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THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON POLITICAL DISCOURSE AND IMAGE PERCEPTION

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ABSTRACT

The online world has become part of the very fabric of society, and an even larger part of how we receive, disseminate, and interact with information – specifically news. Social Media has played a huge role in political discourse in recent years and has given way to perceiving candidates in a newer, brighter light. This thesis explores how social media impacts political perception and discourse and how candidates may use this new age of communication to further their own agenda. It answers the question: how has social media changed political campaigns, and the way we engage in the political process? Ultimately, has social media changed politics?

The results show that social media has increased political engagement online but has largely polarized users – most individuals involved in online political discourse lean left or right, with very few moderates. Political figures or candidates often take advantage of this polarizing affect by catering their messaging to audiences that lean far right or left. Inappropriate usage of social media – such as attacking not catering their message in a relatable way to their audience – often alienates voters and creates a negative perception, while catering messaging to the social media platform and audience successfully creates a positive, likeable image in the eyes of the public. It can be conclusively said that social media plays a large role in political discourse and image perception.
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INTRODUCTION

Communication lies in the heart of society – and leadership. Changes in how we interact have also brought along advances in an average citizen’s involvement in the political process. While interest or knowledge of governance may once have been a privilege for the rich, technological advancements in communication have made it possible for the average citizen to be informed and involved in the political process in more ways than one.

Without a doubt, social media has given rise to various forms of political discourse today, and has given almost every individual the opportunity to voice their beliefs and opinions on a platform open to the entire world. It has given elected officials the ability to communicate with us in a more direct, personal fashion, and it’s also given us a way of voicing our concerns directly to them. Social media allows us the opportunity to build a community to our liking, which allows us to discuss with those who have similar belief systems on a regular basis, or debate with those who do no match our opinions (Sunstein, 2007).

These changes have made it nearly impossible for an individual involved on platforms such as Facebook or Twitter to avoid political discourse – giving politicians a unique opportunity to impress upon those who may not have been politically engaged otherwise. While communication styles have changed, the goal to effectively communicate stances and build a positive reputation has not changed among elected leaders.

This thesis explores the influence of social media on political discourse, and how this plays a key role in how we perceive political leaders and their messaging. By taking a qualitative look at social media posts of prominent 2016 Presidential Election candidates, we will be able to determine how online viewers react to content posted by candidates. Content analysis will be
used for various case studies, blog posts, social media post content, and online political discussions to identify how we are affected by online political interactions, and how we ultimately view political candidates as a result.

The literature review will analyze the effects social media has had on politics internationally, and will highlight the impact online discourse has on political participation and mobilization. The methodology portion will address how the following information was collected, analyzed, and perceived. Chapter one will go on to discuss the polarizing effects of social media on American voters, and how this impacts our political process. It will go on to analyze social media accounts of prominent 2016 presidential candidates for how they interact with their audiences, the responses they provoke, and what kind of perception they build of themselves and their campaign. In Chapter 3, a consensus will be reach as to how whether or not these candidates were affective in their social media usage, the kind of image the ultimately built, and what this means for communication between the public and elected officials. This will ultimately determine just how large of an impact social media has on our political process.
METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the question: how has social media changed political campaigns, and the way we engage in the political process – three different 2016 presidential primary candidates’ campaign were examined. Donald Trump, Hilary Clinton and Bernie Sanders were chosen based off of their observed salience in the news, as well as the average followers or fans they had online on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. These candidates had the highest averages for followers, beating the fourth candidate, Ted Cruz, by the millions.

Each candidate’s Facebook and Twitter pages were analyzed from October 2015 till March 2016, for 1) the content they presented 2) the engagement they receive from voters 3) how they reacted to feedback from their voters. Individual posts were examined, as well as comment threads on various posts exhibiting their supporter’s feelings towards both the candidate and those who opposed the candidate.

While monitoring Facebook and Twitter, thorough research on social media engagement, how news is disseminated on social media, and how this impacts political discourse was researched through various research databases as well as scholarly journals. As a result, the idea of polarization was developed to explain the deep divide our nation faces between the political parties.

The results show that social media has given way to a more personal form of engagement between voters and candidates, which directly change the way candidates develop their messages. Candidates must react based on real-time events, and immediately engage or react to the response of their supporters. Voters are inundated with news and various posts regarding their own political beliefs, leaving them deeply polarized in their own opinions and largely
unaware of any other opinions. This polarization causes voters to demand more extreme ideas and solution from candidates, and due to the personalized engagement form of social media, candidates are then compelled to presented polarized ideas in order to appease voters. Social media has created a form of back and fourth that has altered the way we not only participate in the political process, but how we look at it as well.
CHAPTER 1 LITERATURE REVIEW

I. ONLINE POLITICAL DISCOURSE

In *Facing an Uncertain Reception: Young Citizens and Political Interaction on Facebook* by Kjerstin Thorson (2014), explores the effects social networking sites (SNS) have on the average citizen’s political interactions, both offline and online. The purpose of this study was to identify how social media sites, particularly Facebook, will change the context and shape of political interaction as varying forms of political talk emerges online. The study begins by identifying the “social groundlessness” of political interaction that has been brought on by SNS. Social networking sites increase uncertainties and risks that are associated with engaging in political conversation, and increase the ambiguity of the social setting in terms of potential audience and the context in which the message will be received (Thorson, 2014).

However, this is not bad for political interaction, as it does not produce discomfort and self-censorship but rather encourages SNS users to explore and create new forms of political interaction and engagement (Thorson, 2014). Thorson conducted several in-depth interviews among two groups of people: those who directly participate in political interactions on social media, and those who observe but do not participate in the political interactions they see. The interviews revealed that politics is a salient issue on SNS such as Facebook, which provides a large and rather unpredictable audience (Thorson, 2014).

