content came from traditional news sources and was then positioned and added to in order to create a brand new source that does contain truth, but is also edited to be viewed in the political lens of the particular organization or blogger (Paris, et al., p. 795). Ethically, this is kind of "duping" the average citizen that may assume everything he or she sees on the internet is true.

Immanuel Kant sought to establish the "rights of man," which sets forth a moral foundation for political equality (Strauss and Cropsey 1987 p. 585). In short, Kant believes that each person ought to be free to believe and know as much information as possible regarding politics and moral groundings. Kant would likely feel that the media influence on politics and how it affects political perceptions are linked intrinsically to the extent to which man has access. The issue perhaps lies in the amount of access available in today's society. Due to such large increases in technology, Kant would be flabbergasted at the ability to exercise the "rights of man" that exist in today's society. The ability to post a will on social media and online without guidelines is something that would then call for an ethical community (p. 591) to ensure equality among the populace.

Review of Communication Theory

Kenneth Fleming (2014) maintains that in an ever-evolving world of communication technology, the media dependency model remains useful because the internet allows individuals to "make conscious choices about what they see and read in the media" (p. 25). While the same

could be said for traditional media, like newspapers, the internet allows for even further personalization of news outlets thanks to search engines and internet tracking. That is to say that the media dependency theory views consumption as being far more determined by social forces. So, if Joe Citizen "likes" a blog post that has extreme views, it could very well pop up on a friend's social media feed and therefore shapes the news that people receive.

At the foundation of the media dependency theory is the propaganda model. Developed by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, Andrew Kennis (2009) sought to further investigate how the propaganda model, the media dependency theory, and the historical contexts of each work together to form what modern news media is today. This will be discussed further in the literature review, but the propaganda model focuses on two groups of people that need to be "won." Those people tend to be educated, more or less articulate, and they're the ones Chomsky and Herman argue need to provide consent to be convinced, even though they may only comprise twenty percent of the population (p. 3). It is perhaps too strong an assertion as it gives extremely inordinate power to the upper class of society, but it is serves a point about how media may be working to further opinions and biases among the masses. Herman and Chomsky (2002) maintain that the propaganda model "focuses on inequality of wealth and power and its multilevel effects on mass-media interests and choices. It traces the routes by which money and power are able to filter out the news…" (p. 2).

It makes sense, then, for the media dependency theory to fall directly in line. Stanley J. Baran and Dennis K. Davis (2003) define the media dependency theory as an idea that "the more a person depends on having needs gratified by media use, the more important the media's role will be in the person's life and, therefore, the more influence those media will have" (p. 320). By building on the propaganda model of Herman and Chomsky, Melvin DeFleur and Sandra Ball-

Rokeach name four assertions of this model. First, the "basis of media influence lies in the relationship between the larger social system…and audience relationship to that system" (Baran & Davis 2003, p. 320). The media acts in such a way that it fulfills a need or want from the audience. Second, an audience uses media information to whatever degree it is necessary to them (p. 320). For example, in the current, 2016 election, supporters of Donald Trump may have a need for rhetoric that is directly converse to Obama's in past elections and therefore he garners their support. Third, the industrialization of America has meant that we are becoming more dependent on media for information on how to understand the world, knowing how to act, and for entertainment (p. 320). Sensemaking is a vital component of how Americans are affected by the dependency theory. As noted by Stuart Hall, sensemaking is done when texts are read by preferred reading, or reading that reinforces the status quo; negotiated meaning, in which an individual will interpret information to fit his or her status quo; or oppositional decoding, which Jesus Martin-Barbero explains as the ability to read information in opposition to their beliefs and not be duped" (Baran & Davis, 2003, p. 270). Fourth, and final, the "greater the need and consequently the stronger the dependency…the greater the likelihood" (p. 321). That is, the more active an audience is with media, the more likely they are to be dependent on it.

Literature Review

2008 was the first year that a presidential election was held in an America with Facebook. Still a relative new kid on the block, Facebook was popular among college students and young adults. Historically speaking, political participation among young people is low, with the United Nations citing formal, institutional politics being the least participated in (United Nations, 2013). Social media, however, are being used to allow young people to contribute politically in ways

never before seen. These are much more informal, but nonetheless are new forms of political expression that should be considered and noted for their importance (Gil de Zuniga, 2014, p. 612).

