

#CivicEngagement: An Exploratory Study of Social Media Use and Civic Engagement Among Undergraduates

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Boston College
Lynch School of Education
Department of Educational Administration and Higher Education
Program in Higher Education

#CIVICENGAGEMENT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND
CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG UNDERGRADUATES

Dissertation

by

ADAM GISMONDI

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Undergraduates

by

Adam Gismondi

Dr. Ana Martinez-Aleman, Dissertation Chair

ABSTRACT

Civic engagement is an activity that supports communities at local and national levels (Colby et al., 2000; Putnam, 1993; 2000). Within higher education, there has long been a desire to produce civically engaged graduates that will serve as leaders in addressing current and future societal problems. The task of developing young Americans that become socially aware, community-minded, and publicly involved requires a full understanding of the college learning environment for today's students. In recent years, the undergraduate environment has changed rapidly, with various digital social media presenting a new social and technological context for college students. Scholars have begun to explore the ways in which these social media have impacted the college environment, yet many areas for research have yet to be addressed.

This exploratory qualitative study draws upon this growing literature base and social capital theory to ask: How do students understand the connection between social media use and their civic engagement while in college? This study presents data from six focus groups (n=35) and seven individual interviews conducted with students from campus organizations engaged in one of three pre-selected areas of civic engagement (Adler & Goggin, 2005).

This study found that the students derived a great deal of civic value from their use of social media. These new media provide students with a constant stream of information that promotes both knowledge acquisition and the organization of others around common interests. However, findings from this study also indicate a number of challenges associated with the use of social media for civic learning and engagement, including the need to continuously filter an overwhelming amount of information and the intimidating nature of public civic debate online.

The added value of social media in the development of civic behaviors speaks to a new way of thinking about ways to cultivate civic engagement. As colleges and universities continue to explore means to promote civic engagement as a learning outcome, the digital environments of students must be considered. A broad understanding of social technologies, along with a working knowledge of platform-specific features will help practitioners and scholars to better plan developmentally beneficial interventions.

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction	1
Overview of the Study: Introduction & Focus of the Problem	1
Research Question	3
Social Media Use Data	4
General social media use.....	4
College student use of social media.....	5
Theoretical Rationale: Social Capital and Civic Engagement	7
Research Design	9
CHAPTER TWO: Review of Literature	10
Introduction to the Literature	10
Definitions: Civic Engagement	10
Civic Engagement and Civil Society as Powerful Social Forces	12
Social Capital	13
The Strong and Weak Ties of Social Capital	16
Bonding and Bridging Social Capital	17
Contemporary Changes in Civic Engagement and Social Capital	18
Historical Context for the University as Force in Promotion of Civic Engagement and Social Capital	20
Contemporary Views on the University’s Role in Promotion of Civic Engagement and Social Capital	21
Early Research on Social Media and Civic Engagement	24
Group Polarization	27
Social Media: Overall Nature of the Literature	28
The Development of Web 2.0 and Social Media	29
Leading Voices on Social Media	31
Online Group Polarization, Enclaves, and the “Filter Bubble”	34
College Environments and Social Media	37
The “digital divide” as a fading premise.....	41
Gaps in the Literature and Future Areas for Study	45
CHAPTER THREE: Methodology	48
Methodology	48
Qualitative Research	48
Population/Sampling	49
Research Design	51
Pilot Study	61
Ethical Considerations	64
Positionality	65
Limitations	68
CHAPTER FOUR: Findings	69
Theme #1: Social Media As a Catalyst for Civic Learning and Engagement	70
Social Media as News-Gathering Tool	70
General and Breaking News	71

Social Media Feeds As News Aggregators	78
The Added Value of Social Media for All Levels of Civic Engagement.....	79
Social Media as Tools for Organized Civic Participation and Learning	86
Facebook: Students’ Personal Planner & Interactive Directory.....	87
Hashtags and Spontaneous & Sustained Data Organization.....	90
Theme #2: Social Media As an Imperfect Tool in the Promotion of Civic Learning & Engagement.....	92
Navigating the “Information Fire Hose”	93
Information Quality.....	97
What Constitutes a “Credible” Source?	97
Satire vs. Authentic News	101
The Filter Bubble.....	103
Questions Around Partisanship and Homophily Online.....	104
The Complexities of Strong Ties.....	106
The Ease of Ignoring and Blocking Opposing Views Online	109
The Boldness of Active Debate Online	114
Social Network Features and User Comfort with Civic Discourse	115
Performative Aspects of Online Dialogue	117
Theme #3: Social Media Use Trends	119
Media Features as Predictors of Use Outcomes	120
The Rise of Anonymity Applications.....	126
Mobile vs. Computer Access and the Evolution of the App.....	129
Social Media as Transitional Activity	130
Observation Data as Limited Support for Thematic Findings.....	132
Digital Presence of Participant Organizations	133
Organizational Meeting Observations	134
CHAPTER Five: Discussion and Implications.....	136
The Path from Social Media Use to Social Capital to Civic Engagement.....	137
Social Media’s Ubiquity & Civic Development	140
Quick, Critical Consumption of Media Among Students.....	144
The Tradeoffs of Social Media: Information Overload, Personalization, and the Public/Private Balance	147
Evolving Platforms, Evolving Trends	151
Implications for Higher Education	152
Research Issues.....	156
Areas for Further Study	158
Concluding Thoughts	160
Appendix A: Focus Group Protocol	162
Appendix B: Individual Interview Protocol	165
References	171

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

Overview of the Study: Introduction and Focus of the Problem

Civic engagement is seen by many as an activity that serves not only as a key component to the maintenance of a democracy, but also as a force that sustains social ties across communities small and large (Colby et al., 2000; Putnam, 1993; 2000). As defined by Thomas Ehrlich, civic engagement can be understood as “...working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference...[and] promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and nonpolitical processes” (Ehrlich, 2000, p. vi). Among those within higher education, the literature points to a consensus that American higher education should play an integral role in addressing societal problems (Droege & Ferrari, 2012; Hartley, Saltmarsh, & Clayton, 2013; Mathews, 2009; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Issues including poverty, foreign and domestic governmental policies, and the wealth gap all represent societal challenges that require both critical reflection and pragmatic problem solving, skills that may be developed during the undergraduate years (Hartley, et al., 2013).

An essential part of the college experience is the development of students as publicly involved, socially aware, and community-minded members of society. Cited as a student learning outcome within the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators and the American College Personnel Association’s joint 2004 release, “Learning Reconsidered,” civic engagement is a characteristic that colleges and universities explicitly seek to develop within their students. The paths that students take towards this outcome, while varied, can come through

intentional means. As such, colleges and universities will be well-served to understand how student civic engagement is impacted by the college environment (Junco, 2011).

In recent years, college student environments have rapidly changed. One aspect of change in this regard has been the development of an online environment for students to navigate and integrate into daily life. In addition to the face-to-face interactions that have long been the hallmark of a campus-based college experience, undergraduate students now are met with a myriad of web-based social experiences, from the primarily academic (BlackBoard Vista, online lectures, course blogs) to the primarily social (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit). The challenges and opportunities associated with these new venues of communication are yet to be fully understood, but they are part of an evolving new social and technological context. These innovations, which are by nature constantly in a state of flux (through remote app updates, redesigns, etc.), are in the early stages of empirical study.

Colleges and universities interested in cultivating a spirit of civic engagement on campus must consider not only traditional means of engagement, but also social media. Social media is an integral, but largely unexplored, part of the contemporary college student experience. The ubiquity of digital technologies and the social networking sites and applications that they administer among college students is clear. Data indicate that students are online for many hours each day and 90% of all undergraduates use Facebook, just one of many social networking sites (Dahlstrom, de Boor, Grunwald, & Vockley, 2011). The digitally networked lives of current students can be understood to be, at the very least, an added dimension of communication among all campus populations. In order to understand civic engagement among today's students, the mediating role of social media must be explored.

Higher education students no longer conduct daily life exclusively in physical, campus spaces. Organizational meetings, classroom lectures, social encounters, news gathering, and countless other interactions in undergraduate life also occur within the digital realm. For many students, the online and offline worlds are inextricably intertwined, and often are not even thought of as separate spaces (Martínez Alemán & Wartman, 2009). That is to say, for these students, sites like Facebook and Instagram are not escapes from college, but rather they are just another part of “campus.” This understanding is of primary importance, as it speaks to the perhaps incomplete view that practitioners and researchers may have when exploring the ways in which undergraduates become and remain civically engaged if they observe exclusively offline realms. In reality, the online spaces where students engage may be sites of civic engagement, revealing as much (or more) than offline spaces.

Research Question

As of 2013, scholarship within the areas of higher education, sociology, psychology, and political science regarding the effects of undergraduate social media use on student civic engagement is in its infancy. Extant work in this area is limited, and much of what is known on the related topic areas relates only to some aspects, such as civic engagement within higher education (but not social media) or social media and civic engagement (but not within higher education). Further, much of the existing data on these topic areas are quantitative in nature, and while this work can help define the parameters of the conversation, the depth of knowledge that comes with qualitative research data is lacking. This study seeks to address these gaps and provide insight into the potential role that social media play in the development of college student civic engagement behaviors and perceptions. The primary research question guiding this study is: How do students understand the connection between social media use and their civic

engagement while in college? Many research sub-questions were anticipated to arise during the data collection process, and as this study is designed to be exploratory in nature, findings should inform future work in related topic areas.

Social Media Use Data

General social media use. In order to keep up with the rapidly growing field, studies are periodically conducted to reevaluate current measures of social media use. The most current comprehensive study on general trends in United States social media use is the Pew Research Center's 2013 report, *The Demographics of Social Media Use – 2012*. Data within any study around social media should be considered a snapshot in time rather than as definitive and lasting, because user trends shift constantly. Still, Pew's (Duggan & Brenner, 2013) report offers some insights on the social media landscape in general terms. Across all social networking sites, Duggan and Brenner (2013) report age as inversely related to social media use with adults ages 18 to 29 as the most active users (83% of those online use some social networking site). Data also indicate that online adults in urban areas are significantly more likely to use social networking sites than their rural counterparts (70% versus 61%; Duggan & Brenner, 2013).

The dominant social networking site remains Facebook, and roughly two-thirds of American adults with online access report using the site (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). Women report higher rates of Facebook use than men (72% of Internet users versus 62% of Internet users), and generally speaking, age is inversely related to Facebook use (86% of those aged 18-29 are on Facebook, 73% of those 30-49, 57% of those 50-64, and 35% of those aged 65 and older). Duggan and Brenner (2013) also look at demographic breakdowns of Facebook use along other measures, including education attainment, household income, and urbanity. Within Facebook-specific data, however, the only other statistically significant finding is that those who

have attended some college are more likely to use Facebook than those who have not attended any college (73% of online adults compared with 60%, respectively; Duggan & Brenner, 2013).

Across other social networking sites, the Pew Report identifies several notable findings. Twitter, though similar in terms of demographics to Facebook in most areas, is used significantly more among black online users than among white peers (26% versus 14%; Duggan & Brenner, 2013). This finding may be of particular importance within higher education research, as previous studies identify social media as a potential pathway to social capital formation among minority populations enrolled in college (Junco, 2011). The difference in popularity of Twitter among black and white students speaks to the need for higher education leaders to avoid viewing student use of social media in a uniform way. The importance of social capital formation in campus communities is likely to motivate campus administrators to explore social media as a new avenue for student engagement (Junco, 2011). Duggan and Brenner's (2013) research identifies some of the differentiated ways in which users engage with social networking sites. Similar findings among other social networking sites include Pinterest as disproportionately popular among white and female online populations and Instagram as significantly more popular among black and Hispanic online populations than among white peers (Duggan & Brenner, 2013).

College Student Use of Social Media. The primary source of quantitative data on student use of web-based technologies is EDUCAUSE. EDUCAUSE, a nonprofit organization that develops research relating to information technology and higher education, puts out a yearly report on undergraduate student use of Internet-based technologies. The most recent EDUCAUSE report (Dahlstrom, 2012) represents a vital component of the literature on student social media use, as it is *the* major empirical work done yearly on the topic.

Findings from the most recent EDUCAUSE report indicate that the social media landscape in American higher education has changed rapidly in recent years (Dahlstrom, 2012). Blended-learning techniques, in which coursework is completed inside and outside the classroom offline and online, is now an expectation of college among college students (Dahlstrom, 2012). This shift has occurred alongside the growth of student ownership of web-ready devices, including both traditional computers and smaller mobile devices. Dahlstrom (2012) finds that although students cite larger screens and ease of use as benefits of computers over mobile devices, tablets and mobile devices are becoming less burdensome for students.

The new characteristics of the modern university, along with the high level of comfort that students feel using technology, create future opportunities for higher education. Students are responsive to mixed media presentations of course material, and they are also using social media to build relationships with peers (Dahlstrom, 2012). This openness should not be interpreted as universal, however, as selective management of technologies for distinct purposes remains a point of concern for students. Dahlstrom (2012) reports that the majority of students prefer to keep their social and academic lives separate. While there is great comfort in connecting with peer students online, students are less inclined to see connecting with faculty members on social media as appropriate. The EDUCAUSE study does not include data on student use of social media to connect with other areas of campus, including social media pages for university organizations and administrators. Due to this exclusion, questions remain with regard to issues of student use of social media in social capital formation. The discomfort that students report in terms of communication with faculty members on social networking sites may or may not persist across other areas of university life. The EDUCAUSE study does not reveal if students fully

utilize opportunities to form online social ties that may aid persistence and other measures of success.

Generally speaking, the findings of EDUCAUSE and Pew Research are consistent with the work of Junco, Merson, and Salter's (2010) study on college student use of social media. Across this scholarship, college-enrolled females (as well as Asian students) are more likely to have access to communication technology than their counterparts, but black students are more likely to use these technologies with higher frequency once they gain access (Junco, Merson, & Salter, 2010). This finding, along with the differences among white and black students in Twitter use, further elucidates the need for future studies to examine undergraduate student contexts in a more specific manner. Students are not monolithic, and there will be differences in terms of how and why students engage on social media.

College students are among the highest users of social media, and patterns suggest that undergraduate social networking site use can now be considered near-universal. Higher education professionals and researchers alike show an understanding of this new reality in recent scholarship. Although new data emerge regularly, many implications of social media's ubiquity within contemporary student life remain unexplored.

Theoretical Rationale: Social Capital and Civic Engagement

The interpersonal relationships and bonds that form the foundation for both social media use and civic engagement speak to the inherently social nature of these activities. This understanding of both social media use and civic engagement lends itself to a theoretical framework of social capital.

Social capital formation can be understood as a means to civic engagement. Early research on social media use supports the notion of social networking site use as a means of

social capital formation (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; 2011). Social capital, in turn, can subsequently lead to civic engagement (Putnam, 2000). This path, from social media use to civic engagement, through social capital formation, speaks to an important and largely unexplored area for research. The online interactions that occur among undergraduates and their peers, institution, and others within their social networks are worthy of study, as they may highlight the ways in which students become civically engaged.