Social media users do not necessarily have specific people to address while they voice their opinion, but rather a general audience they want to be heard by. This is compared to the unpredictability a political candidate faces while delivering speeches (Thorson, 2014). The
uncertainty of this drives some people to engage in further political interaction, and drives others away with fear of provoking negative reactions or disagreements. However, those who engage in political rhetoric on SNS seemed to welcome the conflict. In this case, users become more polarized as they post articles, videos, or opinions that are only agreeable to people whose own opinion closely match their own.

As the polarization of active users involved in political rhetoric deepens, anyone who does not participate in the conversation is then viewed as politically moderate, or neutral. In fact, during the in-depth interviews it was revealed that most of the individuals that do not actively discuss politics on SNS view themselves as politically moderate, while those who seem to have strong opinions that lean one way or the other (Thorson, 2014). The study concluded that SNS play a positive role in creating a flow of political content and discussion, which leads to more awareness or deeper thinking on salient issues.

In a 2011 case study by Gunseli Bayraktutan, Mutlu Binark, Tugrul Comu, Burak Dogu, Gozde Isamoglu, and Ash Telli Aydemir, the relationship between social media political interaction was further explored – but this time, the focus was on how political leaders may use social media to persuade citizens to vote for their political party. The purpose of this study was to examine the converting effects of those political parties in the process of political communication on social networking sites. The study identified the United States’ relationship with the online world in three periods: discovery, maturity, and post-maturity.

During the discovery periods, which started around George H. W. Bush Presidency in 1992, the online world was mainly email (Bayraktutan, Binark, Comu, Dogu, Isamoglu & Aydemir 2011). By 1998, political candidates and parties had begun opening their own websites, engaging the online American audience in their political campaign in a more accessible way.
During the maturity period, which began sometimes in 2000s, political content was viewed for informational content, until later on when political campaign websites improved with more advanced, interactive features such as videos. Many political ideas were put-fourth on the Internet, which laid the foundation of how each party should be viewed in the voter’s mind.

This began more intensive data collection and distribution of election materials, where each candidate was able to target specific audiences and promote their ideas and roles (Bayraktutan et al, 2011). These motivated audiences became more involved, since they felt further invested or connected with the candidates they seemingly identified with and grew to be disdainful of candidates with opposing views. The post-maturity period began late 2000s until today, where election campaigns spread deeply through out the Internet instead of being limited to campaign sites. This period began with a “media-controlled online communication” which is when third parties controlled the information being disseminated about the political party of their choice (Bayraktutan et al, 2011). This allowed parties to reach more channels and create images of each political candidate that are to their liking.

With the rise of social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter, third parties are no longer the only ones in control of creating a certain image for political candidates (Bayraktutan et al, 2011). This is known as user-controlled online communication, where social media users dictate what is or is not a salient issue. This study followed social media accounts during the 2002 Turkish general election and then the 2009 elections. Turkey ranks number four in the world in terms of social media usage. Quantitative and qualitative analysis on political content, coding, themes, and subjects provided data that revealed that political parties in the maturity stage of the Internet were relatively successful in using websites as a political communication
tool to promote their candidates (Bayraktutan et al, 2011). Later on, towards the post-maturity stage, social media constituted a “new power” for political powers and users.

Since social media often determines which issues and candidates are salient, political candidates are forced to turn to social networking platforms such as Twitter or Facebook to promote their platform (Bayraktutan et al, 2011). Social media is now in the fabric of communication, which provokes more online political rhetoric in an attempt to make political ideas and/or candidates salient.

II. POLITICAL MOBILIZATION VIA SOCIAL MEDIA

The Facebook Dispute Concerning the Presidency by Monica Patrut studied the 2012 referendum on the impeachment of the president of Romania and how the campaign was carried out in an online environment, specifically Facebook, the most-used social network in Romania. By using functional analysis to quantify acclaims, attacks, and defenses of the two opposing groups involved on social media, the study found that the two opposing sides engaged their Facebook audience via photos, texts, and discursive functions such as acclaims and attacks. This increased the dissemination of information on the referendum of the impeachment of the president of Romania a salient topic (Patrut, 2012).

The supporters used more acclaims, while the opponents mainly used attacks on politics and character, which became more intense towards the middle and end of the campaign. This increased level of political interaction online through likes, comments, shares, and creating a larger political involvement in Romania as well as stronger, more polarized political opinions. In
this instance, social media was able to mobilize and engage voters into becoming more interested and opinionated on a subject that face-to-face interaction would not have encouraged.

Anna Hazare, a social activist in India, began a movement against corruption in 2010 – a movement that no political leader initially took seriously, since they had witnessed plenty of movements, petitions, and protests against corruption before. As Swati Bute mentions in *The Role of Social Media in Mobilizing for Riots and Revolutions* - none of these protests had ever gained momentum, and since nothing had really changed for decades Indian citizens had begun to accept major corruption as part of their political process.

However, with social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, this movement gained momentum seemingly overnight and drove what many referred to as a revolution. Protests and arguments that would never have been heard on the streets took place online, and soon millions of Indian citizens were engaged in the issue of corruption – and finally felt as though their voices could be heard and changes could be made. Hazare’s team used social media in a positive productive way – encouraging sharing, discussion, and action (Bute, 2014) . This spread like wildfire throughout India, and suddenly citizens who were once ignorant or indifferent to politics were mobilized and actively voicing their own opinions.