Kaye (2013) examined the 2008 election also using the media dependency theory. Her research supports the idea that Barack Obama largely won his campaign with the use of social media. Perhaps it could be more accurately asserted, however, that John McCain's campaign suffered significantly at their decreased social media use in comparison to Obama's campaign—even garnering himself the nickname of "analog candidate" (p. 294). Her research relies on media dependency at a micro level. Kaye holds that "individuals rely on media sources to learn about the social, cultural, and political worlds and to understand their own beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes" (p. 296). This is exceedingly important to how social media influences voters because individuals seek out the news from a smartphone and not a television and they shape the content they see based on their browsing. They depend, then, on the media they want to see and receive messages that align with their beliefs.

Indeed, Michael Chan and Francis L.F. Lee (2014) highlight an important debate that has unfurled over the last decade: is a high-choice media environment good for a democratic country? (p. 301). The high volume of media outlets available today involve what they refer to as a "fragmented media." This is to say that people have the ability to "consume media content that is congruent with their own political beliefs and ideologies" (p. 301). Their study shows that following only partisan news sources can both help and hurt a campaign by energizing a populous to support a specific party or candidate with greater gusto or polarizing others by holding extreme views. Polarization is particularly worrying as it hinders a candidate or party's ability to create common ground to rally around. (p. 302).

The effect that this type of dependency has on political campaigns continues to be seen as candidates continue to become more technologically savvy and communicate with potential voters in Facebook posts or 140-character "tweets" on Twitter (Landreville, 2015). Landreville's research focused on how presidential debates have changed in recent years, particularly in light of audience participation via social media and other internet platforms like live polling. CNN was able to provide onscreen visuals of focus group results in real time as the debate was happening, even, creating access to poll data never before seen (p. 147). It could also be hypothesized that the more active an audience is with media, the more likely they are to be dependent on it. Diana C. Mutz (2015) wrote the book *In-Your-Face Politics: The consequences of uncivil media* and studied how television news reports have led to an increase in negative feelings about politics among the general public (p. 154). Certainly, printed words and images are processed differently, as "differences in the processing of pictures and words emanate from the physical similarity of pictures, but not words, to the referents" (p. 155).

Interestingly, research in 2014 by Sveningsson cites certain groups of people as adhering to two "styles of engagement." (p. 2) These groups are either dutiful citizens or actualizing citizens. In short, dutiful citizens participate in politics because they view it as an intrinsic, moral part of citizenship while actualized citizens are more engaged and participate in direct forms of political action (p. 2). These engaged citizens tend to be younger, and Sveningsson cites Bennet's research in 2008 that these types of citizens are more likely to connect in informal ways and interactive technology, like social media (p. 2). Her research focused on the youth of Sweden and concluded that many do not see social media as a valid platform from which to receive political information due to a risk of conflict (p. 6,) a risk of misunderstanding since

one's vocal tone, gestures, or expressions cannot be "read" (p. 8,) and a risk of deception, since "one can never be certain of the degree of truth behind what is written and posted online" (p. 9).

This information would suggest that perhaps the issue is not with young people, but instead the generations that came of age without the Internet. This study was also done of university students, so it could be inferred that these students were perhaps already educated on the downfalls of finding news and reputable sources on the Internet. Finally, the study was conducted in Sweden. The culture of Sweden may automatically adjust for skepticism that Americans simply do not seem to have. Dmitriy Poznyak, Bart Meuleman, Koen Abts, and George F. Bishop (2014) cite that American trustworthiness in government operations has reduced in past years, but remains consistent with lack of government trust during other moments of crisis, such as the Vietnam War (p. 749).

A similar study by Saldana, et al., in 2015 echoed the sentiments of the Sveningsson research. The results of this research was done by analyzing a series of surveys and concluded that in the United States, the Internet has simply allowed for greater political participation due to ease of use. That is, "online political participation does not take away from more traditional forms, but provides an outlet to those who may not engage in more boots-on-the-ground activies" (p. 4). They also cite that two –thirds of social media users, which is over 70% of U.S. adults, have participated at some level in online political activities. This activity could range from simply "following" a candidate or "liking" a page to learn information or it could be as involved as campaigning for a candidate and using social media as a platform for significant discussion (p. 5). While this type of online participation can be good, and certainly helps with finding others of like mind and opinion (Saldana, 2015, p. 5), this research only highlights how

accessible the Internet can be for any person wishing to express a political opinion and the likelihood of others' opinions being shaped by political posts on social media.