The concept of social capital is central to understanding civic bonds and civil society, according to Putnam (2000). Social capital refers to the value of actions performed in a cooperative social network. Individuals and groups all exist and function within social networks, and their interactions with one another results in the exchange of value in the form of information and resources. In a dense social network, individuals and groups tend to practice generalized reciprocity, in which actions are performed with the assumption that deeds will eventually be returned in some form (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Although social capital is not synonymous with civic engagement, Putnam argues that civic engagement is a byproduct of social capital (2000).

Social media in the life of a college student may serve to promote social capital by supplementing traditional offline civic engagement behaviors with online activities. Therefore, social capital is a pivotal concept in the understanding of the ways in which college students use a medium (social media) and how that use might be associated with a particular behavior (civic engagement). A full exploration of social capital literature and other relevant concepts is included in Chapter Two's review of the literature.

Research Design

This proposed study is a qualitative investigation of the undergraduate social media and civic engagement experiences of three groups of students in formal co-curricular university organizations. The primary research question of this study is: How do students understand the connection between social media use and their civic engagement while in college?

This study is exploratory in nature, with multiple qualitative data sources used, including focus group interviews, individual interviews, and observations. Focusing specifically on a small number of undergraduate students as participants allows for a rich, multi-faceted perspective on each individual experience (and also allow for drawing out themes across participants). The students provide their own respective narratives in such a way that would not be possible within a more constrictive and less adaptable research design.

The study utilizes Adler and Goggin's (2005) categorization of civic engagement to identify university student organizations that parallel forms of civic engagement. Using maximum variation sampling (Patton, 1990), student group participants have been identified with the aid of key student affairs practitioners at the university study site. Various qualitative methods have been used, including individual interviews, focus group interviews, observations, and participant journaling. Heuristic coding has been used during the data collection process. The constant comparative method will be used, and codes will be generated inductively through open, axial, and selective coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Member checking has been used to compare researcher findings with participant experiences.

CHAPTER TWO: Review of Literature

Introduction to the Literature

In order to begin to understand the role that undergraduate social media use plays within the civic engagement behaviors of American college students, it is useful to first review literature on the relationship between civic engagement and higher education. Shifting societal needs and resources have helped to shape the role of civic engagement in American higher education, and recent technological developments have redefined the relationship further in recent years.

In this review, I will first provide a brief overview of the general notions of civic engagement and associated terms. Then I will discuss literature on the changing role of civic engagement within American higher education, first historically and then within a contemporary context. Third, I will review the literature that first explored social media as a potentially impactful aspect of student civic engagement. Fourth, I will explore literature on social media as a growing force within society, including demographics of use, definitions, common themes of use, and leading popular voices on the topic. Next, I will review literature on social media and campus environments, which will lead into final thoughts on the scant works dealing with assessments of recent social media-driven student civic engagement and activism.

Definitions: Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is an “elusive concept” (Boland, 2011) that for some is a broadly based idea and for others is more narrow in focus. This project will utilize Ehrlich’s (2000) definition of civic engagement as “...working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and nonpolitical processes” (Ehrlich, 2000, p. vi). Ehrlich’s definition is widely cited within the literature

(Boland, 2011; Hatcher, 2011; O'Connor, 2006), and provides a clear perspective that civic engagement can be defined broadly. The term is not merely confined to political engagement, although political activity can certainly be a part of civic engagement. Political engagement, when considered as part of civic engagement, may also be partisan in nature (Brint & Levy, 1999).

More narrow definitions of civic engagement include that of Einfeld and Collins (2008), who view the term as a “vehicle for pursuing democratic ideals of justice and equality in a multicultural society” (p. 105). These authors present a specific definition from which to understand action and results stemming from civic engagement. This definition of civic engagement may be most useful with the context of certain quantitative studies that seek to evaluate participation among large groups of participants. The definition may prove too constricting in regards to other approaches, however, like ethnography, which tends to be guided to some extent by participant perceptions of terms due to its combination of varying forms of data sources. Further, an early work on the intersection of social media and civic engagement (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009) found its inclination to use a traditional, overly specific definition of civic engagement as a limitation of their study. This method, the authors noted, limited the ability of researchers to account for new, constantly changing media methods of civic participation that may not be addressed in earlier definitions (Valenzuela, et al., 2009).

As Ehrlich's (2000) understanding of civic engagement focuses on the public good development and care for communities, it does not include activities that affect only the performing individual. However, it may be understood that if an individual's activity is self-directed in an effort to advance his/her knowledge of societal issues, that may be characterized as an effort to raise “civic awareness.”

“Civic participation” will be understood as a form of civic engagement in this project. Civic participation relates to the involvement of citizens within a community, an activity that is generally encouraged and believed to serve to benefit participant communities (Saguaro Seminar, 2000). Examples of civic participation may include (but will not be limited to): active campaigning for a political figure or cause, volunteering for community-based organizations, engaging in formal or informal discussions on current events and policies, organizing or participating in protests, or attending community forums, town halls, or meetings (Saguaro Seminar, 2000).

Civic Engagement and Civil Society as Powerful Social Forces

Civic engagement is seen by many as an activity that serves not only as a key component to the maintenance of a democracy, but also as a force that sustains social ties across communities small and large (Colby et al., 2000; Putnam, 1993; 2000). Within higher education, the literature points to a consensus that American higher education should play an integral role in addressing societal problems (Droege & Ferrari, 2012; Hartley, Saltmarsh, & Clayton, 2013; Mathews, 2009; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Issues including poverty, foreign and domestic governmental policies, and the wealth gap all represent societal challenges that would benefit from both critical reflection and pragmatic problem solving, skills that may be developed during the undergraduate years (Hartley, et al., 2013).

The concept of “civil society” is an important notion within the context of this project. Putnam (1993) identifies bowling leagues and labor unions as among the many forms that can shape civil society. Community organizations, issue-related organizations, and expressly civic groups all can be understood as aspects of civil society. Civil society is “the sphere of institution, organizations, and individuals located between the family, the state, and the market in

which people associate voluntarily to advance common interests,” as defined by Anheier (2004, p. 22).

Civil society organizations are not to be understood as either government affiliated or built for profit. Rather, these groups are centered upon shared interests for the advancement of the entire organization’s goals and interests. These organizations can help to aid government in addition to working for the good of a democratic society.

Putnam (2000) identifies civil society’s benefits as an agent for the development of behavioral patterns of civility and social norms that center around the public good. These are trends that can help to steady a democracy. This emphasis upon the collective over the individual derives from group work, identification with others, and voluntary norms. As a result, members of highly functioning civil societies have higher levels of social trust, political understanding, and political participation than others (Putnam, 1993, pgs. 89-90).

Social Capital

Although social capital as a concept can be defined in varying specific ways based upon the discipline within which it is being studied (Adler & Kwon, 2002), there does exist a generally agreed upon definition across the literature. Social capital can be understood as the information and resources that are exchanged and accumulated as a result of the relationships between people (Coleman, 1988). Exact forms of the resources accumulated vary depending on the exact nature of relationships and the contexts within which relationships exist. Analogous to but distinct from financial or human capital, social capital does have a value. Unlike financial or human capital, however, social capital is not “owned” or “possessed” by one individual or another, as it exists within the relationships between individuals in a network (Adler & Kwon, 2000).

Early conceptions of social capital are attributable to Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988). Bourdieu's (1986) early definition identifies social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (p. 248). Related early work on the topic of "weak ties" and "strong ties" by Granovetter (1973) is also of note, as it is considered a cornerstone of modern research on the larger topic of social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011). Putnam (1995; 2000) and Lin (2001) have produced subsequent widely cited scholarship on social capital.

There are societal benefits to social capital, including increases in participation in civic activities, trust among community members, public health outcomes, and lower crime rates, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancy (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Saguaro Seminar, 2000). Benefits of social capital for individuals are clear as well, as the networks that individuals develop provide access to information and opportunities that might otherwise be unavailable or difficult to obtain (Coleman, 1990; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Lin, 2001). Data indicate that these individual benefits include everything from information relating to employment opportunities (Granovetter, 1973), to lower rates of heart attacks and suicide (Saguaro Seminar, 2000), to higher levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004).

Social capital is a resource within a society that actually grows as it is used. The networks that are formed and produce social capital continue to exist and flourish as time goes on, provided network members keep up with connections. Putnam (1993; 2000) notes that social capital is more prominent within communities that inherit social capital and civic engagement-focused societal norms from previous generations. Social capital, according to Putnam, is self-

perpetuating across generations and within communities, and as such yields benefits for many years.

The exact nature of the network structures that best serve the development of social capital is a topic of debate within the literature. Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1993) claimed that networks characterized by a more closed structure (in which connections are dense, and an individual's connections are more likely to be independently connected to one another) serve to encourage and enforce social capital norms. Within this structure, because connections are less likely to be multiple degrees of separation from one another, trust is higher, and norms are well known and adhered to (Putnam, 1993). Burt (1992), however, argues that dense social networks result in information staying *within* social groups, rather than *between* groups, thus decreasing the potential larger societal benefits of social capital. Burt's (1992) view of social networks is not entirely contradictory to the work of Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1993), but it does place a greater emphasis on the importance of connections between groups of differing characteristics. Adler and Kwon (2000) evaluate both sides of this debate and conclude that benefits can be seen in both more closed and more open networks. The relative value of a network is context-dependent, according to these scholars (Adler & Kwon, 2000).

Much of the social capital literature is pre-Internet, and nearly all the literature is pre-social media. However, the notions of weak and strong ties, group formation, and the power of social networks (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1973; Lin, 2001; Putnam, 1993; 2000) all represent social dynamics that may translate into the digital sphere. Also, information gathering and building connections between individuals represent necessary aspects of civic engagement. Exploring these facets of civic engagement within an online context may provide us with a new perspective on technology's role in the development of civic behaviors. For these

reasons, social capital theory provides foundation for this dissertation. Additionally, this study may prove a useful update to current understanding of social capital theory.

The Strong and Weak Ties of Social Capital

The “ties” that exist within social networks, as identified above in reference to the work of Granovetter (1973), provide information regarding the varying values associated with social capital. Ties within a social network are known as either “weak ties” or “strong ties.” Strong ties are the connections through which individuals are networked in a long-standing, highly trusting way. Strong ties are generally between people that have known each other for some length of time, and they often have relative similarities in terms of current attributes because of similar backgrounds and homophily (Lin, 2001). For college students, these strong ties may be to close friends and family from a hometown. Weak ties are those connections within a social network that are newer, and more likely to be between people that have little or no prior connection. As a result, parties who share weak ties often have different resources and information at their disposal (Granovetter, 1973). College students, for example, might form weak ties with peer students through a group activity during an orientation program. Strong ties and weak ties are not opposing concepts; rather, they exist on a continuum and change over time. Weak ties, due to the fact that they often develop between individuals of differing backgrounds and resources, help to provide a “bridge” to information that would otherwise be difficult to come by. Among college students, these bridges to new and otherwise elusive information may help in the navigation of any new and challenging higher education environment.

Social networks promote social capital, which is why scholars have begun to explore the idea that digital social networking sites and applications might play a role in social capital formation (Ellison, et al., 2010). Social media may change an individual’s social network in

multiple ways, including helping to reshape and expand a network and lowering cost barriers for communication with a network connection (Ellison, et al., 2010). Building upon past data that indicate a relationship between social capital among undergraduate students and social media (Ellison et al., 2007; Valenzuela et al., 2009), recent scholarship explores social capital implications online. Focusing directly on Facebook, Ellison, et al. (2010) explore the varying ways in which users interact on Facebook and how these actions relate to social capital outcomes. Data indicate that social networking sites like Facebook may allow for the development of important weak ties, as social media provides scaffolding for relationship-building online (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2010). The authors suggest that social networking sites also provide a multitude of communication options for users that directly aid the development of relationships and subsequent social capital.

Bonding and Bridging Social Capital

Putnam (2000) makes an important distinction, identifying bonding social capital and bridging social capital as two separate types of social capital. Bonding social capital connects individuals to others that share similar characteristics of some sort. Bridging social capital links individuals to others that are dissimilar. Within a diverse and democratic society, it is vital for there to be both bridging and bonding social capital, so that individuals do not cluster into homogenous groups (Putnam, 2000). Bonding and bridging capital are both able to create positive and negative outcomes, but they are not to be understood as mutually exclusive (nor are they inversely related). In order to form a sound democratic society, both bonding and bridging capital are necessary (Putnam, 2000). Bonding social capital is important within a social network for many reasons, including helping minority populations to find cohorts of peers that aid the cultural identity development process. Bridging social capital can help individuals to

better understand the value of diversity as well as expose individuals to cognitive dissonance, a developmentally beneficial process (Putnam, 2000; Saguaro Seminar, 2000).

Contemporary Changes in Civic Engagement and Social Capital

In order to better understand the ways in which undergraduate social media use and student civic engagement may be associated, it is important to look at the literature in several related areas. Distinct areas of literature exist within several associated topic areas, including civic engagement, social media, and social capital formation, each of which have sub-topic areas that relate specifically to higher education. Taken as a whole, these areas of study illuminate current views and known data that may inform future empirical research.

In the 1990s, Putnam (1993; 1995) identified a decline in citizen interactions on an in-person basis, resulting in a decline in social capital. As a result, he argues, citizens are less equipped to collectively act with peers in facing America's societal problems. These trends are troubling because they undermine the societal benefits of a civil society, according to Putnam (1993).

A contrasting but not entirely contradictory viewpoint was presented by Wuthnow (1998), who agreed that civic participation has changed but sees the process differently. The author stated that the very notion of "involvement" has been redefined within society over the past several decades. According to Wuthnow (1998), the combined effects of an increasingly diverse and environmentally and technologically complex society are tangible within community institutions. Due to the changing realities of society, civic organizations are now more open to changes in membership and other organizational characteristics. The decreased rigidity of these groups allows for citizens to move more fluidly between organizations and define affiliations more ambiguously. Wuthnow's understanding of these societal trends speaks to the idea that

civic institutions, and subsequently our very understanding of social capital, are simply changing, and as a result civic participation is now more loosely defined.

The overlapping notions of Putnam (1993; 1995) and Wuthnow (1998) that civic involvement has changed dramatically over the last several decades was joined by other leading scholars (Skocpol, 1999) and further underscore the reasoning for scholarship that defines civic engagement broadly. By declining to strictly outline the elusive concept and instead allowing participants to self-define their actions, researchers may capture the current societal understandings of social capital and civic engagement, as understood by participants.

Increasingly negative public views towards political forces in the United States contribute as a detrimental force against civic engagement as well (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, Rosner, & Stephens, 2000). General public sentiment is one of distrust in existing democratic structures, and a tangible symptom of this national mood is decreased levels of civic and political participation. This trend is seen in particular within younger citizens, a sign that the situation may prove difficult in the years ahead as well (Colby et al., 2000). The disenchantment of American youth also underscores the potentially vital role that higher education may play in impacting movement towards a more civically engaged citizenry.