With the rise of conversations and debates over corruption on Facebook and Twitter, Indian government corruption became a salient topic the mainstream media simply could not ignore. This mobilized older generations or those in poverty who did not have access to the Internet. Suddenly, news outlets began covering posts and conversations taking place online and brought the debate straight into the real world. Members of various political parties as well as various corporate officials and celebrities offered their support of the movement. The movement ended on a positive note when the government of India introduced the “Jan Lokpal Bill” which
created a separate body of officials, unaffiliated with any political party, which served to investigate and curb corruption (Bute, 2014).

III. ONLINE POLITICAL REPUTATIONS

Theresa Renee White and Theresia Anderson focused on President Barack Obama’s 2008 and 2012 campaigns’ usage of social media platforms in order to mobilize young voters and influence them to participate in political efficacy. Social Media’s Impact on Young Adults’ Political Participation in the Obama 2008 and 2012 Presidential Election is a case study that suggests that the proper utilization of social media platforms made a candidate such as Barack Obama seem more personally connected to the voter, creating a political image that was appealing and trustworthy to the young voter. Obama’s virtual campaign on social media communities such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube proved to be instrumental to his success in both elections.

In 2008, Obama vs. McCain’s online presence alone was incredibly different. While McCain remained traditional in his usage of a campaign website with interactive videos, Obama’s campaign heavily used social networking sites to present the issues and his stances. As a result, Obama became a more prominent online figure with more salient topics and issues to be discussed. McCain’s online presence seemed to fade into the background, resulting in him seeming like a candidate who fails to speak to the issues or reach out to the voters (White & Anderson, 2014). Obama’s online supporters were described as loud, and the salience of his stances began making McCain’s stances seem outdated and out of touch, in contrast to Obama’s personalized, positive stances for the future. Social media played a large role in increasing
political interaction among voters who were online, and this increase in conversation played to Obama’s advantage. Obama’s stances were seen as hopeful; the online conversations surrounding his campaign focused on future progress, which in turn made Obama appear as a hopeful vision for America’s future. Obama’s campaign, described as “personal” and “modern” was in direct contrast with McCain’s campaign, which seemed outdated, out of touch and boring (White & Anderson, 2014). As a result, McCain appeared to be a candidate that was not suited for the betterment of America’s future, which was reflected in the polls.

During the Obama vs. Romney presidential election in 2012, Obama’s campaign used similar social networking strategies to his 2008 campaign, except this time Obama used persuasive language, which was based on ethical, emotional, and logical appeal. His social media presence heavily emphasized topics that concerned young adults and focused on emphasizing his family values, and his want to make the world a better place.

Obama also increased his interaction with his online supporters, often “liking” supportive posts on various social media platforms. This, once again, made Obama appear to be the more “personal” or “in-touch” candidate, in contrast to his opponent, Romney, whose focus was highlighting his business experience and trying to persuade younger voters using his economic stances (White & Anderson, 2014). His strategy proved to be unsuccessful, and throughout the campaign his image became that of an unrelatable, detached candidate who may only benefit himself or the few people like him. As a result, he appeared to be untrustworthy in comparison to Obama, who appealed to young adults and minorities.

The study found that, in the end, young and minority voters preferred Obama to Romney - 60% to 36% (White & Anderson, 2014). Obama’s trustworthy image made voters believe he was better equipped to handle the federal deficit, economy, international crisis, healthcare, and
more in a more effective way than Romney, who appeared out-of-touch from the rest of America. Ultimately, Obama used social media to create a better image for himself in contrast to Romney, who failed to relate with voters through a communication form that has become part of the very fabric of society.

*Facebook Use in the 2012 USA Presidential Campaign* by Porismita Borah further explored the political impact on social networking sites, by using content analysis of both 2012 presidential candidates’ official Facebook pages to understand how politicians use social networking sites to reach out to voters. The research resulted in revealing Obama only using one post to attack his opponent, while Romney used several more to attack his opponent. Thirty-three percent of Obama’s posts focused on policy matters, and 66% were labeled as other, or rather posts that appealed to his voters and connected with them. Seventeen percent of Romney’s posts focused on policy matters, while 44 posts were labeled as others, which mainly promoted events (Borah, 2014).

While appealing to emotions, Obama’s posts mainly showed enthusiasm, pride, and humor. Meanwhile, Romney showed some enthusiasm, but 34% of his posts provoked fear of what would happen if Obama were reelected, essentially attacking Obama. Obama’s laid-back appearance on his Facebook page made him seem like a classier, more in-control candidate, while Romney’s made him appear intense, emotional, and bit anxious (Borah, 2014). Overall, Obama’s online presence and political rhetoric seemed to be more effective in generating political conversation that placed him in a brighter light than Romney.

The results of each study indicate that social media has a considerable impact on political image perception. Social networking sites generate conversation and provide a platform for the public to engage in political interaction, which increases the dissemination of information flow.
and creates salient issues the public pays more attention to. As a result, social media becomes an excellent platform for candidates to campaign their policies and stances on – as well as their character.

IV. SUMMARY

The results of each study indicate that social media has a considerable impact on political image perception and discourse. Social networking sites generate conversation and provide a platform for the public to engage in political interaction, which increases the dissemination of information flow and creates salient issues the public pays more attention to. As a result, social media becomes an excellent platform for candidates to campaign their policies and stances on – as well as their character.

These campaigns create an image of candidates that can go on to help them win an election, further a cause, or keep them in office. However, if social networking is not used to its full extent or to the taste of its audience, it can create a negative image of a candidate, which keeps them from making any progress. Political image, thus, is a huge factor in a democracy and can go a long way to reflect not only upon political candidates but also on their respective parties. Social media’s influence on political perception has created a new obstacle for political candidates and a new platform for political interaction.
CHAPTER 2 2016 Campaigns

I. THE POLARIZING AFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Paul Ricoeur’s theory of narrative self-construction is based on the fundamental insight that we don’t actually know or think of ourselves through introspection, but rather that we know ourselves through an image we construct of who we are through how we behave, dress, and appear strong. In short, we have a natural tendency to believe that we are who we portray ourselves to be. We project ourselves in this particular persona in an assertive manner, and the way we speak about ourselves can transform the way we feel about ourselves – and how others feel about us as well (Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2016).