This is good news for young people, a group seen as being more politically active in recent elections. In 2012 Paul Taylor, Executive Vice President for the Pew Research Center, said in 2008 there was a 34 percentage point difference in how 18-to-29-year-olds voted and how those aged 65 and up voted; and in 1998 there was no difference. So, the Obama administration fired up this cohort of youth in ways America hadn't seen since 18-year-olds were given the right to vote in 1972 (Benedict-Nelson, 2012). Indeed, Real Clear Politics confirms that the youth vote made a difference in the major political state of Iowa in 1972, and in 2008 (Cannon, 2011). This tells politicians that the information they put on social media and information that may be written about them on alternative or heavily partisan news sites do have an impact on voters, but perhaps mostly on those under the age of 30. However, with political participation among this group increasing as Pew states it is, this cannot be discounted and is important information for any political campaign.

Technology Usage and Dependency

While the connection between involvement and dependence is not challenging to comprehend, it is important to reflect on how this knowledge is propagated by the political communication experts tasked with spearheading political campaigns. Emily Vraga, Stephanie Edgerly, Bryan M. Wang, and Dhavan V. Shah (2011) examined political blogs through the lens of those less likely to use sensemaking skills and process all forms of communication through a digital framework as factual news (p. 796). These individuals lack the decoding skills needed to differentiate between actual news and campaign rhetoric, but this allows political candidates to capitalize on a new-found need that citizen may have for a certain type of news. More and more,

these political blogs are shared on social media by networks of acquaintances and friends. Technology "cookies" on the internet track usage, search engine optimization words, and other keywords to automatically and without consent suggest more articles that may be of questionable accuracy. This arguably reinforces the dependence on media, as the individual now does not even have to put in effort to receive information that fills a particular need. The review of past literature and study on this topic in addition to data within this study help provide insight into how the dependence on certain types of social media and blogs can be harmful to politicians and perhaps society as a whole.

Rationale

This research is significant because it shows how social media has impacted the political landscape in a relative short number of years. The media dependency theory is one that has stood the test of time as media has advanced and evolved and provides a quality framework for explaining the research on the topic. Saldana, et al., (2015) explain that "digital news audiences increased by 23% in 2013, while print circulation has continued to decline" (p. 2). As the United States approaches an election year, understanding how social media can be used in political campaigns is invaluable when deciding an opinion on a candidate. The media dependency theory, though decades old, remains useful when examining a relatively new media source like social media (Fleming, 2014).

The purpose of this research is to examine how social media use effects voters' perceptions of political candidates during campaigns using the media dependency theory. As the research suggests, the Internet is full of information of questionable accuracy (Sveningsson, 2014, p. 9.) Media dependency holds that individuals are attracted to information they do not receive face-to-face; and in the case of the Internet and social media, this type of written

information is available to the masses. Whatever a person's particular leaning, there is likely a partisan website, blog, or social media page to "like" or follow. From there, the information source continues to churn out articles that further cement an opinion and ideas about an issue or candidate.

Additionally, regular citizens have far more access to politicians than in previous elections thanks to social media outlets like Twitter. CNN and other media outlets partner with video sites like YouTube, allowing voters to submit debate questions and otherwise comment on how candidates' responses are received. For this reason, the 2012 election was coined the "Twitter election" due to the media's near constant use of the platform to disseminate information and collect data (Landreville, et al., 2015, p. 147). As the public continues to depend on the media to shape their beliefs, it is important to examine how the newest media sources are shaping political perceptions and how voters respond to media. The purpose of this research, then, is to study how social media and the proliferation of blogs and other opinion sites do or do not effect voters during a presidential election.

Research Question

RQ: How does the media dependency theory explain how social media and alternative news sites affect voters?

Baran & Davis noted in 2003 that, the "greater the need and consequently the stronger the dependency…the greater the likelihood" (p. 321). This research seeks to explain the link between social media, a type of medium that combines printed words in blogs, Facebook/Twitter posts, and adds in video commentaries or news report clips.

Negativity among politicians and mudslinging is not a new concept, but perhaps the access is what social media has allowed to increase the most. The freedom of the Internet

provides ample room for every voice to be heard and it is important to understand how this creates further dependence on media to fill a need for every political ideology.