The historical evolution of American higher education has led to periods of change in civic engagement within the college environment. Early colleges in the United States made the preparation of civically engaged students an integral purpose of curriculum, often as a direct result of the religious affiliations of the institutions (Bryant, Gayles, & Davis, 2011). Since its founding, American higher education has developed according to societal needs. Education has become more secular, more of the population has been afforded access to postsecondary education, and wars have interrupted college enrollments and then resumed many collegiate

careers in waves. These developments, along with other historical and social events, each shaped the ways in which civic engagement is approached in American higher education (Bryant, et al., 2011). Although the entire history of civic engagement in higher education in the United States is beyond the scope of this review, recent history is shaped around identifiable events. The federal government has implemented various initiatives aimed at both improving educational access and increasing civic engagement, including AmeriCorps, the Corporation for National and Community Service, and the Federal Work Study Program (“Advancing Civic Learning,” 2012). National government initiatives, such as the creation of the Peace Corps in 1961 led to greater levels of volunteerism, while civic engagement of the 1960s became increasingly political because of sociopolitical issues of the decade (Bryant, et al., 2011). The 1980s were a period of declining interest among college students in community efforts, and the 1990s and 2000s brought about a public acknowledgement of disengagement and intentional efforts to change this trajectory (Bryant, et al., 2011; Ehrlich & Hollander, 1999; Hendel & Harrold, 2004).

Historical Context for the University as Force in Promotion of Civic Engagement and Social Capital

The American university has historically had a major role for citizen education and engagement. Thomas Jefferson’s work within education in the nation’s earliest years served to ground the trajectory of American higher education as a civic institution. Within his writings, Jefferson spoke about the importance of teaching children in areas of morality, history, and the importance of freedom (Jefferson, 1785). While Jefferson speculated that the youngest members of society were not fully prepared to begin grappling with areas such as religion, the schools could teach important foundational principles that would serve them well later in life. This

schooling could also lay the groundwork for the education that Jefferson envisioned colleges providing.

By instilling basic ideas in young citizens, Jefferson postulated that not only would educational leaders be able to begin identifying students with great promise, but also that all students would have a basic preparedness for serving as informed citizens. As a result of this broad-based education, the United States' democracy would be centered upon voters with the knowledge and the ability to process civic information and responsibilities. Jefferson's actions as he designed the University of Virginia reflected his principles, as he fiercely resisted bringing on faculty with federalist political views, instead seeking faculty that had republican views. From Jefferson's perspective, higher education informed democracy, which was the foundation for a movement towards equity. A faculty that supported these political beliefs was vital to educating the developing student population (Onuf & Sadosky, 2002).

Alexis de Tocqueville (1945) made note of the strength of civil society when he traveled the United States in the 1830's, and he observed that it was this ability to form connections within communities that served as the engine for American democracy. Citizen-led institutions, such as colleges and universities, serve to foster a sense of civic participation and offer outlets for participation. Civic engagement, according to Tocqueville (1945), was the distinction that enabled early American societal success. In many ways, these areas of Tocqueville's observations and propositions aligned with Jefferson's educational initiatives.

Contemporary Views on the University's Role in Promotion of Civic Engagement and Social Capital

The American university's current role in moral and civic development among students is not clearly agreed upon in the literature, and there is a range that exists between those that see

the university's efforts in a critical way (Bok, 2001; Colby et al., 2000; Hartley, et al., 2013) and those that are more optimistic with regards to the current landscape (Mathews, 2009; O'Connor, 2006). Colby et al. (2000) question the current status of student exposure to the moral and civic issues that foster development in these areas. While liberal arts education is designed to create the conversations and moments of cognitive dissonance that aid student development, faculty members may be stopping short of the most important learning opportunities (Colby et al., 2000). This potential problem may be caused (or at least exacerbated) by faculty disinclinations to provide critical insights of historical works that carry the discussion into practical application in students' lives. Seen in conjunction with the desire among faculty to present an unbiased, impersonal viewpoint, the practice of mere critique actually can result in an underdeveloped sense of moral and civic responsibility among students (Colby et al., 2000).

Further critiques of the status of civic engagement practices in American higher education cite ambiguous institutional goals and a failure to meet the needs of the public good as evidence of systemic shortcomings (Hartley, et al., 2013). The systemic issues are driven by the fragmentation of the civic engagement movement, as competing groups put forth varying understandings of engagement without always working as a united force in collegiate culture (Hartley, et al., 2013). Further, the atmosphere on college campuses is often intentionally depoliticized by university officials (Colby et al., 2000), which in turn can create gaps in the learning process for students (Hartley, et al., 2013).

Cautious optimism is expressed elsewhere within the literature, with some scholars (Mathews, 2009; O'Connor, 2006) noting new developments in recent years while also highlighting areas for growth within universities. Mathews (2009) finds that civic engagement has evolved in new ways in higher education, and that this has resulted in the establishment of

some encouraging outlets for civic engagement. Mathews (2009) references new centers and institutes that work with the primary focus of creating opportunities, often hosted at universities, for citizens to gain practical political and other civic experience. The author also mentions recent efforts at Wake Forest University to develop a program centered upon the notion of deliberative democracy, in which students (and other citizens) are encouraged to discuss issues publicly. The conversations work to explore the moral and ethical implications of policy and public decision-making. Efforts such as this one, Mathews (2009) notes, help to recalibrate the public dialogue that can animate democracy.

Similar expressions of cautious optimism are found in the work of O'Connor (2006), who contextualizes civic engagement within the modern constraints and opportunities of higher education. O'Connor (2006) reviews recent trends in the literature and concludes that while some new, unanticipated challenges have arisen during recent years (post-9/11 security concerns, harsh economic realities), so to have developments that aid an engaged citizenship (higher education partnerships with external organizations and service-learning initiatives at universities). O'Connor also identifies the Internet's emergence as a vital tool in cultivating a civically engaged society. The author cites Campus Compact (www.compact.org), the National Forum for Higher Education and the Public Good (www.thenationalforum.org), and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (www.civicyouth.org) as examples of online destinations that help to not only inform the public on matters of civic importance, but also as sites that help to bridge the gap between passive information-gathering and pragmatic paths to offline activism (O'Connor, 2006). These forces, found on the web and in burgeoning initiatives on campuses and in institutes, speak to the future potential for civic engagement within higher education and the students for whom these institutions operate.

There is some research that indicates that while large government efforts at building social capital across society are difficult to implement and not often successful, localized government initiatives do show signs of effectiveness (Warner, 1999). Universities may be able to mimic this community-based strategy and serve as a proxy for (or partner with) local governments in the promotion of social capital. Various scholars have identified localized, delegated social capital building as a promising path for government involvement in community-building efforts (Lowndes & Wilson, 2001; Warner, 1999). This form of involvement could conceivably work with colleges and universities serving as intermediaries for the government. Student affairs and academic affairs could conceivably both have involvement in developing this framework, in which universities could take the lead on targeted social capital development efforts on a college campus. This model has not yet been explicitly implemented in higher education, and the literature speaks to an ongoing debate as to the best path forward for colleges and universities.

Early Research on Social Media and Civic Engagement

This project aims to bring together the burgeoning field of research on social media in the undergraduate context and the long-standing tradition of college student civic participation as a foundational outcome of higher education. As social media itself is a new development, the literature in this area is sparse and most pieces on the topic can be classified within the realm of popular media or thought pieces. Still, some academic work is underway that has begun to explore the issues of social media use among college students, some of which also addresses the civic engagement behaviors and attitudes of these students.

A portion of the quantitative analysis regarding the intersection between social media use and undergraduate civic engagement derives from the work of faculty at Michigan State

University (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; 2008; Vitak, Zupe, Smock, Carr, Ellison, Lampe, 2010). An evaluation of the 2008 United States presidential election found that activity among students during the election cycle in terms of social media use and political activity was complex and not easily parsed (Vitak, et al., 2010). Student users were comfortable sharing political views and other content on their social media feeds, yet the participation level was considered to be somewhat shallow. The authors concluded from these results that it was likely that the study's participants were essentially provided an entry-level path to political and civic participation through social media. This deduction, the authors note, contrasts with an opposing potential conclusion that may be drawn from the data that the students were merely interested in participating civically in a low-impact, low-effort manner (Vitak, et al., 2010). Within peer-reviewed academic journals, the literature is mostly silent on this distinction between passive social media use as a substitute for offline civic engagement, but recent events such as the Occupy Wall Street movement and the Arab Spring have drawn significant academic attention to these issues and may lead to future work in this area of study (Howard, Duffy, Freelon, Hussain, Mari, Mazaid, 2011; Kreiss & Tufekci, 2013).

The 2008 presidential election was also a potential turning point for social media use among college students, as participants reported a slim leaning towards acceptance of politicians on social media sites, which may be an indication of changing social norms online (Vitak et al., 2010). This study also found a positive relationship between politically focused student use of Facebook and overall political participation. Vitak et al. (2010) concluded from these data that online political behaviors begat greater levels of civic participation and vice versa. Other data from the study were less conclusive, such as the negative relationship between the intensity of Facebook use (based on time spent, psychological orientation to the site, and other interactions)

and political participation. The authors propose this as an area for further study, as many conclusions may be drawn from this particular area of the study's data.

Social capital formation among college students as it relates to social media use is an area of study that has seen some academic focus of late. Valenzuela et al. (2009) put forth the definitive early-era study on this topic. The authors found a small, yet significant, positive association between student Facebook use and their civic engagement and political participation. This study is foundational as it provides a starting point for future work, but the work does focus on several other social indicators as well, including student happiness.

Building upon the earlier works of Ellison, et al. (2007) and Valenzuela, et al. (2009), Ellison Steinfield and Lampe (2011) focus on the relationship between social media, Facebook in particular, and social capital formation. The authors speak to the important role that Facebook plays in contemporary social life among undergraduates as a place to form weak ties. Beyond simply looking at whether or not students are active users on Facebook as a dichotomous variable, the authors suggest that their data speak to the importance of understanding the behaviors within the site. Doing so will help researchers to grasp the full implications of social capital formation within social networking sites (Ellison, et al., 2011).

An exploration of the remaining recent literature on social media use among college students that addresses civic engagement even in a cursory fashion does so with a general, practitioner based approach. Early works in the literature address topics like encouraging students to practice civil discourse online (Junco & Chickering, 2010) and the new ways in which students receive and understand information online (Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007). While these works are quite useful for student affairs practitioners in the beginning stages of

understanding social media and the associated campus implications, they are less rigorous than the primary research cited earlier.

Group Polarization

One area of the research literature that is relevant to this work explores the notion of group polarization (Myers & Lamm, 1976; Sunstein, 2002). Group polarization refers to the idea that viewpoints become more extreme as a deliberative body works through a discussion, and the direction of the movement is towards that which the members tended before the discussion (Sunstein, 2002). This phenomenon is focused within communities that are unified in some way prior to group formation, for instance a political party affiliation or stance on a particular issue that has gathered together. Sunstein (2002) identifies these groups as *enclaves*, in which communities form around a particular characteristic among members. The author weighs the dangers (driving groups of people to political extremism and violence, for example) and social benefits (such as providing voice to marginalized groups) of group polarization as well as its role in fostering civic engagement.

Sunstein's (2002) work updates an earlier discussion of group polarization (Myers & Lamm, 1976), and it addresses some modern contexts. However, online communities within this piece are only briefly mentioned. Still, there exists the possibility that student involvement online in communities that reinforce previously held beliefs (especially in a way that may lead to offline action) might create a confounding force within the data of this study. This area of the literature illustrates the nuanced forces that help guide civic engagement and is worthy of consideration during this study.

Social Media: Overall Nature of the Literature

Social media as an academic topic area should be considered both new and engaged in a state of perpetual evolution. Social media as a marketplace is not yet fully developed, and the myriad ways in which the Internet and other technologies will become more “social” are yet to be fully realized. Each year, the social media market shifts in new and unanticipated ways. Due to the fact that the current reality includes companies posing challenges to existing industry leaders, going through mergers and acquisitions, and forming to fill specialized voids in the marketplace, the social media landscape is a difficult field to capture with empirical data. Even slight changes such as application updates and interface shifts might alter the ways in which users interact with social networking sites. As a result, much of the writing that is more than several years old is removed from current contexts. This transient nature of the literature limits the type of content that can retain its relevance.

The literature on social media and its relevant applications also tends to be tied to specific contexts of any given research project. New web technologies appear and evolve constantly, and as a result the uses and social contexts of the Internet also are in a constant state of flux. This status as an ever-evolving field of study is both a benefit and detriment to the literature base, as topics are approached from many viewpoints and within many contexts. Studies are not yet regularly replicated, as the changing environment of social media creates a need for new perspectives on nearly every topic to account for new information.

Another limitation within social media research is that much of the literature that exists consists of opinion pieces that are produced within popular media including videos, magazines, newspapers, and countless other mediums. In this sense, the subject area can be characterized by many opinion pieces and more anecdotal information than empirical research. Regardless, this

literature review purposefully omits many pieces that fit into one or more of the aforementioned categories and highlights important work that rises to a scholarly level.

The Development of Web 2.0 and Social Media

Martínez-Alemán and Wartman (2009) provide a look back at how technological developments emerged in the late 20th century to usher in a new, computer-centered era. As recently as the 1960s, computers that facilitated communication were focused within local networks, primarily closed network areas of research such as universities. Developments in the late 1960s through the mid-1970s saw the emergence of technology that allowed computers to send data back and forth, which set the groundwork for the commercialization of the Internetwork Protocol (IP) in the 1980s and 1990s. The 1980s saw a rise in the production and adoption of user-friendly personal computers, and developments by both IBM and Apple brought this technology into the mainstream. By the mid to late 1990s, the Internet's rise as a useful tool for individuals merged with the refining of new user-friendly computers to begin a new movement (Martínez-Alemán & Wartman, 2009).

The era in which computer technology shifted away from a strictly research-oriented, academic user base and towards a popular audience was signified through its movement from a text-based interface to a more visual model (Martínez-Alemán & Wartman, 2009). Microsoft's introduction of the Windows Operating System brought in an intuitive structure to computer use that relied more heavily on a graphical user experience. While this was not the first operating system to emerge with these characteristics, it was the first to popularize the technology. In many ways, this innovation set the stage for the social networking sites that would emerge in the subsequent decade.

Martínez-Alemán and Wartman (2009) posit that understanding this development is a prerequisite to grasp the pivotal moment that followed: The existing paradigm of the Internet was changed by the introduction of social networking sites. Friendster and MySpace set the stage for the current dominant social networks, the most prominent of which is Facebook. These early websites drew upon the notion that individuals had a web of connections to others. By featuring these connections as a means for facilitating relationships, social networks formed the quintessential manifestation of the Web 2.0 movement (Martínez-Alemán & Wartman, 2009).