Social media gives us the unique opportunity to portray ourselves in a certain way that we see fit – and to a community we choose for ourselves. Any large social media platform – whether its Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. – allows us to choose who we accept into our circle and whose circle we would like to be included in. In some sense, we are able to build our own world online and are able to broadcast a portrayal of ourselves to the communities we want to draw engagement from. This constant interactive measure is what keeps us coming back for more – we enjoy engaging in things that are directly related or of interest to us.
The ability to make interactive choices – id est. choices which lead to feedback from the computer program and/or those who are engaging with us via the program – is an important aspect of online engagement. Every time we log onto Facebook we experience the volitional dimension of who we are: we might receive a comment to which we respond in turn, play a game or fill in a quiz, open the chat window, approve a friend request, post a photo, comment on a photo in which someone we know has been tagged, and so forth. Interactivity in this sense is more than interaction (Seargeant & Tagg, 2014).

Being able to create your own community online has its obvious communication benefits – the ability to stay in touch with those you may not have had the opportunity to otherwise, update your loved ones on your life on a daily basis, viewing loved ones’ updates on the daily, and so on. Thanks to widely-used social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, the ability to communicate and stay in touch with a wide audience is now possible. With the rise of smartphone usage, you are constantly connected to your community at almost any given moment or place. Without a doubt, social media is a huge step in communication not just for the media, but also for the average citizen. However, the biggest positive to these personalized online communities is also its biggest negative: you only see what you want to see.

The idea of personalization and customization is exciting for users – not only do you get to “friend” or “follow” the people you want to connect with, but you also get to choose the brands, news outlets, and other institutions you want to. Marketers have begun collecting data that allows them to target specific audiences and personalize advertisements to their liking – once again, feeding into your personal tastes. Platforms such as Twitter allow you to follow celebrities, elected officials, and news outlets of your choice. Each time you directly engage with a post, such as a news article, your “click” becomes part of the personal data companies are collecting; suddenly what you’re interested in is every brand or social media platform’s business (Tucker, 2014). For example – if you ever visit Amazon, type in something generic or a specific
brand. A few moments later, visit an online platform such as Facebook – and you’ll notice the item or brand you searched for is now being advertised to you by either the same brand, or several other brands that carry similar items. So now, not only have you built an online community of your own liking, but everything you see is now catered to your own tastes.

The idea of search customization or personalization has become an exciting prospective for Google, which takes pride in its idea of searches, posts, and news being personalized to you. In fact, if you’ve noticed, Facebook now filters through all your friends and only shows you the posts of the ones you tend to interact with more – or seem to share common interests with. So any deliberation you may have had on topics such as political or social issues almost completely disappears, since your feed is personalized and catered towards your own interests (Sunstein, 2007).

Facebook takes note of the types of links you click on, and then in turn caters the posts on your feed to what it considers is your taste. However, this process rejects political debate, as you slowly will only view articles that match your opinion. If the only thing you see on your newsfeed are articles and posts that agree with you, your ideas or thoughts are never challenged – you are never forced to think of any other perspective. This phenomena makes your own personal online world a sort of “bubble” for you to live in – and as mentioned earlier, you are constantly connected and in this bubble, never told you are wrong or never presented any idea or thing that goes against what you like (Pariser, 2011).

The Facebook News feed does limit the amount of cross-cutting links that viewers choose to read. The News feed algorithm ranks stories based on a variety of factors including their history of clicking on links for particular websites (Brookings.edu, 2015). If a user regularly clicks on stories from sources with a partisan leaning then the chances of seeing a similar story
increases. The News feed algorithm functions in this way to make the experience of using the website more enjoyable. This approach also has some unintended negative consequences. The authors find that the News feed algorithm reduces the politically cross-cutting content by 5 percent for conservatives and 8 percent for liberals (Bleiberg & West, 2015).

Table 1 Facebook Ideology Cross-Cutting

The Facebook News feed algorithm

Source: brookings.edu

The lack of exposure to opposing viewpoints leads to a polarizing effect, where individuals become more extreme in their political viewpoints than they would have been had they been exposed to different opinions. As Cass Sunstein discusses in his “A Talk,” individuals who find like-minded people who share similar opinions tend to be more extreme in their opinions and less likely to want moderation or any compromise. Constant discourse among like-minded individuals leads to a deep-seated belief that anyone who opposes them is simply wrong or crazy, rather than perhaps simply another viewpoint that can be understood or bargained with.
Sunstein tested out this theory in Colorado. He gathered a group of people from Boulder, a town that leans liberal, and a group of people from Colorado Springs, a town that leans towards conservatism. Each group was told to discuss a few questions, such as their thoughts on Vice President Dick Cheney, greenhouse gases, and affirmative action. Each group, though leaning respectively to either the left or right, initially had varying degrees of belief and viewpoints on each issue. Some were more passionate about certain causes; some were a bit more moderate on others. However, after spending time with generally like-minded people and discussing each subject extensively, each person eventually became far more extreme in their viewpoints and the diversity of opinions seemed entirely gone; in the end, there was a liberal point of view and a conservative point of view, with little to no moderation in between.