Chapter 3: Scope and Methodology

Focus & Scope

This study focused on gaining more information about how people use various news sources to gain information about politics through firsthand, focus group style interviews. This work focuses on how individuals receive political information through the Internet and social media. The goal was to find out how political websites, blogs, and social media did/did not affect their perceptions of political candidates and their campaigns.

Data will be collected for the purpose of this research using focus groups. Neumann (2011) suggests focus groups are particularly useful for research in which discussion is needed to be free and open in order to gain experiential data (p. 459). In general, this research is informal and allows participants, if chosen carefully, to provide insight relevant to present research and knowledge in a particular field (p. 460). The purpose of this research, then, is to study how social media and the proliferation of blogs and other opinion sites do or do not effect voters during a presidential election.

The focus groups were divided into two groups; one younger and one older. The segregation due to age is so participants felt more comfortable among peers and be more likely to speak openly. Group A consisted of people aged 18-35 and Group B consisted of people aged 35-50. Collecting as much data as possible through this discussion is key for focus groups to be considered valid data, and therefore careful selection of participants was vital. Focus group participants were solicited via social media and through personally asking participants at Drury University. Both sexes were solicited, and effort was made to have a good mix of both male and

female contributors. Richard Kruger and Mary Anne Casey (2009) suggest focus groups be smaller to facilitate discussion and similar, as the homogeneity of participants would allow for open communication (2009, p. 2).

Data collected was compared and contrasted against studies already conducted in the field of political communication and media dependency. The information extracted from these focus groups will add to the existing bodies of information to further enhance the pool of responses and information on human behavior and opinions as it pertains to media and political perceptions.

Methodology

Focus groups require intensive interviewing of a group of people and then analyzing their responses. This type of qualitative research does not, then, require a meticulous instrument where a statistical outcome is expected. Human behavior is fluid and exceptionally individualized and the opinions gathered on media dependency in the framework of the 2016 American Presidential election will be reported as such and not set on a numerical plane. Focus groups are traditionally conducted with groups that do not know each other, however these groups are people on the same college campus, either as students or faculty/staff. No participants considered themselves close friends beyond an educational or work setting, so disclosure on discussion is not of significant concern (Kruger & Casey, p. 5).

Simply put, focus groups work because it promotes the participants to self-disclose in a safe and comfortable environment (Kruger & Casey). It is particularly useful for this research because it allows participants to give more insight into their behavior than say, just checking a box on a survey. Instead of seeing that a person is or is not impacted by political news and advertisements on social media, the focus group allows for a deeper understanding of *why*

that person is or is not impacted. This is crucial when studying human behavior. The purpose of this research, then, is to study how social media and the proliferation of blogs and other opinion sites do or do not effect voters during a presidential election.

The data collected was analyzed by reading transcribed responses and using that evidence to provide support or discredit the research hypothesis.

Data analysis

Data was collected and analyzed using live coding methods due to time constraints and size of study.

Limitations

A limitation of focus groups is that all details are rarely reported because the data is largely anecdotal; for this reason the research for this study will be somewhat limited (Neumann, 2011, p. 460). The data collected during these focus group interviews will be compared against other quantitative survey data pertinent to social media and politics to provide a wider breadth of information related to the research question posed in this study (Neumann, 2011, p. 460).

Validity and Reliability

Focus group research will provide insight into the behaviors of people as it pertains to the use of the internet for political information. This research will measure their participation, their likelihood for future use of the internet and social media for political information, and will therefore provide valid data on how the two age groups are both similar and different in their use of the internet and social media. . Due to focus groups being focused on human behavior and opinion, care will be taken to ensure that the answers given are carefully recorded so that the data collected is reliable and can be added to current research. Reliability in research requires the method is dependable, stable, and consistent (Rubin, et al., pp. 202). While human behavior and

opinion may yield different results if the study were to be repeated, the focus group method of collecting information remains dependable provided proper procedures are followed and that the study is conducted ethically.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical goal of this study is to be responsible to the participants for the secure, confidential keeping of their information. Their safety is of paramount importance and the researcher bears the responsibility of ensuring the security of their trust and data. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and participants may leave at any time. Appendix B shows a copy of the consent form signed by all participants that adheres to Institutional Review Board guidelines and parameters set by Gonzaga University. Participants all engaged and provided consent to be studied and their privacy protection. All information was kept confidential and any quotes or information taken from the focus group does not identify the participant.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis and Findings

Summary:

Author held two focus groups in April 2016 involving different groups of people to collect information on political perceptions and media. These groups were assembled as part of research for a graduate thesis and were solicited from Drury University. Data was collected via note taking and permission to quote individual responses was gained by signed informed consent forms. Data was analyzed using live coding methods. This researched aimed to discover what, if

any, difference age made in how individuals learned about politics and more specifically how social media was used in politics.