“Web 2.0,” as coined by Tim O’Reilly in 2004 (O’Reilly, 2005), refers to the maturation of the Internet that occurred over the most recent decade. Within this growth period, the web became a place in which information was freely exchanged, and the software used to transmit this information began to repackage the user experience. Whereas the old Internet experience presented a one-way flow of information (from website to user), the relationships online became much more dynamic within Web 2.0. This new wave brought about not only an advanced interface and graphical experience, but it also leveraged the collective to provide a better user experience for the individual. Web 2.0 brought about an era of information sharing among users, and this new era is perhaps best embodied through the proliferation of social media that exists today.

Web 2.0 as a general term is often used interchangeably with the term “social media,” but while the two terms are related, they are actually distinct concepts (Haenlein & Kaplan, 2010). Web 2.0 refers to the more general notions around web design, such as how content is created, shared, and consumed (Haenlein & Kaplan, 2010). Social media are the specific websites and applications that facilitate the Web 2.0 content, so a social networking site like Facebook would be considered an example of social media that exemplifies Web 2.0 principles (Haenlein &

Kaplan, 2010). As per this understanding, social media websites can be broadly understood to include open-sourced wiki sites, like Wikipedia, social networking sites, like Facebook, and blogging platforms, like Wordpress, along with any other site that incorporates multi-directional sharing and networking (Haenlein & Kaplan, 2010).

Leading Voices on Social Media

Two authors that emerge within the literature as leading popular thinkers on social media are Clay Shirky and Sherry Turkle. While each author has a particular subset of topic areas for which they are known, both Shirky and Turkle have published particular works of great influence on social media.

Shirky's breakthrough work, *Here Comes Everybody*, is a 2008 book that explores the shifting realities around collective action due to the growth of online sharing mechanisms. Perhaps due to his "eloquent and accessible" style, Shirky found a large audience for *Here Comes Everybody*, a book that was met with positive reviews and remains widely cited today (Schillinger, 2009). In his work, Shirky (2008) identifies tools on the Internet such as Wikipedia that provide new avenues for group formation, discussion, and action that were previously only possible within large institutions. By constructing free, simple platforms for action, this "social" side of the web removes long-existing barriers such as prohibitive investments in both cost and time. Online environments that allow for ease of action result in shifting behaviors and new communities alike.

Shirky's assessment of social media takes a mostly optimistic tone; the author sees the emergence of social tools online as the key force in a paradigm shift in which consumers of information are empowered with choice. Rather than the one-way delivery of information that existed in years past, the multi-directional flow of information requires consumers to interact

with one another to inform decision-making in nearly every aspect of life (Shirky, 2008). This description of the strengthening of social networks digitally directly ties back to the concepts introduced by Putnam (2000) of social capital formation. The many ties that the newly social Internet allows for can be considered both bridging and bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000; Shirky, 2008). Similarly, the simplicity of sharing information online allows for what the author refers to as “mass amateurization” (Shirky, 2008, p. 66). As tools emerge that encourage the creation of easily sharable social media content, the line blurs significantly between those traditionally viewed as “experts” and those viewed as “novices.” This shift towards mass amateurization allows individuals to circumvent traditional paths to accreditation or certification and reach a popular audience directly. Still, Shirky does acknowledge the negative side to free flowing information. With the infusion of nearly unlimited voices into one medium, how is truth separated from fiction? Will bad data overrun good data, as users become content editors? Shirky’s questions reverberate throughout recent literature, particularly in the work of Pariser (2012), who looks at self-selection of information within social networking sites.

Another important aspect of social media, according to Shirky (2008), is that we should not think of the online world as existing separately from offline lives. Rather, the online world is an augmenting force within individual lives, and in many ways the two are deeply integrated into one another. Again, this notion of the online as a support for the offline speaks to the possibilities for social media as a conduit to social capital formation. Shirky also notes that the bulk of content online is mostly driven by a small group of individuals, and others add the remaining content in small and less frequent contributions.

Shirky’s (2008) interpretation of social media and other associated technologies can be considered landmark not only for its early recognition of contemporary trends but also for how

well it has withstood the passage of time. While some works age dramatically over only several years (often due to the emphasis of media use trends that become obsolete), Shirky's successful prognostication of social media traits that would endure allows *Here Comes Everybody* to serve as an essential cornerstone of the social media literature, even today. Shirky's own subsequent work builds off *Here Comes Everybody*, as is evident in his 2010 follow-up, *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age*. This latter work identifies the shift in role among media audiences from consumers to producers, made possible by the popularization of social media over television.

A different perspective on social media and society is put forth in the work of Sherry Turkle (2011), a scholar that takes a cautionary approach to understanding new technology. Turkle's seminal work, *Alone Together*, can be considered part of a multi-decade series of the author's writings on technology and society, but it is her most fully realized work as it combines past theoretical propositions with contemporary interview data.

Turkle's (2011) work has been criticized for its "sanctimonious" tone and the clear perspective that the author puts forth a great deal of personal, subjective judgment when describing the actions of interview subjects (Kakutani, 2011). The evaluation of interview responses and retellings of anecdotes often is punctuated with a detached sense of bewilderment (or disgust). These criticisms are not enough to fully undercut her main thesis, however, which is that technology is not without psychological side-effects on users. Turkle (2011) posits that while we are not without some level of control over new technologies, the inverse relationship is also rather significant and worthy of study.

Turkle (2011) puts forth a view of social networking as a "task" to be performed amidst busy schedules, rather than as a means to improving one's life. Ultimately, Turkle's view is that

technology (and the social norms that it has helped create) has become overgrown within our lives. From the author's perspective, we as a society must take steps to realign our priorities, which is something that she claims is still possible. Turkle's cautionary evaluation of technology use in American society does serve to anchor the more skeptical realms of the social media literature base. The many ways in which digital media can have a positive impact on society has created a wealth of optimistic scholars that hope to leverage these new opportunities, but it is important to also provide a counterbalance, and Turkle's (2011) writing serves this purpose well.

Online Group Polarization, Enclaves, and the "Filter Bubble"

Group polarization, as described in offline contexts earlier by Myers and Lamm (1976) and Sunstein (2002), among others, is an issue receiving heightened attention in recent social media literature. Both Bellah (1985) and Sunstein (2002) describe community formation that occurs around specific shared characteristics, referred to by both authors as *enclaves*. When formation includes a physical space, the groups are located within lifestyle enclaves, as defined by Bellah (1985). Lifestyle enclaves are separate from traditional notions of community, according to Bellah, because while communities are functioning systems that honor the distinct individual nature of a collection of differentiated persons, a lifestyle enclave "is fundamentally segmental and celebrates the narcissism of similarity" (Bellah, 1985, p. 73). Those that do not fit into the norms of the enclave are rendered irrelevant, if existent at all. More recent literature points to new, online developments in this trend. Social media, due in large part to its ability to customize sites to individual users, is now changing the ways in which individuals receive information and promoting group formation of self-selected enclaves (Pariser, 2012).

Pariser (2012) writes about what he calls the "filter bubble," which refers to the relatively recent trend of social media websites (including major sites like Google and Facebook) to gather

data on users and customize user experiences based on past use history. Many social networking sites collect data on every aspect of use across their sites and mobile apps, from time of use, to items clicked on, to reaction time that it takes a user to click on an item. These sites then use that information to rearrange the site on each use, such that a user is more likely to engage with the site, and subsequently use the site for longer periods of time and at a more active level (Pariser, 2012). The algorithms that determine the exact content within a social media feed can be quite elusive for study, as they are constantly in flux. Facebook designers recently disclosed that their newsfeed algorithm is in fact adjusted every week (Somaiya, 2014). The result of this customization aspect of social media is that media exposure is shaped by individual behaviors, and a positive feedback loop is created. Social media users are (often unwittingly, without ever having “opted in”) presented with a custom-built version of information that ultimately shapes their behaviors in more extreme ways (Pariser, 2012). As behaviors are reinforced and sites become more and more tailored to individual clicks and views, users are exposed to an ever-narrowing field of content. When the content that is narrowed is global news within a Facebook feed, for instance, each user can end up being exposed to a very specific subsection of information, entirely different than that of the next user (Pariser, 2012). Before the advent of social media, individuals were able to self-select which media sources they viewed, but even within those choices often existed a diversity of editorial opinions, because most information sources had to cater to many people at once. The data that derive from social media sites allow for granular customizations, such that there is an unlimited number of ways in which a website or application can present itself (Pariser, 2012).

When considered within the context of social network research on homophily, Pariser’s (2012) description of new trends in social media take on added relevance. The homophily

principle is predicated on the notion that people with shared characteristics come into contact with each other more often than those of dissimilar traits (Lin, 2001; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Recent studies evaluate Twitter under this premise, and findings indicate that Twitter users tend to end up engaging with users with viewpoints similar to their own (Barberá, 2013; Yardi & Boyd, 2010).

The research literature on Twitter and other social networks as a polarizing force within the media landscape is an incomplete but developing area. The two major studies conducted to date on the subject approach the relationship from contrasting methodological perspectives. Yardi and Boyd (2010) follow the public stream of Twitter data surrounding a particular, politically charged event (the shooting of an abortion doctor) and observe and analyze relevant user posts and interactions. Barberá (2013), through a presentation of data from across the 2012 United States presidential election cycle, builds a study around individual users and the accounts that they follow. A common theme across this research literature is the tendency of users to not only follow accounts of similar users, but also to engage in dialogue with these similar users as well (Barberá, 2013; Yardi & Boyd, 2010). Despite the fact that Twitter allows users to access public streams of information through hashtags and an easily searchable Trending Topics panel, data indicate that users in the studies consistently sought out voices similar to their own. While there is some indication that Twitter conversations do occur in limited amounts between users of opposing ideologies, clusters of interactions are much more likely to occur around homogenous groups (Barberá, 2013; Yardi & Boyd, 2010).

Taken alongside Pariser's (2012) examination of social networking sites as increasingly personalized structures and extant literature on group polarization and enclave formation, the data presented by Barberá (2013) and Yardi and Boyd (2010) speak to potential concerns that

may be raised in the relationship between social media use and civic engagement. If civil society benefits the public good by promoting dialogue, civility, and a standard of social norms (Putnam, 2000), then the segmentation of political and social dialogue that is happening online may prove detrimental to society at large. By providing a means for individuals to self-select themselves into restricted areas of communication, social media's "filter bubble" may limit user exposure to contrasting and challenging ideas about the world. In American higher education, in which the social media user base is large, this shortcoming of social media is a problematic proposition. Challenging traditionally held beliefs and providing safe zones for cognitive development are widely regarded desired outcomes of American higher education ("Learning Reconsidered," 2004). As such, the literature indicates that the premise of social media as an avenue for conflict avoidance speaks to a potentially degrading force within the civic engagement learning process for college students.

College Environments and Social Media

Comprehensive works on social media use in the higher education environment are largely absent from the literature. To date, the two most significant works remain *Connecting to the Net.Generation* by Junco and Mastrodicasa (2007) and *Online Social Networking on Campus: Understanding What Matters in Student Culture* by Martínez-Alemán and Lynk Wartman (2009). Both books provide early insights into web technology's impact within higher education.

Junco and Mastrodicasa's (2007) work is indicative of the difficulty scholars face when approaching the topic of social media. Many of the references used are dated and largely irrelevant within current contexts, and as a result the book serves more as a point of historical context than as usable data today. Nevertheless, Junco and Mastrodicasa (2007) put forth the

first comprehensive attempt at understanding social media's role within American higher education. Survey data included in this work are focused primarily on very basic measures of website visits and use patterns and again are more useful as a snapshot of the mid-2000s than as an indication of current trends.

Martínez-Alemán and Lynk Wartman's (2009) work avoids some of the pitfalls of Junco and Mastrodicasa (2007) through the inclusion of student interviews and the focus on campus climate and culture. This methodological decision allows for themes to emerge from the writing that are relevant today. Rather than simply compiling a quantitative snapshot of student use of social media, Martínez-Alemán and Lynk Wartman (2009) probe the underlying motivations for student social media use. Within this work, students note that there are many reasons why they are involved on Facebook, such as for sharing and viewing photos of themselves and others, to stay in touch with people that are located geographically close and far, to express their personal identity (ranging from sexuality to personal interests), and for voyeurism (Martínez-Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2009). Martínez-Alemán and Lynk Wartman (2009) also discovered that students report using Facebook as a primary tool in the transition between high school and college. In fact, many students interviewed utilize social media not only for the direct purpose of sharing pragmatic information, but also to gain a more general idea of what a particular college experience will entail for them (Martínez-Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2009). This finding is key in supporting the notion of social media use as a means to building social capital in the higher education process. Students within this study sought out digital paths to information and online connections with potential peers and university resources.

Martínez-Alemán and Lynk Wartman's (2009) study is also notable for its prescient suggestion that universities position undergraduate student leaders in building social bridges to

prospective students. Within the pre-college experience, Martínez-Alemán and Lynk Wartman (2009) come across many students for whom social media represents the primary connection between high school life and a future college life. In this sense, an entire new generation of students is socializing to a college campus prior to the formal, school-sanctioned first day of orientation. In light of this finding, Martínez-Alemán and Lynk Wartman (2009) put forth the notion that informed student leaders can serve as a valuable resource in monitoring online sites, helping others, and correcting misinformation.

Other major works within the literature are largely collections of essays and non-peer reviewed writings on social media in higher education or outsider approaches that seek new paths for understanding. The popular book *DIY U: Edupunks, Edupreneurs, and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education* by Anya Kamenetz (2010) falls within the latter category. Kamenetz (2010) argues that costs of higher education and failings within the system drive unhappy students to seek out new and innovative paths to an education. This process, the author notes, is aided by new online technologies that allow individuals to pick and choose disparate pieces of training and education and patch together their own vision of a higher education (Kamenetz, 2010). While provocative in many ways and well reasoned in its construction, Kamenetz's writing ultimately serves the purpose of critique of higher education and speculation on the future of the field, but little more. The author undermines her main thesis that a revolution is upon us in higher education by holding steadfast in her rejection of conventional notions of college. *DIY U* focuses entirely on change aspects of the college environment and largely ignores the hegemonic component of a structure that has several hundred years of established societal value in the United States. Still, Kamenetz (2010) does highlight important new technologies within higher education like Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) that are

a growing part of the higher education landscape. These technologies will play a role within the future of higher education, but it is not yet known how impactful they will prove in shaping the college experience.

E-Learning and the digital classroom. A significant portion of the literature on social media and higher education focuses on the academic portion of the undergraduate experience. Often referred to as e-learning, in which digital and online media is used to develop coursework, the instructional side of social media is now an area of interest within academia. Specifically, typical scholarship exists on case studies of classroom use (Schroeder & Greenbowe, 2009), general use of social media within course curriculum (Wankel, 2009), and aspects of offline coursework that may be preferable to move online (Silius, Kailanto, & Tervakari, 2011). This segment of the literature is notable for the prevalent theme of changing environments and expectations within higher education. Students, instructors, and administrators are all moving towards greater acceptance of social media (as well as broader information technologies) in crafting the future of American higher education. The attitudinal changes that scholars see across higher education provide cause for researchers to believe that current and future contexts will prove receptive to the implementation of new technological advances.