The personalization in social media thus impacts political discourse greatly; the more polarized we become the more extreme views or solutions we expect from our political leaders of our party of interest. As the Pew Research Center reports as of the end of 2015, over 65% of Americans are online, an increase from 2005 when they initially began researching how many Americans are online. This explains why we experience so much political rift today and find it acceptable that our elected officials sit stubbornly on their points of views rather than working towards any amount of compromise. Since we view our own points of view as the correct one and the other as entirely wrong, we then desire less compromise and more political party wins.
Since the American people are so divided, politicians in order to appease their voters/audiences allow themselves to become more divided, since the public demands a right or wrong rather than a solution. Our online political discourse impacts our way of thinking, thus impacting the way our elected officials appease us. By remaining divided in our personalized bubbles, where we are right and everyone else outside of the bubble is wrong, we give way to politicians who promote extreme opinions, policies and solutions.
II. SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE 2016 CAMPAIGN

As we grow more rooted in our own beliefs, Americans have also grown to dislike career politicians. Political discourse on social media gives way to an uncensored authenticity career politicians often lack, since they are so used to polishing their messaging and targeting it towards specific audiences. Online discourse has lead us to prefer raw, honest political remarks from our leaders rather than structured, seemingly ingenuous remarks from elected officials. Our polarized political discourse, mixed with our lack of patience for career politicians to get things done, has caused the American public to largely turn to candidates that can lightly be described as off-beat. Social media users enjoy messaging that seems more like a real person is writing it, rather than another PR person.

The change in political discourse and attitudes has resulted in a huge change in the 2016 presidential primaries race. Each candidate has to overcome new obstacles, such as proper social media usage and building a positive political perception that balances experience while portraying themselves as anything but a politician. With heated political debates, extreme ideologies introduced into the mainstream political process, and new ways of reaching out to voters, we seem to be moving towards a new age of politics that the NY Times has described as “The Rise of Antipolitics.”

A. Donald Trump

From making headlines over Obama’s birth certificate, to theatrically descending an escalator in Trump Towers on June 16, 2015, to announce his candidacy, Donald Trump has made one thing very clear: he will be heard. Initially, the general consensus of the media was to
cover him as a joke. From being mocked on *Saturday Night Live*, to being ridiculed over his “I’m really rich” comment, Trump was considered a candidate that was here to eventually leave – until his ideas began appealing to a frustrated, polarized population of Americans who began to make sense of what he was saying.

The main appeal of Trump is simple: he is not a politician. Trump’s unpolished, loud and offensive statements rile up rallies and make his supporters appreciate his authenticity. His messages are brutally honest, and often offensive, but his to-the-point stances on issues make him appear much more likeable in comparison to the polished politicians that give long-winded answers that don’t directly address the issues frustrated Americans feel.

![Figure 1: Offensive Tweet Describing Trump's Stances](source: Official Donald Trump Twitter Account)

Trump’s tactics are simple: take the polarized right, that has fallen to extremes, and promote offensive but honest solutions to problems and appear unwilling to let anyone in his way. If he is ever critiqued, he blames establishments such as elected officials or the media for any negative coverage he receives. And with over seven million Twitter followers, Trump’s tweets receive attention – both positive and negative – both online and offline.
Trump’s online appeal is primarily because he involves himself in political discourse the same way polarized citizens engage in political debate: unwilling to listen to another point of view, rejecting anything different, and portraying any other viewpoint as just plain wrong. His supporters find his social media presence relatable instead of offensive, since they feel it is actually Trump himself updating each platform rather than a paid PR person. In fact, Trump supporters engage in very positive discourse when discussing Trump – often describing him as a “strong leader,” “unstoppable,” “strong,” or even a “genius.”

Source: crooksandliars.com

Figure 2: Trump's Tweet Featured on CNN
Trump’s successful use of social media has created a political perception of an unstoppable political candidate who may just have it all — even those who do not support him consider the idea of him being president. *Washington Post* OP-ED columnist David Brooks wrote, “how do I prepare now for the post-trump era?”

Trump has the appeal of authenticity and uncensored honesty that many Americans living in the anti-political era crave — and he knows his audience well enough to give them just that. His constant rejection of political norms, his mockery of career politicians, and his grandeur make him the perfect candidate for a generation of tired, frustrated Americans who want direct answers and seemingly fast solutions.
Trump also makes it a point to feed off of fear the American people may have – such as terrorism - and using this discourse to his advantage to make him appear as though he is powerful enough to put a complete end to any violence. His ability to fear-monger and relate to angry voters increases his appeal – and to those Americans he seems like the obvious candidate of choice.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 4: Examples of Trump Feeding off his Supporter’s Emotions**

**Source: Donald Trump Official Twitter Account**

Donald Trump’s success in his campaign is a result of what happens when political discourse becomes polarized, and political perceptions are born with only one half of the story. Unfortunately, his hateful words feed into total extremism, and encourage people like David Duke, leader of the Ku Klux Klan, to openly show his support for ideas that alienate and discriminate large populations of Americans. While your social media may be cluttered with anti-Trump posts, leaving you to wonder why or how he is succeeding in the polls, there are millions of Americans whose newsfeeds are cluttered with pro-Trump posts, leaving them to wonder why so many people are surprised or disappointed in his success. The polarized political discourse has led to split political perceptions and a leader who insists on leading the people he chooses to lead.
B. Hillary Clinton

It’s no secret that Hillary Clinton has been a career politician. Since 1993, Clinton has served in the public’s eye as first lady, senator, secretary of state, and now presidential primary candidate. As mentioned earlier, voters still look for experience in potential presidential candidates – but what Clinton has in experience, she lacks in what is perceived as authenticity. Her seemingly lack of genuineness has often labeled her as just another lying politician – and her inability to connect with audiences on her social media accounts only adds to this perception.