Introduction:

Focus Group A consisted of five adults aged thirty and above on April 13, 2016. The median age of group A was 40.8 years. Three participants were female, and two were male. All participants had a Facebook account and three could be considered "ground level" account holders; that is, they had maintained Facebook accounts since the platform's proliferation among college campuses in 2004.

Group B consisted of four college seniors. The informants were all 22 years old and the group was divided evenly, two male and two female participants. All participants reported being active on at least one social media site and shared that they all held Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Group A

Identification	Race	Age	Gender	Occupation
1A	White	56	Female	Director of Information Systems
2A	White	30	Female	Manager, Corporate &

				Foundation Relations
3A	White	30	Male	Director of Development
4A	White	30	Male	Development Officer/Fundraiser
5A	White	57	Female	Manager, Gift Stewardship

Group B

Identification	Race	Age	Gender	Occupation
1B	White	22	Male	Student
2B	White	22	Female	Student
3B	African-American	22	Male	Student
4B	White	22	Female	Student

A full copy of focus group questions can be found in Appendix A and the Informed Consent Form in Appendix B. Key topics explored in the findings below were focused on political interest, primary news source and media bias, political advertising, and the role of politicians on social media.

Results of Study

Political Interest

The amount of political interest varied among the groups. Among Group A, the males tended to self-identify as extremely interested in politics while the females stated that they were moderately interested. 5A responded that she had become more interested as she had grown older, and 1A agreed. Group B did not identify as particularly interested in politics, but all remarked a concern for the role politics plays in current events, agreeing that they didn't necessarily follow all political happenings but they absolutely cared about how it impacted the world. 4B felt that her age and status as a college student made it more difficult for her to be involved in politics due to being away from her permanent address. She said "it is hard as a college student to vote absentee…it seems that there is not much education on how to vote absentee and people tend to wonder if their vote still counts." Every participant from Group A actively voted in the current presidential primary and have been loyal voters in the past, as well.

Primary news source & media bias

Though only eight years separated some participants (22 years old and 30 years old,) the method of learning about news showed a clear demarcation. Every participant in Group B cited the Internet as their primary news source. More specifically, the informants explored sites like Buzzfeed, which presents news with several infographics intermixed as well as fairly ample use of profanity to report on current events. 2B shared that she sought sites like Tumblr, which operate as a sort of real time discussion forum on news reports.

Both respondents over the age of fifty years reported watching a lot of news on television, but none of the participants in Group B could even recall the last time they turned on

a cable news network. In fact, 2B did not own a television and the others admitted to only using their televisions to watch sitcoms or to stream web based services like Netflix. This was the starkest difference among the focus groups. This is not to say that Group A gathered no information from social media, just that they did not gather the majority of it from there. 2A said that she did not give much clout to social media articles because she did not always know the authenticity or if it was factual. This type of hesitance in believing what is on the Internet was only found in the older group. Group B named social media in the top two ways of obtaining information (the other being the Internet in general) and gave the articles they read there enormous credibility.

The focus group data is clear in reporting that media bias and the ways that news gets reported could be contributing to a continued divisive political climate in America; every respondent felt that there was definite animosity between political parties. What is interesting is that the younger group did not take into consideration the notion that the political candidate they support could be lying, because they felt that they knew the individual on a personal level thanks to social media. A Group B respondent even said "Bernie Sanders hasn't changed his position, and you can see that through all that he posts. He is genuinely a good person." While Sanders may indeed be a moral and trustworthy individual, it was interesting to note that one's performance on social media led to that belief.

In general, both groups felt that the media was biased toward either right or left-wing politics and cited various podcasts like the Young Turks that tend to elaborate on that bias. Group A felt that right-or-left wing bias was dependent on network. For instance, 3A and 4A, the two male informants in the focus group, identify themselves as Democrat and Republican respectively. With the exception of sites that simply report polling numbers and statistics, like

Real Clear Politics, 3A said he definitely knew where to go in order to find news that leans Democratic. 4A agreed, saying that if he wanted Republican commentary he would watch a debate on Fox News. Regarding media bias, the older focus group tended to seek out news media that was further from their typical belief system just to hear what was being said whereas a respondent 2B stated that she almost exclusively followed Tumblr because "every person responding is a Bernie (Sanders) supporter, so I know they're all going to be writing things I agree with."