Other studies deal specifically with faculty adoption of social media and other online technologies. The benefits of faculty use of social media sites like Facebook include increased levels of student trust and engagement with faculty members. This outcome may be difficult to reach in practice, particularly if students are uncomfortable with online faculty communication (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). Twitter may provide a useful middle ground in the online communication process between students and faculty members, as it allows information to travel

one way and thus can provide more student privacy (Sturgeon and Walker, 2009). In this sense, social media may enable social capital development among students and promote engagement without creating insurmountable privacy issues.

The “digital divide” as a fading premise. The issue of faculty and administrative adoption of social media specifically and Internet technologies generally relates back to the “digital divide” concept put forth in popular media. Although students today live comfortably in a world with advanced web technologies, the literature is not entirely clear on the differences in technology use between generations. The current generation of students is known under many different names, many of which relate to the idea that they have been raised in an Internet-based world. These terms for the generation include the “digital cognoscenti,” or “digital connoisseurs” (Salaway, Katz, Caruso, Kvavik, & Nelson, 2006, p. 5), “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001), and the “net generation” (Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007). Ultimately, despite the many terms used, they all describe the same general idea of students understanding the Internet and its uses more than any other generation, having grown up alongside the technology. This is a common assumption across nearly all the literature on social media and universities, across thought pieces and empirical studies. Similarly, much of the extant writing speaks of a “digital divide” that exists between generations, in which members of the younger, current college generation are the native speakers of the technological language and older users are working with it as a second language (Salajan, Schonwetter, Cleghorn, 2010).

Upon review of previous empirical studies and suspicion that the digital divide may be exaggerated, Salajan, Schonwetter, and Cleghorn (2010) conducted an empirical study that explored the issue. Although the work was limited by its small sample size (32 students and 20 faculty members) and single-campus focus (University of Toronto Dental School), this

quantitative empirical research study is a rare recent look at the digital divide. The study found that the current conversation on the digital divide is an oversimplification of a complex matter, and that much of the perceived difference amongst age groups is mostly myth.

Interestingly, Salajan, Schonwetter, and Cleghorn (2010) found that the significant differences amongst the age groups were merely in expectation of technological efficacy. Older and younger participants both predicted that the younger group would be far more knowledgeable with regards to Internet technologies, but core competencies were found to be relatively similar. The findings of this study are important to note for the purposes of future work because of the contrast provided to many of the questions that might be immediately raised regarding university use of social media. For instance, when addressing how best to reach potential, current, and future students, administrators might make the claim (based on false assumptions) that they themselves are far apart from students in terms of their understanding of Internet-based technology. While this study does not evaluate nearly enough data to be categorized as highly generalizable, it does provide a strong argument for opening the debate on the digital divide. Perhaps the researchers, along with the past work that they used to contextualize their study, illuminated a false assumption that exists within the social media literature. Whether Salajan, Schonwetter, and Cleghorn (2010) set the groundwork for a shift in the collective understanding of generational use of technology or not, their study provides a sense that the understanding of the relationship may not yet be complete.

Marc Prensky, the creator of the term “digital natives” that largely started the conversation on the digital divide among generations, now sees his original premise as dated (Prensky, 2012). Recent scholarship by other authors scrutinizes terminology like “digital natives” and “net generation” that perpetuate the notion of age-related gaps in technology

comprehension as well (Bennett & Maton, 2010). Instead of thinking of considering the differences among generational use of social media and other digital technologies, we should begin to think in terms of “digital wisdom,” according to Prensky (2012). Prensky’s (2012) notion of “digital wisdom” refers to both the ways in which technology aids human capacity for wisdom as well as the wisdom that humans use in developing and engaging with technology. According to the author, digital technology has reached enough of a widespread audience and endured for long enough that generational issues of technology use are less relevant than ever. Within higher education, Prensky’s call for a shift in the debate has wide-reaching repercussions. Past concerns of students and leaders of higher education approaching technological advances from differing and irreconcilable perspectives may no longer be applicable.

Social media as pathway to undergraduate engagement. Social media is viewed elsewhere in the literature as a potentially powerful conduit to college student engagement (Heiberger & Harper, 2008; Junco & Cole-Avent, 2008; Violino, 2009). Social networking sites are now a major part of the undergraduate student experience in such a way that they can be viewed as seamlessly integrated into daily life (Junco & Cole-Avent, 2008). Higher education’s response has been to develop social media sites to represent individual institutions and departments through which students may interact (Violino, 2009). Institutions of higher education have also developed professional positions that are exclusively responsible for the implementation and maintenance of online networking resources for students (Violino, 2009). The result of the new practices on college campuses has been positive, as students now regularly use social networking sites to access campus resources as well as to engage with their peers online (Junco, 2011). Student use of social media to connect with others and collect and share

information is evidence of the potential for social capital formation online, even though this process may not yet be fully realized. Much work remains to be done and universities must stay proactive in meeting the needs of a developing populace (Heiberger & Harper, 2008; Junco & Cole-Avent, 2008; Violino, 2009; Benson & Filippaios, 2010).

Consistent with earlier findings by Martínez-Alemán and Lynk Wartman (2009), prospective students have shown a desire to connect with potential colleges early in the college selection process (Benson & Filippaios, 2010). Data indicate that students are most interested in connecting with other prospective and current students early in the college search, a trend which can be seen once they arrive on campus (Benson & Filippaios, 2010). Social media can be viewed as a powerful pathway to social capital formation when these student perspectives are considered. When students are able to connect directly with both their larger community organization, their college or university of choice in this instance, and their peers, they are proactive in exchanging information and building social ties. Although students within this situation do share a higher education institution in common (which speaks to bonding social ties), they also may be exposed to students with otherwise dissimilar backgrounds, and in this sense bridging social ties may also come from social media use (Putnam, 2000).

Issues and concerns of social media use among college students. The literature on social media use among college students contains a number of pieces on problems and concerns relating to technology. This area of the literature, it should be noted, is more heavily based in the period shortly after social media's proliferation and is not as prevalent in recent years. Kolek and Saunders (2008) discuss the dangers of excessive self-disclosure online among college students. The authors look at a random selection of student profiles and find that students were

unlikely to use privacy controls, even in cases where incriminating activities were depicted (Kolek & Saunders, 2008). Mitrano (2008) addresses other privacy concerns, noting that there are no longer standard settings on social media sites, which creates a need for constant education on social networking site use. Lastly, another concern addressed within the literature relates to the idea of identity management online. Whereas students that are concerned with portraying a hardworking persona are unlikely to post inappropriate content online, some students desire a more rebellious image and post inappropriate information regularly (Peluchette & Karl, 2010). The issues raised regarding social media use within higher education creates need for institutional social networking policies, according to Nealy (2009). Students are held accountable for their actions online, and universities should help foster a responsible environment by proactively outlining appropriate social media behavior (Nealy, 2009).

Much of the literature on dangers and concerns of social media use among college students may relate back to the given context of the writing. For instance, certain forms of privacy concerns may not be immediately apparent to users or social networking site administrators, but can be corrected in time. Certain issues may endure, but concerns raised in 2008 may not last into 2013. It stands to reason that the densest period of literature on dangers and concerns of social media use follows the first years of social media's popularization. Due to both the rapid growth in popularity and the relative unknown uses of social networking sites, concerns arose during this period but have since become less prevalent.

Gaps in the Literature and Future Areas for Study

As reinforced by the work of Duggan and Brenner (2013), not all social media users use sites equally. Further, not all social networking sites serve the same purpose. Due to the fact that the literature base is relatively new, many studies present general views of user behaviors on

social media with little concern for differences among demographic groups. Similarly, studies to date focus primarily on Facebook, Twitter, or general use of social media. While studies on the major sites and general trends are useful, further insights to social media as a social force would be provided through empirical work on other social networking sites as separate entities. These shortcomings in the literature speak to the early stage of the research on social media (particularly so with regards to social media use within higher education). It is likely that future research on social media will focus on specific demographic uses of social media as well as on specific uses of social networking sites beyond Facebook and Twitter.

Given the growing comfort among both students and higher education professionals with social media for various applications, it seems appropriate for the bulk of new literature to take this new reality as a given. Rather than remain static and continue pursuing differences in trends among generations with regards to social media and online technologies, future researchers should look for practical applications of social media within higher education. Previous studies have established that social media use is fully integrated into college life, and so the question now becomes: How will this new integration affect aspects of the student experience? If it is known that the students are using these new technologies, it must then be considered how these technologies are being used, and in what ways impacts are being felt. The use of peer leaders as liaisons between a university and students can prove useful as practitioners begin to understand how to balance the resource allocation capabilities of social media and privacy concerns of students. As students choose a university, and as they navigate the actual college experience, social media tools may be able to build the bridges necessary to help aid student success. Issues of social capital naturally arise, and it is important for those within higher education to understand how students are developing social capital online and how colleges may best aid that

developmental process. These areas for exploration will not only help researchers to better understand a growing phenomenon, but it will also inform practice for higher education administrators, faculty, and policy makers.

Issues of online group polarization and increasingly customized social media websites raise important questions around political and social extremism, partisanship, and civil society on college campuses. As students use social media for information gathering and increasingly rely on social networking sites for news, how might their experiences be shaped by online structures? These issues are important not only for higher education leaders but also for any individuals concerned with the development of the public good.

CHAPTER THREE: Methodology

Methodology

As outlined in Chapter One, the focus of this study is to explore the ways in which undergraduate social media use is associated with student civic engagement. As social networking sites and applications become integrated in more aspects of college student life, what effects (if any) do these media have on students' civic engagement? Conventional notions of civic engagement are based upon research that viewed offline student interactions as entirely representative of the student experience. Extant data indicate that this perspective now represents only a portion of the ways in which students interact within their social networks.

In order to explore the relationship between social media use and civic engagement among undergraduates, I conducted a qualitative study using a variety of data collection methods. Individual interviews, focus group interviews, and ethnographic observations all served as sources of data within this study. Participants were identified through current involvements with various Registered Student Organizations (RSO) at a major research university. The pseudonym for this institution is Commonwealth University (CU).

Qualitative Research

Research in the area of social media use in higher education is limited due in large part to the recent emergence of the technology, but it is a field that has seen significant growth in recent years. Nearly all of the major research organization-developed studies (Dahlstrom, 2012; Duggan & Brenner, 2013) and smaller, faculty-based work (Ellison, et al., 2007; 2008; Junco, 2011; Junco, Merson, & Salter, 2010; Vitak, et al., 2010), however, have been quantitative in nature. In this regard, a gap in the literature exists in the form of empirical qualitative research data.

The quantitative data found in the literature speak to general trends, and this does help to shape a scholarly understanding of social media use and civic engagement within higher education. However, this form of research should not be miscategorized as necessarily better than qualitative research. In fact, the work done within quantitative research is often overvalued due in large part to a traditional emphasis in scholarship on data that can be generalized and declared significant (Harper & Kuh, 2007). Ultimately, the underlying purpose of research is to aid in the improvement of the human condition, and specific methodology will be guided by the research question at hand (Hostetler, 2005). A qualitative study within the college environment provides in-depth individual perspectives, and this feature is particularly needed on the dissertation topic due to the subject's ephemeral nature and the lack of qualitative work in the area (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). By learning about the individual experiences of undergraduate students, certain aspects of the college experience may come to light that would otherwise have gone unnoticed in broad quantitative studies. This perspective is particularly relevant within social media research, as the subject matter is constantly changing and an in-depth snapshot of individual experiences may not be accessible through quantitative means.

Population/Sampling

The sample used within this study was comprised of undergraduate students at a midsized, private, highly selective university in the Northeastern United States. The size of the participant sample was not predetermined, as the final number was determined through data collection, and once saturation was reached, the sample size was finalized. Ultimately, 35 students participated in total, divided across six focus groups and seven individual interviews. The host institution for this study is a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) located within a major metropolitan area, and it is religiously-affiliated and has a student body made up of 52%

women and 48% men. At the institution, 32% of students identify as African-American, Hispanic, Asian, or Native American.

This study is not meant to be generalizable to the national undergraduate population, but rather it is intended to provide a snapshot of the research question from the perspective of the individual participants in time and place. The findings from this study allow us to speculate how the same relationships (between social media use and civic engagement) might be happening among students at peer institutions. However, participant data in this study provide information to this end, rather than causal relationship data.

This study included students from a variety of genders, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. Students did not self-report demographic information, but the study is estimated to have included 20 female participants, 15 male participants, and nine students from racial or ethnic minority groups. This sample is slightly over representative of female students and slightly under representative of minority students compared to the overall university demographics. As the host institution is primarily residential, fewer commuter students are served there and participants were more likely to be traditional college-aged (18-24) at the outset of the project. Slightly less than half of all students at the host institution receive some need-based financial aid and the cost of attendance (tuition and fees, along with room and board) is slightly under \$60,000 per year. Since the identification of participants relied primarily on civic engagement outcomes of student groups and not demographic makeup, the participant characteristics are a byproduct of student involvement trends on campus. Although this aspect of the data might have made for a rich area for exploration within the findings and implications of this study (and might hint at further areas for study), it is not considered to be a primary focus of this study, and participants were not

specifically asked about demographic information nor their perceptions on how their demographic characteristics might mediate the study's concepts of interest.

Research Design

This study is a qualitative investigation of the undergraduate social media and civic engagement experiences of three groups of students in formal co-curricular university organizations. The primary research question of this study is: How do students understand the connection between social media use and their civic engagement while in college? Throughout the data collection process, several research questions emerged. These questions are: 1) How do college students use social media as a tool for civic understanding and action? 2) What positive and negative civic engagement outcomes does social media use promote? and 3) What do current social media usage trends look like?

This study is exploratory in nature, with multiple qualitative data sources used, including focus group interviews, individual interviews, and observations. Focusing specifically on a small number of undergraduate students as participants allowed for a rich, multi-faceted perspective on each individual experience (and also allowed for drawing out themes across participants). These students each provided their own respective narratives in such a way that would not have been possible within a more constrictive and less adaptable research design. There was an iterative approach to data collection, which allowed for more flexibility and ongoing change. As new information and themes emerged, the research process adjusted accordingly. Specifically, coding and analysis were ongoing processes during data collection, and early data collection informed subsequent interviews.