Clinton has struggled with connecting to younger audiences, not because she doesn’t try, but because her efforts are so far off target they make her seem old, unconcerned, and as just another politician who will say or do anything to get votes.

Figure 5: Out-of-Touch Hilary on Twitter

Social media has become part of the fabric of society. Since over 65% of Americans are online, constantly connected, and therefore constantly in touch with the ongoings of the news – in this case, the ongoings of presidential primary candidates – what goes on online becomes a
salient topic that is discussed by traditional news outlets as well. This trickle-down effect leaves almost any citizen – both online and offline - generally aware of how particular candidates are perceived. When online political discourse makes front page news of your broadcast or print media, even individuals offline can adapt to a particular mentality.

Another part of being a career politician in the age of the Internet is that nothing you say or do will be forgotten. A large part of the discourse over Clinton is her hypocrisy over the years – she has changed her stance on various issues and government programs, and while this may be seen as okay by some, most of the online world views this as proof of her inability to be a reliable leader. Anderson Cooper took notice of online debates over her ever-changing mind, and addressed it during a democratic debate during the Fall of 2015:

Plenty of politicians evolve on issues, but even some democrats believe you change your positions based on political expediency. You’re against same-sex marriage now you’re for it, you defended Obama’s immigration policies now you say they’re too harsh, you supported his trade deal dozens of times and you even called it the gold standard, now suddenly last week you’re against it. Will you say anything to get elected? (Cooper, 2015)

This idea of “saying anything to get elected” is only highlighted on Clinton’s social media profiles when she attempts to connect with minority voters – in this instance Latino voters – and ends up failing miserably.
In a tribute to the 60th anniversary of Rosa Parks, the Clinton campaign paid tribute to her on Twitter. This was perceived well – until the campaign released an image of Rosa Parks on the campaign logo. The Twitter backlash was almost immediate and harsh, and one thing was made clear: it did not reach out or resonate with black voters, but rather made them feel as though they are simply a part of a political ploy.
The mistakes don’t stop there. After sharing news about her daughter’s second pregnancy, Clinton tried to compare herself to an “abuela,” Spanish for “grandmother” in an attempt to connect with Hispanic voters. Her critics were far from impressed, pointing out that she was trying too hard and once again, out of touch with voters and unable to serve them to their best interests. Soon, the viral hashtag #NotMyAbuela emerged on Twitter, where Hispanic users shared stories of their own abuelas:
As you can tell by Twitter responses, voters are not impressed and largely turned off by misuses of social media – especially by a politician who was already perceived to be untrustworthy or out of touch. By not engaging in a productive way with the public online, the Clinton campaign fails to create a positive perception of Clinton and thereby only emphasizes the negatives of her image and campaign. Poor social media engagement leads to negative discourse, which only leads to a negative image perception.

C. BERNIE SANDERS

The Bernie Sanders campaign is unique in various ways, but his biggest appeal is simple: he has experience, but is not your average politician, and is authentic with his campaign.
Sanders’ biggest appeal is similar to Trump’s: he is just as frustrated as the American people, and offers a solution out of the frustration they’re experiencing. His social media engagement is quick: he offers polished and short messaging, sleek graphics, and never seems to offend or try too hard.

Though, like Clinton, he is a politician but his largest appeal is that he seems consistent. What he is fighting for today, he backs up with his actions from decades ago. A huge problem in the 2016 campaign is that minority groups do not feel like any candidate truly cares about their rights – after being marginalized for decades, every candidate’s civil rights passions seem far-fetched and a simple political ploy for votes. Sanders, however, impressed voters when a picture of him being arrested during the Civil Rights Movements in the early 1960s emerged.

![Figure 9: Sanders Being Arrested During Civil Rights Movement in early 1960s](source)

Source: CNN

The overwhelming online response to Sander’s commitment and proof that he has stood by what he says for his entire political career makes his supporters more confident in their choice, and the naysayers a bit quieter. His campaign – which is completely funded by donations
– appeals to voters in authenticity and experience, which is a rare combination for political candidates.

Source: Bernie Sanders’ Official Facebook Page

Social media has built an enormously positive perception of Sanders – and while our polarized right wing voters detest him, they cannot deny the authenticity of his campaign. This makes him very appealing to a younger crowd of voters, who are not to be easily swayed by well-rehearsed messaging or well-written but out-of-touch social media posts that pay little to no real attention to how the candidate is being perceived.
His appeal to a younger audience has brought about an abundance of gifs and memes appreciating Sanders, and his social media accounts take notice of it all. Recently, a video of a bird landing on Sander’s podium during a Sanders Rally went viral. Within 24 hours, his campaign released this image on his Facebook page:
Social media attentiveness is essential in making successful social media accounts; when the moment passes, it is no longer seen as acceptable to revisit it. Sanders’ campaign pays close attention to his online presence and is sure to cater to it, such as in the instance of the bird, and as such keeps a positive, highly engaged presence online. Users on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and even popular image-sharing websites such as Imgur or Reddit indulged in the heart-warming video of a bird landing on Sanders podium. Political discourse on his social media accounts is overwhelmingly positive, with supporters growing in their confidence day-by-day and becoming more and more in tune with his stances, and his overall persona. Sanders’ proper and successful
use of social media is proof that – when used correctly – social media discourse can build a positive image for candidates and engage citizens in the political process.
CHAPTER 3
CONCLUSION

As social media becomes a larger part of how we communicate, the more change arrives in how we perceive communication. Due to modern technology, this fast and easy way of communicating with all your followers or friends has become a constant; as long as Wi-Fi is available, we are almost completely connected to the online world at all times. This makes us more likely to receive updates on our friends lives, updates on ongoings of the world, and updates on the ongoings of our government from the Internet. This constant interaction makes us almost dependent on the accessibility of all this information and often invested in just the online world – particularly the world we’ve built for ourselves.

Platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, which serve various demographics across the world and in particular the United States, provide an opportunity to individuals to create an online community of their own, or rather a type of bubble. This bubble consists of who they want to interact with, and what kind of posts they see. The level of personalization does not end there, however, as these platforms, brands, and search engines such as Google take customization a step further by catering all ads and news articles to the user’s taste. Slowly, the articles, images, and general posts you see only coincide with what you like – which initially is great. This level of personalization makes users more attracted to these platforms, since it provides a get-away from reality and into a world of their own. The problem with living in your own world, however, is that it’s easy to become ignorant of anything outside of it.

The more we are exposed to things that only suit our own interests, the more invested we become in those interests. If every news article you are viewing relates to your own personal
views, you will soon begin believing that your personal views are more righteous or somehow better than any other view. This is a common trend in online political discourse; individuals are only exposed to friends, articles or pages whose opinions and belief match our own, and the more we indulge in our own views, the more extreme and stubborn we become with them. This is known as the polarization effect, and our society has gradually become more and more polarized due to the things we see on a day-to-day basis. A key element to polarization is lack of exposure to other viewpoints, which creates no foundation for compromise or understanding. Rather, each side of every argument believes they are completely correct and refuses to budge on their stance. This has put a huge stint in our political process, and this is reflected in the little progress our government has managed to make in the past decade.

Polarization leads to more extremism in opinions, which gives way to leaders with extreme viewpoints to emerge. An example of this would be Donald Trump: initially seen as a joke, Trump rose in ratings throughout the months and gained larger, supportive audiences through his polarized, extreme messaging. His online presence seems ridiculous to some and completely righteous to others since he knows exactly what demographics to target in order to maintain support. Though some of his viewpoints are seen as offensive, many of his supporters claim that he only says what they believe everyone else is thinking – the “everyone else” his supporters are referring to are the people in their own online bubble, and since they are surrounded by those thoughts, they are lead to believe that almost everyone believes the same. Trump’s online presence is controversial, but covered and seen as an overall success since the discourse he engages in engages his audience. In fact, out of all 2016 presidential primary candidates, Trump has the most followers and fans, beating all others by the millions.
While Trump is successful at reaching out to his audience, Clinton fails to effectively communicate with the online world. Out of all candidates, Clinton is the one with the most experience – but since the voters are sick of politicians, her biggest challenge entering the primaries was to build an image that is relatable to the public. Clinton’s constant failures online have only built her the reputation of being a detached politician who will say anything to be elected. Her failure to engage in effective political discourse on social media has given the public a negative perception of her, and her integrity is constantly questioned regardless of what she is promoting. While Trump serves as an example of how online polarization may be taken advantage of – and used effectively to the candidate’s own benefit – Clinton serves as an example of what can happen if you do not engage with any audience effectively. The failure to participate or create positive political discourse goes on to create a negative political image online, and since social media has such a strong hold on what is or isn’t a salient topic, this can hurt an elected official’s overall perception in the general eye of the public.

Sanders entered the election as an underdog; nobody knew him, and nobody really believed in his success. However, Sanders’ online presence sky-rocketed as he promoted his own beliefs in short, effective polished ways such as sleek graphics, videos, and powerful messaging. His online campaign remained responsive; it closely monitors what his audience likes and engages in the discourse they prefer. This can be seen as the Sanders campaign utilized the viral-internet video of a bird landing on Sanders’ podium; they understood the quick nature of the Internet, and took advantage almost immediately. This not only appeals to his followers, but also fuels their own polarized debates. While Trump is seen as an extreme candidate from the right side, Sanders is seen as an extreme candidate from the left side. His messaging coincides with the polarized left, who have been demanding higher minimum wages, funding for Planned
Parenthood and more involvement from the government for quiet some time. His messaging not only appeases them – his experience appeals to them as well. While Trump is a candidate with no experience and Clinton a candidate with a lot of experience in the public’s eye, Sanders is a candidate with experience that entirely backs up what he is fighting for today. As images resurface of him fighting for civil rights since the 1960s, minority groups that have felt marginalized and largely ignored by elected officials engage with him more as well, since his track record proves he has cared about these issues for decades and not just for the election. Once the image resurfaced, Sanders’ campaign posted a video and statement on the importance of civil rights, which invited a massive amount of political discourse on various social media platforms as well as other platforms with online communities – such as Reddit of Imgur.

Social media’s impact on political discourse is great and its effects can be seen by how we perceive elected officials and involve ourselves in the political process. While using social media actively and effectively may build a positive perception of you, being ineffective may make any official seem disconnected from the realities of the American people. Online platforms have become such a huge part of our communication that ignoring them entirely may make any campaign seemingly not exist in the eyes of the public. Social media is here to stay for some time, and its impact on political discourse and political image perception are almost unquestionable. The challenge for elected officials, then, is how to utilize social media in an effective way that allows their messages to be heard and perceived well by an audience who political discourse never truly ends

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APPENDIX A

BACKGROUND ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Facebook:

Founded by Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook was launched on February 4, 2004 with the original intention of connecting Harvard students to one another. This quickly spread to the rest of the IV league schools as well as most schools in the Boston-area, and then spread across the country and soon the world – with an appeal that serves almost any demographic with access to Internet. The website allows you to connect with anyone – so as long as you or the other individual “accept” the friend request – and add them to your own community (Imming, 2015).