The marked lack of cynicism that the younger focus group held was in contrast to Group A. Perhaps age plays a role, but Group A was in general distrusting of most things found on alternative news sites and primarily followed mainstream media for news. And social media played a role in how some members of Group A communicated with others about politics, but none engaged politicians during live-tweeting debates the way the younger crowd did. Nobody from Group B reported intentionally seeking out messages that went contrary to their beliefs. 3B echoed the earlier sentiments of 2B and said he just checked out news sites, blogs, or alternative media sites that he knew would support his beliefs. This type of reinforcing of political belief and orientation shows that these students have a need to receive only the type of information that satisfies them.

Political advertising

As a whole, both groups despise political advertising but Group A was the only one that had actually seen any advertisements because Group B tends to not watch television. Or, if they do, the programs are recorded and commercials can be passed through. Informant 4A felt like it was a different shift in political advertising during this presidential election because so many are

rallying around negative advertising for Donald Trump or around Hillary Clinton's email scandal and because social media has sort of taken over.

Group A felt like most political advertising they had seen was in the form of memes on social media or commercials produced for sharing on social media. This research was done in April, so television advertising for candidates is bound to increase, but at the time of the research neither group had seen very much in the way of television advertising. Group B said the negative things that had seen about politicians had to do with clips on social media, as well. Informant 5A and 2B both cited a short video that compiled negative comments made by Donald Trump in regards to women, while others also recalled seeing several negative memes or videos regarding emails and compromising confidential information by Hillary Clinton. What was most interesting about the two groups was that Group A cited social media political advertising, but Group B really did not. Informant 3B said he looked to social media because yes, there is political advertising, but that he "feels like on social media, anyone can participate. The inclusivity of it makes me happy, and like those without a ton of money can have a seat at the table. So you're free to advertise whatever candidate you want and get your voice heard."

Role of politicians on social media

Both groups turn to social media to find much of their news, and all follow at least a one political candidate on social media. However, only Group B stated that a candidate's social media presence was important to them. Group A felt that politicians have their place on social media, but it was more to educate and inform. That is to say that they felt politicians should be using their social media platforms as a way to promote their plans, perhaps as a way to distribute their information on how they would change healthcare, or balance a federal budget. Informant 4A said, however, that their role needed to shift from candidate to elected. "As a candidate, their

role is to win. However they can promote themselves, do it. Once they're elected, the role is to educate the masses and keep them updated on what is happening." Informant 1A and 5A want politicians to use social media as a way to really learn what constituents want, and feel that if utilized properly it could be a way to eliminate an "ivory tower" sort of feel that some political figures portray.

This was in contrast to Group B as a whole felt that a politician that was not on social media would not be well known or liked because they were not sure how to otherwise find out a candidate's thoughts on a current event. 2B felt he saw more of Donald Trump's character with his insensitive tweets about the Brussels terrorist attack, and the focus group agreed. He said his tweet just talked about how cities that had been attacked recently used to be "great and beautiful" and that the US needs to be careful. "People died. Not once did he give condolences, just made it more about politics than the actual tragedy that happened." The idea of a candidate's social media presence being so tied to one's identity and personality is by far a phenomenon not found among the older focus group.

If anything, Group A does not put as much stock into social media presence and news because "any opinion is pushed further there. It's all about who shouts the loudest." Group A all agreed, and informant 3A said he was surprised at how seemingly minute comments from any candidate could be construed and publicized on social media to egg on the opposition and watch it all happen almost in real time. While Group A may not solely rely on social media, they agreed that it is important for the younger generation. 4A recalls the Obama campaign and how much more involved the younger vote was due to his social media presence and John McCain's lack of social media use. 1A and 3A agreed, stating that the use of social media, especially by Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, really seemed to prop up a constituency base.