The original intent for this study was for potential participants to have been identified with the help of a key student affairs administrator at the host institution. During the earliest

stages of the dissertation planning process, the administrator at the host institution who works directly with student groups on campus was identified and contacted. The administrator was contacted six times over the course of 4 months in an effort to collaborate on participant group identification. As the administrator had a working knowledge of student participation and organizations, it was my belief that they were a natural gatekeeper for this study. The gatekeeper typically plays a vital role in data collection as they can help to control “avenues of opportunity” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 38). Fortunately, the administrator who was initially seen as an essential contact for building this study was easily replaced by the web presence of the host institution’s student organizations. Through the combination of Commonwealth University’s own website, an institution-driven student organization platform, and student-created social media pages, there was a wealth of information available online. These digital sources provided organization descriptions, self-categorizations, and membership explanations. Additionally, real-time organization postings helped indicate how active each student group had been in recent semesters.

In order to select participants, I used maximum variation sampling (Patton, 1990) to choose students from an adapted version of Adler and Goggin’s (2005) categorization of civic engagement. The original development of Adler and Goggin’s categorization divided civic engagement into four areas: community service, collective action, political involvement, or social change. This study identified participants from three of these areas (depicted in Figure 1),

excluding only collective action as a participant category.

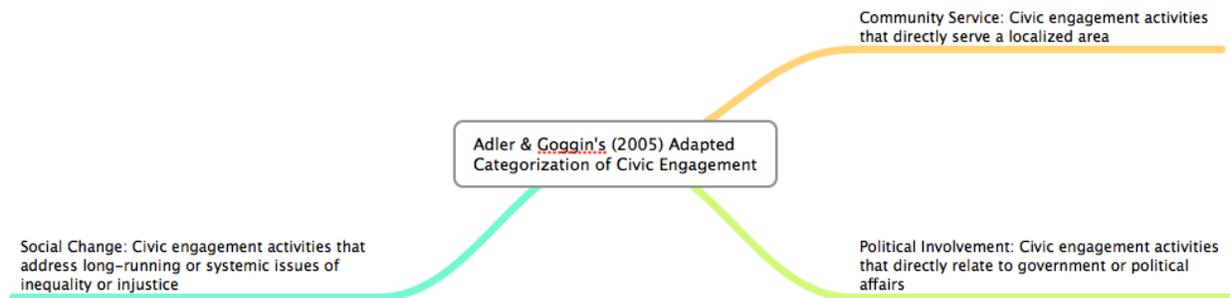


Figure 1: Adler & Goggin's (2005) Adapted Categorization of Civic Engagement

This exclusion was due to the fact that the collective action category refers specifically to individuals coming together to act as a collective to improve the whole of civil society (beyond a specific cluster of individuals, as a college campus might be characterized). Although it may have been possible to match this category to an area of student involvement in a tangential way, there was not a current campus group at the host institution that directly aligned with this particular category. This incongruence between organized campus groups and collective action (as a form of civic engagement) may be due to the fact that these sorts of activities have been characterized (particularly within recent years, as seen within the Occupy Wall Street movement and early aspects of the Arab Spring protests) as issue-based and impermanent in nature (Howard, et al., 2011). The three remaining categories of civic engagement each aligned closely with multiple student organizations. Other forms of civic engagement are based around durable constructs, such as within community service work, in which the broad goal of civic volunteerism to strengthen a community transcends specific issues or events.

Although Ehrlich's (2000) and Putnam's (1993; 2000) respective understandings of civic engagement helped lay the groundwork for this study, Adler and Goggin's (2005) categorization

of civic engagement structured the data collection process. This organizational method also allowed for data analysis that identified patterns across group variations (Patton, 1990).

Participant organizations from this study are described below in Figure 2, with information including each group's category of civic engagement and a brief description of the group's purpose. Pseudonyms have been assigned for each organization, and identifying information about each group's specific features has been adapted to allow for anonymity.

Organization	Civic Engagement Categorization	Organization Description (adapted to maintain anonymity)
Progressive Political Students (PPS)	Political Involvement	PPS works to unite politically progressive students within the CU campus.
Conservative Political Students (CPS)	Political Involvement	CPS works to unite politically conservative students within the CU campus.
Student Aid (SA)	Community Service	SA works to promote volunteer-driven events centered on helping the local community.
Participation Now (PN)	Community Service	PN partners with local leaders to promote and develop volunteer community events and education.
Students Against Racism (SAR)	Social Change	SAR works to battle systemic issues around racism through educational events and structured dialogue.
Students Combat Depression (SCD)	Social Change	SCD serves as a support system to, and advocate for, students battling depression and related mental health issues.

Figure 2: Participant Organization Descriptions

In order to triangulate the data and have several information sources for comparison, various qualitative methods were employed in this study. First, student participants were each asked to partake in a focus group interview session. These focus groups were organized according to the previously stated civic engagement typologies. Students involved with a CU organization that fit within the “community service” category were part of a “community service” focus group. Two organizations from each civic engagement category were identified, along with alternate possible participant groups, although the “ideal fit” organizations in all cases did agree to participate. After CU organizations were identified, the groups were contacted via email, and organizational leaders confirmed member interest and helped schedule focus groups.

Due to member availabilities, student focus groups were conducted immediately following student organization meetings in all cases. All but the first focus group (a CU political organization, which participated in a Spring 2013 focus group) were conducted in the Fall 2014 semester. At the focus groups, students were first provided with an explanation of the research study and given a copy of the consent form. Participants were then required to sign the consent form and told that an audio recording would be made of the focus group for transcription purposes. Following each focus group, student contact information was collected from the group for the purpose of future member checks and to identify interested participants for follow-up individual interviews. Individual interviews were explained as an opportunity for students to discuss relevant research issues in greater depth and within a more personalized context.

All individual interviews were conducted in the Fall 2014 semester, and they were all hosted in a shared research office in the CU College of Education. These interviews took place in the two months immediately following the period of focus groups and initial data analysis. Prior to the start of individual interviews, all focus group data were transcribed and coded, and

initial analysis yielded information suggesting areas for follow-up inquiry. Subsequently, the individual interview protocol was updated to reflect emergent themes and focused exploration. As part of the individual interviews, synchronous ethnographic tours of social media pages also took place. Participants were asked to bring either a laptop or mobile device to interviews (if available), go through a typical “check” of each of their primary social networking site accounts, and describe what they were doing and how they were doing it throughout. Questions were asked during this process, and follow-up probes helped to explore issues brought up by participants. These portions of the conversations also had audio recorded, and observation notes were taken as well.

Individual interview participants were identified based on self-identified interest, and interviews were conducted until saturation was reached. In total, seven students participated in individual interviews from across each of the six participant CU organizations. The individual interviews are reflected alongside other areas of data collection in Figure 3 below.

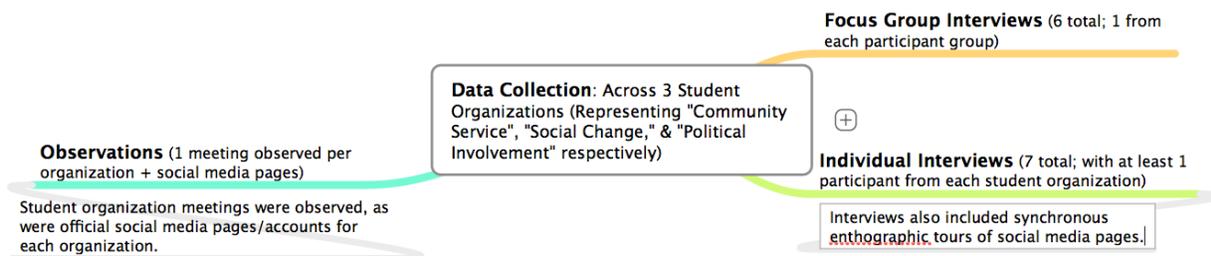


Figure 3: Data Collection Breakdown

Interviews have been noted as “a conversation with a purpose” (Burgess, 1984, p. 102), and within this study, interviews had several primary purposes. Interview data was of vital importance to this study, as they helped to establish insights into the thoughts of participants, provide context for analysis, and strengthen understanding of the participant experience.

Individual interviews were standardized open-ended (Patton, 2002) in format, as this semi-

structured framework allowed for both focused exploration and freedom for interviewees to help guide data collection. An interview protocol was developed for use prior to data collection, and it was subsequently updated following the focus group data collection and analysis process.

As part of the individual interviews, time was allocated for “synchronous ethnographic tours” of the participants’ preferred social media sites, a technique used by Martínez Alemán and Wartman (2009) to explore similar issues among college students. This is a method that calls for students to log onto a computer and narrate the ways in which he or she typically “checks” his or her various social media accounts. As the students explained their individual usage of each site and application, I logged both audio and written recordings. Student participants were asked to guide this process in a way that allowed for comfort, but probes and follow-up questions were also an essential part of this area of data collection. Participants pointed out the ways in which they use social media, and open-ended questions were posed with relation to what items are typically clicked or read, social media habits and preferences, online behaviors and their relationship with offline behaviors, and general effects of social media on their lives as they understood them. This semi-structured process allowed for exploration of research themes and digital participant activities, and it also provided a flexible framework that helped to enrich data collection.

Perhaps equally as important as the initial interview protocol questions were the follow-up questions asked of the participants. Follow-up questions are traditionally part of making the interview a more organic and rich process, as they bring the questioning to “a deeper level by asking for more detail” and serve as “a natural part of any conversation” (Ulin, Robinson, Tolley, & McNeill, 2002, p. 86). This research method proved essential during this study’s data

collection, and much of the most salient data were gathered during unplanned conversation tangents.

Previous work indicated the fact that important data may actually still come from the conversations after the more formalized portion of the interview ends. As such, in this study, recording of interviews and focus groups continued until the participant left the interview site. May (1991) noted, "...some investigators have found that data logging should continue until after the investigator and informant have finally parted company" (p. 198). This notion was adhered to and memoing was routinely conducted in the immediate period following each interview.

One important aspect of this study is that data comes from several sources in an attempt to address some elements of preconception and other shortcomings of qualitative research. Yin (2003) sums up the need for this sort of data collection by writing, "interviews...are subject to the common problems of bias, poor recall, and poor or inaccurate articulation...a reasonable approach is to corroborate interview data with information from other sources" (p. 92). It is for this reason that it is vital that individual interviews were conducted alongside focus group interviews and observations.

Observation data was also gathered at student organization meetings. Observational data was gathered at two organization meetings for each of the three civic engagement categories (totaling six observations, one of each participant organization); verbal and non-verbal interactions were recorded as notes in these observations. The observations of these organizational meetings were designed to help inform focus group and individual interviews, as questions were designed relating to the exchange of information at meetings (with a focus on the source of information, including the ways in which information is gathered prior to meetings

online). In-person observations adhered to the sociological tradition of discourse analysis and relied on textual, contextual, and interpretive analyses (Ruiz, 2009). Transcriptions of observations were analyzed for understanding of the observation. Subsequent review was then conducted to parse meaning, structures, and purpose behind actions within the observation. As will be discussed in Chapter Four, data were extremely limited for observations, and although they helped to provide context for the study, this was a less useful set of data than the other areas.

The social media pages of the participant student organizations were also formally observed. Conversations that occurred between members, non-members, and under the name of the organization, along with postings by the organization were also observed and noted. Within this portion of the data, Computer-Mediated Discourse (CMD) was utilized (Herring, 2004). This form of analysis in recent years allows for the researcher to access online communications during or after the initial communication was made and explore meaning within the context of a computer environment. Aspects of this include differences in computer language norms, gaps within conversations (interaction management), and other elements that are associated with computer use (Herring, 2004).

One benefit to a study on social media is that although the medium is often considered to be constantly in flux in structure, data produced on social media are often permanently accessible. The student organizations in focus within this study provided data through various forms of social networking site presence (Twitter accounts, Facebook pages, Instagram accounts, and so forth). Within these pages and accounts, data was presented in the form of postings (by both the organization and affiliated or interested members), profile information, and social interactions between social media participants. These documents proved to be of varying levels

of value, as they did serve as evidence of practiced behaviors, apart from perceptions of behaviors, or behaviors as filtered through participant interviewees. In some cases, these documents were less rich for data collection, due in large part to less active social media accounts of some organizations. Still, organizational documents are treated here as part of the greater whole of data (and part of data to be corroborated), as Yin (2003) warns that documents can be biased in their own ways and may not always be fully accurate. The goal for observations was to gain snapshots of various areas of data, including civic engagement behaviors, social capital exchanges and development, and college environments, all within the context of social media use.

Data from this study was transcribed and heuristic coding occurred as data was collected. As initially anticipated, this did affect the data collection process, as new questions and categories arose that informed future observations and interviews (in terms of both questions asked of participants and themes apparent within observations). This process helped to enhance the richness of data, as early observations and interviews informed subsequent data collection. The constant comparative method was used in the study, and open, axial, and selective coding within the qualitative research program HyperResearch was used in order to inductively generate codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Once data have been finalized, an executive summary of findings will be shared with interviewees (member checking) in order to establish validity and consistency between my perceptions of student experiences and that of the participants. All participants will be offered the opportunity to participate in the member checking process. Triangulation of the data will assure validity. This analysis will be pivotal in validating participant data, as it will compare the data across several sources. By merely reviewing the data collected in individual interviews, this

study will be limited to the information provided by the participants directly, and these data may be affected by misguided personal perceptions or biases. By adding in other areas of data, including observations and focus group interviews, the interviews can be compared with other areas of information. This comparison will allow for both fact-checking and increased depth of analysis.

Pilot Study

Individual interviews for this study were piloted in the fall of 2012 with two students from major research universities. Participants were identified through purposeful sampling, as both students were self-identified as active social media users and active within civically-focused student groups. Prior to the pilot interviews, an interview protocol with semi-structured interview questions was developed for use. Each participant participated in an interview of approximately 45 minutes in length. Audio recordings of these pilot interviews were created and transcribed, and the data were subsequently coded for emergent themes.

Piloting yielded several themes amongst the participants. First, although both participants were active on social media, there was some divergence with regards to how they viewed social networking sites as well as how they viewed their own behaviors. This difference in perception led to differences in terms of preference of social networking site usage, but there remained similarities in how and why the sites were used. While one student viewed himself as highly active and informed civically and the other student saw herself as less civically active and aware, both students spoke about delivery of news via social media. Issues that they were not previously aware of were brought to their attention via news feeds across several social media platforms. The self-described highly involved and aware student spoke in terms that aligned quite closely with the self-described less involved student when it came to information gathering.

Both participants reported a reliance on social networking sites for news; this preference was so pronounced that both students cited social media as their *primary* source for news and information.

Another theme that emerged within the pilot data was the appearance of consistencies between offline and online behaviors. Both participants spoke about their levels of comfort in terms of engaging in civically-focused behaviors and conversations in ways that reflected congruence between online and offline situations. One student carefully noted that she did not enjoy getting into deep discussions on topics relating to civic engagement in person, as they could lead to conflict and discomfort, and she said that she also felt this way in online discussions. For this student, the result of this was a complete disengagement with opposing viewpoints, as she said her preference was to defriend or unfollow others online that were too forceful in these online conversations. The other student in the pilot study was very interested in engaging others in dialogues relating to civically-focused issues, and he noted that this is something he also does regularly on social media. Differences between these participants, along with their consistent online and offline traits, may also have socioeconomic, gender, or ethnic components as well. Although pilot work did not delve into these areas, future study may see value in the exploration of these areas. Also, congruency between online and offline behaviors was determined to be another theme for potential exploration within the larger subject research area.