Facebook enables you to share various forms of content, such as links to articles, photos, statuses, etc. and allows you to follow various brands or celebrity pages as well. This becomes a part of your profile page, which is a page each user has of their own where they may share information about themselves – such as their relationship status, where they work, where they went to school, and an image of themselves. People may engage with you directly through your profile page or through Facebook message.

Facebook also allows you to heavily engage with content you see on your newsfeed – you may like a post, comment on it, or even share it if it appeals to you. You may comment directly back to another user’s comment, or like specific comments as well. The newsfeed, thus, is a key attribute of Facebook, since it is where you may see other users posts as well as your own.

As of December 31, 2015, there are roughly 1.59 billion monthly users of this website worldwide. On average, about 1.04 billion users are active on the site daily, and around 934 million users are active via smartphones (Mastroianni, 2016). Up to 63% of these users claim
they use Facebook as a news source – and this holds true among almost every demographic. All in all, Facebook serves as a widely popular platform for people to heavily engage in daily activities (Mastroianni, 2016).

**Twitter:**

In 2006, Evan Williams – the CEO of Odeo, a podcasting company, asked his employees to come up with a new direction for the company. An employee named Jack Dorsey brought the idea of a social networking platform in which users may share their day-to-day activities in 140 characters posts, or tweets. Working alongside of co-founders Noah Glass, Facebook launched on March 21, 2006 (Immings, 2015).

Twitter allows you to share quick, short thoughts on its timeline – similar to Facebook, but only consistent of tweets. Tweets may also include videos, gifs, photos or graphics if the user chooses. You may follow whom you like – loved ones, celebrities, news outlets – and anyone may follow you back. These people become your followers, who may engage with you tweets by favoriting, retweeting, quote tweeting, or replying to the tweet. You may also use a hashtag to trend certain topics, or use it to engage in topics that are already trending. Users may click on the trending hashtags or topics on the sidebar and see which users or media outlets have used it, and the content they’ve posted.

As of 2015, there are at least 288 million users on Twitter, 80% of them are active via smartphone. An average of 500 million tweets are sent per day, and over 63% of Twitter users claim they rely on Twitter as a news source – unlike Facebook, users are able to keep up with events in real-time, giving it an edge as a news source (Bullas, 2016).
**Instagram:**

In 2010, Instagram launched itself as a new social networking platform and went viral. Instagram allows you to share photos or videos on your feed – similar to a timeline or newsfeed, its where you may view contents of the people you follow (Immings, 2015). You can interact with content with liking, sharing, or commenting on the post. Before posting, Instagram offers you the option of using various filters on your photo – which are essentially color washes over your photo that can enhance the attractiveness of the image.

Instagram is a primarily mobile application, so it is only relevant to smartphone users. However, as of 2015 it has over 400 million users and is growing 10 times fast than Facebook or Twitter. Its primary appeal is for people under 35 across the globe – and over 30% of these users describe Instagram as their main social media platform (Amazing Facts, 2015).

**Reddit:**

Primarily an entertainment networking service, Reddit began in 2005 and now has over 542 million monthly visitors, ranking as the 14th most visited web-site in the United States (Reddit, 2016). What makes Reddit unique is that it is not focused on users individually; rather, users share entertaining content or social news, and depending on the level of engagement they receive, they are ranked highest to lowest. Social news may vary from what is happening in the world, to what is trending on social media. This website is used worldwide, catering primarily to people under 30.
**Imgur:**

Like Reddit, Imgur is an online sharing website founded in 2009. This website focuses more on the content users produce – social news, memes, funny images or gifs, general entertainment, etc. - rather than the user themselves. Thus, personal content is highly discouraged in Imgur culture. Imgur receives over 300 billion image views monthly worldwide, with demographics similar to Reddit but a bit more diverse in terms of gender (Imgur, 2016).
APPENDIX B

SOCIAL MEDIA TERMINOLOGY

General

**Engagement:** The level of direct interaction between the creator or publisher of the content, and the audience. Direct interaction includes liking/favoriting, sharing, or commenting.

**Comment:** A form of engagement, a comment is when you can express your thoughts, comments or opinions directly with the publisher of the content. This is relevant to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Imgur, Reddit, and almost any form of social networking.

**Share:** Another form of engagement, this allows you to share another user’s published content and even add your own thoughts or opinions.

**Post:** Any type of content you publish – written, photo, link, share, etc. on any social networking platform.

**Bubble:** Also previously referred to as a “filter bubble”, this refers to the communities you’ve created for yourself online – including all of your friends/followers, brands or celebrities you follow, news outlets you follow, etc.
**Messaging:** What you convey to your audience through your online posts – this refers to how you have presented your thoughts, opinions, or stances.

**Facebook**

**Friend:** People choose/accept to connect with, and share content with.

**Profile:** Where a user’s complete picture, story and personal information appear.

**Post:** Any type of content you publish – written, photo, link, share, etc.

**Status:** A type of post, this is where you can share your thoughts, whereabouts, etc. alongside of any image, video or link you decide to include.

**News Feed:** Where you can view content updates by friends as well as your own update.

**Like:** Also relevant to Instagram, this is where a user may quickly engage with your content and express their appreciation for it by simply clicking a thumbs up button on the bottom of any content you publish. On Instagram it’s a heart at the bottom of every picture.

**Twitter:**

**Tweet:** The 140 character post that may include text, photos, or videos.
**Hashtag:** Created by adding # in front of terms (ex. #twitter) this allows you to join in on any trending topics or make a topic trend. The hashtag is now used across all social media platforms, but began on Twitter and is primarily used on Twitter as well.

**Followers:** Similar to friends, these are the people connected with you on Twitter that may view your content on their timelines.

**Timeline:** Similar to a newsfeed, this is referred to where you may view content from every account you follow from latest post to oldest.
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