Both groups agreed that the biased and partisan nature of social media led to a cementing of thoughts early on about political candidates. Group A cited the 24 hours news phenomenon as "contributing to crazy" because at any time of the day a person could find a news source somewhere that was giving information concurrent with their beliefs. Indeed, the younger group fully acknowledged that they almost exclusively seek out news sources they know will be offering information that cements their current political stance. The older focus group seemed to be more open to the idea that they would listen to other views, sometimes even for fun. 4A said he may listen to Glenn Beck talk radio on his commute into work, even if he does not fully agree with everything he says.

Discussion

It does not take academic research to know that media use is extremely prevalent in today's society. From 24 hour news stations to the internet, there is no shortage of sources to gain and share information. What has perhaps changed the most with the advancement of technology, is the access the average citizen has to communicate directly with politicians as well as other people about current events and political issues facing the nation. The information gathered from these focus groups is useful because it shows a fairly significant dichotomy between age groups and how they perceive politicians. The theme of Group B's focus group discussion seemed to center around consumption of media and information that was easily digestible. That is the appeal of Buzzfeed and the like; the information is given in a sentence or two and frequently includes a funny picture or other graphic, then gives another sentence or two.

This type of instant and no holds barred access to political candidates and their goings on is clearly important for the millennial generation, and they expect the information to literally be at their fingertips via smartphones, apps, and podcast updates. This is a contrast to those aged

thirty and up. This group still watches the news and, while they do gather a lot of information online, they don't expect it to connect them to politicians the same way the other group does. In fact, the older focus group never mentioned the idea of being connected to politicians. Notations made during the younger one mention social media as a reflection of a politician's character and personality a minimum of three times.

Being in the public eye at all times thanks to the amount of resources available today has its challenges. One of those is very likely the different spins each media outlet can put on even the most innocent of soundbites. Among the groups, all agreed that media outlets promote what they want to promote and that there is a place for every view online because the internet is free and easily accessible.

Ball-Rokeach theorized that people sought out media that filled a void; something they didn't get face to face. Which is fair, since when asked with whom they typically discussed politics, all respondents said either "nobody" or "a spouse." So, in 1976 the media that was sought out was usually in the form of paper, or radio, and to some extent television broadcasts; the Internet has taken over that role for those participating in the two focus groups. This leads to a clear response in support of both the theoretical framework of this research and the research question.

Baran and Davis (2003) as stated in Chapter 2 believe that the more a person depends on having needs gratified by media, the more they use, and the more that media will influence them (p. 320). In this case, the needs gratified are those of political orientation. Group B intentionally seeks out media sources that they already know they will agree with. Any negative sentiments toward a particular candidate will be readily reinforced, while the candidate they support will be praised. The research, especially among Focus Group B, supports the media dependence theory.

Perhaps it is due to age, but members of Group B were the only ones to report only following certain sites due to the knowledge of the type of political information and opinions they would find there. Group A certainly had media preferences, but, in the words of informant 3A "I've seen how the sausage is made, so I don't necessarily believe either side when it comes to what I see in the media."

The data collected as part of this focus groups answers the research question of "how does the media dependency theory explain how social media and alternative news sites affect voters" by providing clear insight into how people are using media and to what end they rely on media. Since the data supports the theory that individuals seek out certain types of media that suits their preferential needs, it is clear then that social media and news sites outside of mainstream news outlets are key forms of getting information.

The level with which voters seek out media consistent with their beliefs is decidedly higher with the younger focus group. That informants from Group B spoke of political candidates in such a way that seemed as though they knew them personally, and felt that they could adequately judge whether one was "good" or "bad" due to what they posted gives the voters a sense of rapport with a candidate. Instead of simply being these talking heads, they are instead interacting directly with the candidate via social media, and that is having an impact on their voting decisions.

Chapter 5

Summaries and Conclusions

This research project began as a way to seek how people used social media to learn about politics, and how that may affect their political perceptions of candidates. What is perhaps most

interesting from the focus group data is the clear rate of speed with which technology and social media has impacted how people think politically. The youngest respondent from Group A was thirty years old, and the oldest from Group B twenty-two years. With less than a decade separating their age, it was astonishing how the discussion varied.

Both groups did acknowledge seeking information first that pertained to their personally held belief systems, but only members of Group B admitted to not even considering other viewpoints. This is especially telling of ways that Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur said the media dependency theory works. In the 1970s, this theory posited that people sought information that could not be fulfilled face to face, but now that aspect has changed. Perhaps it still is not face to face, but the ability to communicate with others has now been brought full circle. Dialogue occurs through a keyboard or smartphone instead of a consumer simply taking in a news report on the television. The interactive nature and ability to communicate impacts a person's emotions, creating increased affections and attachments to a political ideology or candidate.