A third theme that emerged from the pilot study data was the issue of trust within social media. The participants spoke of the relationships that they had with others online and how these connections played a part in what they paid attention to online. Both students spoke of their networks as consisting primarily of people that they trusted, and that trust allowed them to

know what links to read and click. This theme seemed to relate directly back to the issue of social capital as a means to civic engagement, as the students spoke about their bonds online and the paths that those connections would lead them down. Further, the data raises questions regarding work on group polarization (Myers & Lamm, 1976), enclaves (Sunstein, 2002), homophily (Lin, 2001; McPherson, et al., 2001) and the “filter bubble” online (Pariser, 2012), as outlined in Chapter Two, as these past works may help explain the clustering that happens within social networking sites.

Lastly, a fourth theme that emerged from the pilot study was the use of social media for building ties with others and bringing them into offline civic engagement activities. Although both students had varying involvements and uses of social media, they each spoke about the ways in which social networking sites had helped them to not only get involved personally within issues and activities that they cared about, but also to involve others in those same activities. Pilot participants each found involvement activities through separate means online, but they both used social media to lower barriers between themselves and involvement opportunities on campus. Facebook seemed to be the primary outlet for this use of social media, but Twitter, YouTube, and Wikipedia were also cited. Once the students became involved in their respective organizations, they then used social media as a way to spread information to peers and help provide others with information and resources for also becoming involved.

These data presented several interesting possible areas for exploration within my dissertation research. Since this was an exploratory study, I was unsurprised to find many themes emerge that were not immediately apparent. Still, the findings and discussion in Chapter Four and Chapter Five bring a great deal of depth to some of the themes hinted at in the pilot work. The short time spent in the piloting process hinted at a wealth of information to mine

regarding student use of social media and civic engagement behaviors, and the full study supported this notion.

Ethical Considerations

In a study such as this that deals with perceptions and individual behaviors, certain ethical considerations naturally arise. The nature of some of the questions within the interview protocol related to topics that could have been sensitive to some interviewees. For instance, questions were asked that relate directly to views on social and political issues, and such topics are often areas that bring up personal and emotional experiences. As this research aimed to delve into some of the ways that people might become involved in civic activism and how this may be related to social media use, it was possible that some of the underlying catalysts to civic action might be emotionally based. The reasons for a person's civic engagement might be related to arguments, personal experiences, or other such sensitive realms. While one does not generally know the specifics of these participant perceptions and behaviors prior to an interview, it is always a possibility that these issues can arise during an interview. As a researcher, I entered each interview with an awareness of these potential issues and brought a sensitive view to participant comfort and willingness to disclose information, as was indicated within the consent form. Students were also informed several times prior to, and during, the interviews that they were able to abstain from answering any question and could leave the study at any point.

At each interview for this project, participants were presented with consent forms that outlined the potential risks and benefits of their participation, as well as given a clear verbal explanation of the various aspects of their commitment to this research project. Each participant was also given verbal reassurance that the data collected during the interview would only be used for the purposes of this study, and that the recordings of the interview (which were subject to

approval of participants) would only be heard by me and any hired second transcribers, as deemed necessary. Participants were also informed that I would make every effort to maintain individual anonymity.

Another ethical concern within this study was that my role as researcher might have led me to subconsciously write down data that related exclusively to my a priori hunches. To address this concern, each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. I also took notes during interviews, and I actively allowed participants to drive conversations when possible. The interview protocol was the explicit guide for the process, but it was also a priority for me that the participant answers were not directed by my questioning into a predetermined area.

Finally, I wanted to ensure that participants feel safe and unpressured during the interviews. As such, the environments in which the interviews took place were ones in which the participants were less likely to be casually overheard. Focus groups were held in organizational meeting spaces, and although individual interviews were conducted in shared office space, times were set aside to allow the interview to be in a one-on-one environment. Conversations were kept private, and I ensured that there was comfortable seating and enough space for participants. I also offered participants options regarding interview location sites before scheduling. No participants expressed any concerns regarding any of these issues, but they did seem to appreciate the thought and care that went into addressing their possible confidentiality concerns.

Positionality

My background as a full-time practitioner in Student Activities at a major research institution informs my perspective on the role of social media in college student life. Rather than serving as a fad or as a mere diversion, college students that I worked with often spoke of social networking sites in a way that indicated their use as an integral part of their lives. Almost

universally, students used social networking sites as an extension of their offline lives; activities were organized, old and new contacts were sustained and developed, and information was shared by students as seamlessly online as offline. As we begin to explore how this integration of social networking sites into student life has changed the college experience, it becomes clear that this technology has opened up a new area of inquiry for researchers.

The broad questions of social media's impact on the college student experience must be looked at with a certain level of granularity to begin getting at specific areas of understanding. To that end, this research focuses on the notion of civic engagement and civic perspectives of undergraduate students as a result of the new online aspect to student life. I believe that through the study of current students, we will be able to get a valuable snapshot of how these issues interact for college students.

Another aspect of my work history with potential implications for my positionality is my current research assistantship projects. I am involved in a number of projects that relate directly to the specific interviews that will be conducted for my dissertation work. My primary research assistantship project is a multi-year study that relates to technology use among first-generation college students. This work incorporates the study of social media, tablet technology, and smartphone application use as constructs of interest among undergraduate populations. Clearly, being immersed within this research project has helped to shape my interests and beliefs regarding student technology use. Mostly, it has illuminated the multiple dimensions of this technology use among students, and it has provided many examples for me of the both positive and detrimental aspects of emergent technology's new role within the college environment.

My work as a doctoral student also included management responsibilities for the social media accounts of the Educational Leadership and Higher Education department as well as the

Lynch School of Education, experiences that have played a role in shaping my thinking on social media within higher education. The role of social media community manager for a college's academic department is multi-faceted, and with the work comes questions regarding engagement, student use, and generational differences among the community. This position also leads one to interact with other staff members who bring assumptions about social media (and student use of the medium) into professional conversations that can directly color opinions about both student and faculty interactions on social networking sites. It is these potential biases that I recognize and acknowledge, and I will make sure to constantly revisit the assumptions that I may bring to data collection and analysis. Although I believe that my experiences and subsequent perspectives mostly help to inform my work, I do try to make sure that potential biases are openly acknowledged and do not alter my interpretations in a way that degrades my research.

As a male, white, highly-educated researcher from an elite, highly selective university, I must also understand that my societal position will potentially play a role in how I view data as well as how participants view me. The sample used within this study was not expressly focused on any ethnic, racial, gender, or other group, and so for this reason it is difficult to state exactly *how* my position played into this study, but it is still important to identify that it is a potentially impactful aspect of the research process. In this regard, it was important for me to not impose any sort of environmental constraints or impositions that could in any way accentuate any underlying power dynamic. Seats were level between the participants and I, overly-academic language was avoided, and I dressed and acted casually and conversational.

The host institution for this study is similar in many ways to the institution at which I completed my undergraduate degree (PWI, highly selective, research-focused), and as a result I had to be careful not to allow my own experiences color the participant data. I believe that it was

vitaly important for me to develop a trusting rapport with participants early on without becoming too otherwise involved with those in the study. I feel as though this comfort level was achieved, in large part due to my topic area, which many students viewed as interesting on a personal level. I also felt a responsibility to ensure that the participants felt comfortable sharing information without feeling any sort of obligation to provide responses that were perceived by the students as *desirable* or *ideal* answers.

Limitations

Due to the fact that this is a qualitative study, there will be neither statistical analysis nor specific percent-based reliability tests within this dissertation. However, the data was held to a standard of maintaining a level of consistency. If interview data wildly fluctuated, or if the interview data directly conflicted with observational data, there would have been questions raised regarding the study's validity (which would then have been reassessed and addressed).

The limited social media research was also a limitation of the study, but it did also allow for rich discovery in an uncharted realm of higher education research. As discussed at length in Chapter Two, there are some substantial gaps in the literature with regards to social media research in higher education. Although this study is exploratory in nature, a larger literature base could possibly inform this research and provide greater focus for analysis. Within a new field, however, there is not always a wealth of literature to build upon, so this study aims to fill that void, even in just a modest fashion.

CHAPTER FOUR: Findings

This chapter presents this study's findings on college student social media use and civic learning and engagement. In particular, this chapter explores students' understanding of the relationship between social media activities and civic engagement. Three dominant themes emerged from the data, along with many sub-themes, social media as 1) Catalyst for Civic Learning and Engagement, 2) Imperfect Tool in the Promotion of Civic Learning and Engagement, and 3) Social Media Use Trends.

Briefly, the dominant themes can be summarized in these ways:

1. Catalyst for Civic Learning and Engagement refers to the varying ways in which social media serves as a positive force for student civic knowledge acquisition and activity.

This theme looks at how students use social media to gather news and information, how social media organize and aid civic understanding and involvement, what “added value” looks like to civically engaged students, and how social media are used as a tool for social organizing.

2. Social Media as an Imperfect Tool in the Promotion of Civic Learning and Engagement refers to the challenges associated with social media use. Student descriptions of the difficulties navigating overwhelming amounts of information, determining information quality, the trappings of homophily online, and the difficulties of engaging in semi-public debate are all discussed.

3. Social Media Use Trends looks at other findings related to how these students are using social media platforms at this moment in time. This snapshot provides some insights into the ways in which the social media landscape has changed and seems to be changing going forward.

The themes in this study are organized to provide the reader with a clear understanding of the data. The findings could be reorganized many times over, but the themes as presented here are meant to be durable and provide structure for future study and further understanding. Social media use is a new and inherently unstable field of study, and as such, the presentation of data here is meant to offer a framework for not only this dissertation work but also comparable future research and scholarship.

Theme #1: Social Media As a Catalyst for Civic Learning and Engagement

Social Media as News-Gathering Tool

It became clear through the data collection process that one way in which social media serve as a catalyst for participant civic learning and engagement is as a civic and sociopolitical news and information source. Across every individual interview and focus group, students discussed the varying ways in which social media are used by themselves and their peers, both intentionally and indirectly, for contact and subsequent follow up with news. Some students described social media's role in this process as a very direct relationship; users purposefully curated their social media feeds to provide them with social, civic, and political news and information by following individuals and organizations that would deliver them information as it occurs. Other students spoke of unsolicited, but not unwelcome, contact with news and information. For these students, there was a sense that although they might not sign onto a social media platform with the explicit intent of finding out the news of the day, they felt confident that if news broke that day, their respective networks would inform them of any developments.

Breaking news in particular was a topic of interest for all students in this study, as social media provide them with news sources that both a) makes them aware of topical issues and b)

allows them to follow-up and follow along with news at their own discretion. Numerous examples emerged of breaking news stories that the participants first learned of through their online networks, and students repeatedly expressed the sentiment that traditional news media would not have informed them as well or as quickly as a social networking site. In addition to the speed that it adds, social media also were seen as a tool that makes these tasks easier, through various functional options like hashtags and clustering of news stories (or “trending” topics). Due to these social network tools, participants reported that social media’s news functions were uncomplicated and effortless, and as a consequence overwhelmingly felt that social media had made them more civically informed and involved.

Ultimately, the experiences of student participants in this study indicate that social media add value in the pursuit of civic engagement and civic knowledge. For some students, this value is a basic understanding and awareness of civic and sociopolitical issues to which they otherwise would not have been exposed. Other students were able to easily conduct an in-depth follow-up on issues that they were previously aware of or which they had only cursory knowledge. Some students took their own knowledge and used social media to share and involve others. Regardless of how this added value manifested itself, students reported some sort of increase in civic learning and engagement due to their social media use.

General and Breaking News

Students engaged with social media knowing that they would gain news and information through their usage. Social media as a news source was a theme throughout the entire data collection process, and students largely saw social platforms as a collectively powerful civic force. Repeatedly, participants described social media as a vital, if not the only, piece of their

civic learning. The students expressed confidence in the ability of their respective digital social networks to deliver them news of interest, and they saw social media as a faster, simpler path to information than older media. Throughout interviews and focus groups, participants also spoke of the organization of data online as a system that encourages the user to find articles of interest and to easily share them. Overall, social media were seen as an avenue to news that afforded the user greater agency. Not only is there an added level of convenience when you can find your way to information with regularity and quickness, but the user can also help construct the news environment. As one student in the Student Aid (SA) focus group stated, “That’s an issue with the news, sometimes. What they present and how they present it. You’re just not getting everything, it’s frustrating.”

Simplicity and speed were paramount reasons for using social media among participants. One student from Students Against Racism (SAR) summed up the sentiment, noting:

It’s quick and easy. Fast, easy. I feel like that’s probably the best part of it is that something pops up, you click on it and can read it or skim it, and you have whatever knowledge from it and you learn something from it very fast. You don’t have to wait as much. I feel like, whereas, before [social media] was a thing, if you wanted to hear a story, you’d have to wait until a certain time when it came on TV, or wait for a story, and it’d be three minutes of something and you wouldn’t even get all the information you wanted from it.

Other students, including one from Participation Now (PN) spoke about similar experiences online when asked the benefits of social media for news and information gathering:

Getting it in the first place and then sharing it to other people, too...Just finding information. Like, you have it at your fingertips. You don’t have to go scour through

articles in the newspaper. You can just see the headline right there, and you can click on it yourself and move around very quickly and easily.

Speed was not the only reason why social media were a powerful tool for civic knowledge, according to these students. User autonomy, specifically the ability to choose who and what you follow, means that you also select your information sources. Students felt that this ability gave their news a more personalized perspective, and it gave them some level of editorial control. One student from Participation Now expressed the power that this essential function of social media offers:

...[On] Tumblr you can...follow people that you know are going to post things that you're interested in. So I feel like, also, with Tumblr you can see more grassroots organizing of things that are going on, people's raw ideas about stuff, or things that are left out of media and larger sources that people look at. Also, the engagement of other people in it that aren't in the media. For example, just things that aren't as publicized, so you kind of get more of like, I don't know, the nitty gritty of certain stories.

Due to the vast nature of information online, students have had to learn to navigate myriad sources. Participants spoke of informal processes for understanding news, especially when reports come in that seem dubious. In particular, students take news from the wider feed (Facebook, Twitter, and so on), and they identify issues of interest. Those issues are then taken to trusted sources and filters. The exact distinction of what made a source "trusted" varied across responses, but the end point –if the source printed a given story, it was true – was always the same for participants. Among the characteristics cited by students that signified a trustworthy source were a position working for a major, perceived non-partisan news network, a verification icon on Twitter, a history of accuracy in reporting, and national reputation. For

many students, a trusted source would include a well-established newspaper or news network website, and the trusted filter used by these participants is Google search (which subsequently leads back to trusted newspapers or news networks with editorial standards). The focus group with Students Against Racism (SAR) discussed how they use various online tools to find their way through information:

Student 1: ...[On Twitter] stuff will pop up that's trendy. That, I'll check regularly, and usually if it's breaking news, it's on the trends, and I'm like, "What's going on?" For the actual story, I'll go to Google it or something. I'll hear about it from Twitter, but I won't investigate it on Twitter, if that makes sense.