With social media becoming increasingly pervasive into society, how voters respond to the messages sent out is of utmost important to politicians. Moreover, this research supports the idea that the younger voters are using social media more heavily than older. If the trend continues, this means that political campaigns need not only be concerned with the current set of young voters, but also those that will be voting in the next election. Interesting research could be done on the social media use of fourteen-year old adolescents that will be voting in just four years. How their political perceptions are shaped may be even more influenced by social media and technology than the college seniors interviewed for this focus group.

This research proposed to affirm that the media dependency theory is still viable in today's media-filled society. From the responses collected in these two focus groups, it could be

said that perhaps the desire to obtain information that fills a particular need is even greater. The face-to-face interaction most are used to having has largely been replaced by smartphones and texting –rare is a phone call among millennials, even. Through the touch of a button, swipe of a screen, and download of an article, information that pertains directly to one political viewpoint is available.

Limitations of the Project

One limitation of this research is that the material covered was over an ongoing, current event. This constant change in available news content as well as political primaries meant that focus group participants were reporting on a political campaign they had not yet seen completed. For some focus group members, this is the first time they have been eligible voters with a vested interest in the results. A larger, broader series of focus groups could provide more insight into how society uses social media as a whole. Also, all focus group members held at least a bachelor's degree or will in a matter of weeks as they are college seniors. The propaganda theory, which is in part used to explain the media dependence theory, would have us believe that those of higher education levels are the ones that are propagating these forms of media. Future focus groups containing a broader mix of people – including education levels, may reveal more insight.

Further Recommendations

While this was not a large study or longitudinal in nature, it would be interesting for further research to be done to find whether or not the social media habits of both groups continued to be the same, or if they perhaps decreased as they became older. Further, it creates room for additional implications on how these younger groups will grow up. For instance, is it

possible that technology and social media are so engrained as part of regular life that their use actually becomes more prevalent as they age?

Conclusions

As in 2008 and 2012, it appears the 2016 Presidential election is shaping up to be influenced heavily by social media. How much weight a political candidate should put on social media use remains to be seen and campaigns would be wise to follow further research in that realm when planning future strategies, but the research done here supports the idea that people still seek out news that suits a need they have for that information. It cements beliefs and validates opinions, which leads to a more ingrained perception of a candidate. Now, more than ever before, there is room on endless webpages for all opinions to be spread and all perceptions to be made.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Questions

The nature of focus groups is to engage dialogue, and for this reason the list of questions for the focus group is not exhaustive and not meant to be leading toward any one opinion, but rather to incite conversation and allow for discussion to naturally flow. The questions listed below will be used to facilitate that discussion and more may be added depending on the direction the group moves in.

1. How interested are you in politics?
2. Do you feel like you are more, or less, interested in politics than the average American your age?
3. With whom do you typically discuss politics?
4. What, if any, effect do you feel your age/demographic makes up your political leanings?
5. Where do you get most of your news?
6. Do you feel the media is biased?
7. Do alternative or partisan news sites have their place on the internet?
8. How do you learn about politics using social media?
9. If you can, think back to a news article or advertisement that was painting a political candidate in a negative light. Can you talk about what was said?
10. If so, do these reports or advertisements influence your opinion on a particular candidate?
11. In your opinion, do you think a candidate's ability to use social media (either in a positive or negative way) has an impact on voters' perceptions of that candidate?
12. What do you feel is a politican's role on social media?

Appendix B

Political Perceptions and Media Dependence
Interview Consent Form

Date:_____

I hereby grant Amy George, a student at Gonzaga University, permission to document through written, audio, or video recording and transcription focus group interviews for the purpose of gaining information on my social media behaviors and political participation. My participation in this focus group is entirely voluntary and I have a right to leave the study at any time.

The information I share will be used solely for the purposes of this research and will not be released for any other use. Additionally, personal identifying information will not be released about me beyond basic demographic information such as my age and sex.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, you can contact the following office at Gonzaga University:

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I have read this form and understand that the information will be used for an academic research study. I ____do/____do not wish to be quoted directly from my interview.

_____

Participants name (printed)

Participant's Signature	**Date**

Name of Person Obtaining Consent	**Date**