Student 2: I Google it...For me, since there's a lot of breaking news on Tumblr, I think the ones that are the most resourceful are the ones that have a picture of someone's face and it's like, "This person died." And then it's like, portion of an article, link, link, link, like "find out more." Or when Ferguson was happening, and it was like, photos from Ferguson with the watermark of the photographer, pictures of tweets of reporters who were there, and a picture of some statistic, and a bunch of links. That's how I would know that it's good...I feel like a couple of times a year, things like [celebrity death hoaxes] come up on Twitter and I'll just look in the news section of Google, and it'll be like, "hoax." That's what happened with Macaulay Culkin...I type in "celebrity's name" and "death" and then Google it and click "news," and if it's there, then I'm like, "Okay, it's real."

In the Student Aid focus group, participants echoed near-exact sentiments; social media produce a massive amount of information that is then grouped into stories of interest. Stories are

then followed up outside of those platforms and through other, brand-established online news sources. One student spoke about recent events specifically:

Last year during, or two years ago, I guess, wow, during the [Boston] Marathon bombing, I heard about it first on Twitter. When I hear something on Twitter, I follow up somewhere else. But I do get a lot... That's the first source, it's the first spot.

General newsgathering via social media was a topic of interest for students, but often times, discussions in both focus groups and individual interviews came back to breaking news. General news can be understood here as the broader, ongoing, less urgent form of news, while breaking news stories are the fast-developing, viral, and often surprising information that arise suddenly. General news stories were those features that students spoke about as bookmarking for later reading, while breaking news stories were often those in which students were instantly captivated and followed on a second-by-second basis. In recent years, participants first learned of major news stories through their digital networks, everything from the Boston Marathon bombing to celebrity deaths. Many students spoke of the ubiquity of social media in their lives as a reason for its central role in sharing breaking news. Participants also referenced the proliferation of mobile devices as a main reason why social media had become so prevalent in the past decade.

Just as general news requires a certain amount of filtering and follow-up, breaking news can be a challenge to follow online. Students reflected on past incidences of breaking news events during the Students Combat Depression (SCD) focus group:

Student 1: A lot of things trend now, too. That's the big thing is on Facebook or Twitter is like, trending topics. Where you'll see like five people...

Student 2: I always look at the trending topics on Facebook.

Student 1: ...Yeah, post the status about the same thing. Like maybe there'll be a couple posts in between, but they're all very similar to each other. So then you're more apt to look up other stuff about it because you don't want to just be like, okay they said that, cool. Like you [want to] know more about it.

Student 3: I remember when [the shooting at] Sandy Hook happened; I live not too far from there. So like it was going on, in my high school the whole day, "There's a shooting in Connecticut, there's a shooting in Connecticut." And I remember just like freaking out, and going to just Google search it. And whatever that comes up that looks like it's a reliable source, just hit the first thing to find out more about it.

Student 4: Or check if multiple things say the same thing.

Students across focus groups described similar situations surrounding other national and regional news stories. Due to the many connections in each user's social network, breaking news is inevitably shared, and it is shared immediately. Student definitions of breaking news continuously crossed boundaries between the sociopolitical and the entertainment sides of news. As traditional news sources were more likely to post this blended form of "infotainment," participant understanding of issues followed, and entertainment news often intermingled with sociopolitical news in individual feeds. For one student in the Students Combat Depression focus group, a breaking news experience had recently occurred, noting, "...Robin Williams' death...everyone was making posts about it...I follow about 200 people on Tumblr, which is not a lot, but I feel like someone always knows what's going on on Tumblr." The utility of social media is apparent to these students, many of whom recognized the ways in which social media have disrupted traditional news consumption. In the focus group with Participation Now (PN), students reflected on how information gathering has changed:

Student 1: I think things like the Internet have become so, like, big and intricate and so much more interesting. Like, everybody has something that they like to go to on the Internet...It's not just that I'm passively watching people either, like, act out a situation or telling me things. I can actively engage with other people on certain topics. Whatever we want to talk about.

Student 2: I think, going back to breaking news, there's a lot to be said for social media. Because, even if I wasn't a student, even if I was working, it's not like you can watch TV in the middle of the day. So, I think that there's a lot to be said. I think we do definitely get our news faster, and I think we're more in tune more often. Because if something important happens, it's probably not going to happen at 7am or 8am when you're watching the morning news, you know? So, I think that it's a level of, I think it's a totally different kind of media situation because of [social media].

For some participants, residential college life plays a factor in the level of dependency that they expressed for social media as a news source. The focus group with Participation Now had several students in agreement that the student schedule at a college campus can impact the degree to which social media play a role in newsgathering:

Speaker 1: ...When it's...obscure but also important news, it's because I'm tracking a newspaper or a newspaper app, more than likely.

Speaker 2: For that, I don't know where else you would get breaking news, anyway. Like, the only option I can see is, like, television.

Speaker 3: Outside of social media. Yeah, I don't even have a TV. For me, it's because I'm at school. Because when I'm at home, we'll have the TV on, like, in the morning while we're having breakfast and drinking coffee.

Speaker 2: Yeah, it's also our schedule here, I think. Our class times and we have certain work that has to get done before a certain time, and that kind of affects when you can watch TV and when the information that we actually want is on TV.

Speaker 1: I feel like it's become a bigger trend though not to watch TV on TV. To watch it on computers.

All of the students spoken to recognized the role of social media as not only a valuable source for news and information, but also as the single best source of breaking news. There was an undeniable appeal of the speed, customization, and convenience that social media provide to the students, who all felt like their networks kept them updated on the biggest stories of the day.

Social Media Feeds As News Aggregators

One point of contention that emerged in the data was the exact function of digital social networks. To some students, social media can be seen as the actual information *source*, while to others, social media are the filtration system through which information can be found. Perhaps this distinction is a matter of semantics, but students were not in agreement on the role of social media in this way. A student from Participation Now posited, "I think of Twitter as like a newspaper stand, rather than as a newspaper. Like, it's a portal into other sources of news, but...it's not [news] in and of itself."

The distinction in this conversation is highlighted because it may offer some level of insight into how actively students think of the nesting of information online. The question becomes, where does the value of social media as a tool for civic learning exist? Do students see applications like Facebook and Twitter as hosts for information, or do they function more as the destination *before* the destination? If information is nested within the social platforms, are the

networks themselves the provider of this information, or are they conduits to the information? Participants spoke openly of the value of social media for civic learning, but the question of if the utility is primarily content-oriented, social organization-oriented, or both seems open for debate. Data indicate that students were aided through both content and social organization, but the student understanding of such questions is not entirely clear.

The Added Value of Social Media for All Levels of Civic Engagement

Conceptualizing, and potentially devising a quantitative measurement for, civic engagement is a difficult and largely subjective endeavor. As outlined in chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation, the definition of civic engagement is still debated, and for this project the definition of the phrase is taken broadly. Still, for the purposes of interpreting the research data in this study, it must be acknowledged that “civic engagement” can be done in varying degrees, whether those actions are seen in a linear, sequential manner or in a non-linear, multi-directional path. Ultimately, the premise of this understanding is that some people are more civically engaged than others, and that this behavior may manifest itself through a variety of activities (volunteerism, political activity, social organizing).

The students within this study expressed the notion of degrees of civic engagement as they discussed the civic knowledge and involvements of themselves and their peers. Although participants were recruited because they were involved with civically focused organizations, their individual paths to engagement varied, and students also had experienced changes in their respective involvements over time. Each student had a view of how civically involved they themselves were, and it was clear that their use of social media has impacted their understanding and interactions with civic issues.

Repeatedly, social media came up in interviews and focus groups as a positive force for information gathering, online and offline organizing, and building connections with others. A resultant theme in the data is that social media helped add value to existing civic engagement behaviors. This was expressed across the spectrum, from students who saw themselves as less engaged, to students who felt they were very engaged. One participant, who is a highly involved and engaged student from Progressive Political Students (PPS), noted that he sees the value in his social media use for both general information and following up on topics of interest:

I follow interesting people [on Twitter], so it makes it easier to learn about broader topics and issues, and then also more in depth about the issues that matter to you. So if I follow somebody who, for instance, is really into indigenous rights and natural resources, they probably tend to retweet or post about that sort of stuff a lot...So I – just by virtue of being exposed to that, learn a little bit more about those issues, and then I become a little more informed that way...If I'm interested in a particular issue, like the Keystone Pipeline for example, you can use the hashtag or search for it on Facebook and then learn a lot more in depth on social media too...or follow groups related to certain issues and then you're able to learn a lot more in depth.

The student's particular involvement was not limited to issue exploration at his leisure, as social media have also become a valuable source when following live events:

...one of the biggest, kind of...breaking news stories in recent history was the Ferguson protests...I remember reading an article or two when [the deaths in Ferguson] first happened, and it kind of passed over my head; I didn't think much of it at the time, for better or for worse. But then when protests kind of turned violent and the police force came out, and that was like the night – I forget when night it was, but when they started

using tear gas and shooting rubber bullets and whatnot, I followed that entirely through Twitter, because – that was the night when one of the journalists, Wesley Lowery, got arrested at the McDonald’s and that’s kind of what sparked it, I saw that outrage. And then you saw everything just coming in at real time like that, and that was... it was something that you saw more of it happening than if you had turned on TV or anything like that, because it’s kind of like the crowdsourcing of, like, journalists... you really saw it unfolding in real time. Something that you couldn’t necessarily see by reading on CNN, or any political website, or even watching the news because there’s sort of that delay and that bias there... It’s funny when you’re following something like that... you get the occasional friend who tweets something about going shopping in the middle of a major event like that. So I was – it was hard to cut through some of it, but I feel like in that moment, everything kind of adds a different perspective or layer to it. It really adds depth to the story, because even if some of those opinions aren’t true, it showcases the feelings of people who are there and what their opinions might be. So although they might not be true, that adds more to kind of the entire news story that’s going on.

The balance discussed by this student, in which social media provide users with a steady, raw data feed that is rich with information but also demands vigilant scrutiny, is a known complication for participants. The constant flow of information during a breaking event (and in active social media feeds naturally) and the associated challenges of parsing those posts is a topic that many students referenced. The discussion around that particular aspect of social media use is discussed at length later in this dissertation.

Participants also spoke about the ways in which social media have permeated students' lives and how that ubiquity has at times led to the discovery of new information. A focus group of students from Student Aid provided some personal examples of this process:

Student 1: I think I got on Facebook in like eighth grade. And I mean, I've always been an opinionated person, but as a seventh grader I wasn't exactly interested in discussing what was going on in the world. But I think a lot of the time, a lot of the things that have gone on, it's things that...it's seeing that other people my own age are also interested in discussing things like that. And then, so I guess it's just been like integrated in my life, for as long as I've had the passion and the intelligence to be able to do that.

Student 2: I remember the red equal sign [*note: Facebook users temporarily changed profile pictures to images of a red equal sign in spring of 2013 as part of a Human Rights Campaign to show support for marriage equality*]. I had to look that one up when I first saw it. I think that first profile I saw changed to that, I went and looked it up.

Student 3: I've had profile picture changes I had to look up. I do remember, specifically, some opinions about Ferguson over the summer. My opinions are changed a little bit from people posting. Not really *change*, but seeing a different perspective, from some people, was a little influential.

Some participants viewed social media use as a way to glean some information about the events around them, as they felt they otherwise wouldn't have been exposed to this news. For those students who reported not following the news very closely, social media provided a convenient pathway to a basic understanding or awareness of issues. One such student from Student Aid noted a skepticism about biases in the media (social media and mainstream media), but noted that access to social media is helpful for "keeping in touch with things that are going

on when we get so busy and caught up in classes and stuff, it's like kind of connecting back to reality and things going on all over the world...it's a good way to know that something happened." This participant experience represented the base level of civic learning done by students, even in moments where they were not necessarily seeking out information when signing online.

For some of the most active students, social media not only represent a path to personal information gathering and engagement, but they also serve as a tool for bringing others into the process. One student participant from Participation Now explained his perspective on social media as a tool that expands his civic reach:

I think it helps a lot, actually. I mean, before I, when I was younger at least, I didn't really look at social media that often. So my information was watching TV...all that stuff, and I actually got a pretty good amount of information on that but wanted to know more about it. Social media gives so many articles on these things...it definitely is a better avenue for getting information and knowing about everything, really...People would spread messages from their organizations if they have a politically oriented group or are a part of one that's neutral, really. And we share information all the time. Get other people to come and get excited about these things and just...we had an election day gathering [on campus], and a whole host of people came to that.

Similarly, a student from Students Against Racism discussed how social media can present information in easily shareable bits, thus allowing users to be part of the process:

...for a lot of college students I think social media definitely is a really good resource for them to just become educated...especially how the news and social media are just kind of like meeting each other and like interconnecting now, I feel like the trending headlines on

my Facebook and BuzzFeed...it has a lot of funny quizzes but it also has significant articles about current events and things like that...

When describing their newsfeeds during a synchronous ethnographic tour, this student went on to describe the sharing process that she sees and participates in:

So this is...kind of, pictures of what's happening in Ferguson, and just showing what's going on with the protesters versus the police right now. And then...I read through that I guess, and then I just am aware of what is going on if I feel so compelled I like probably to blog it [*note: To 'blog' is how sharing is done on the Tumblr platform*], just to kind of keep that awareness going...I wouldn't say that I'm part of, like, the movement, but I do think that it's like, almost a personal responsibility that you would just be aware of what's going on and continue that awareness.

Common across the interviews and focus groups, particularly among students who viewed themselves as more civically engaged, were similar sentiments about feeling a civic responsibility to share important information as they find it. Platforms like Twitter and Tumblr were cited repeatedly for this purpose, as each allows for one-click sharing. On both platforms, retweeting and reblogging are commonplace, and the students expressed a sentiment of social duty in using these tools for sharing certain forms of information and news.

Telling examples of the translation from online, social media-based activity to offline behaviors arose during the Progressive Political Students focus group:

Student 1: [An example of a time where I became active offline due to my online actions was with] Planned Parenthood. In 2010, there was a big defund Planned Parenthood movement, and I definitely heard about it and read about it, and was mobilized through social media. Through Planned Parenthood Advocacy Fund and reading about it on the

news, that led us to do things like go to a rally, become more active, and it definitely inspired me to take up women's issues as my kind of, pet issue. And that was completely rooted in what I learned through social media.

Student 2: In terms of politically following candidates, one thing was Wendy Davis last year, when she did her big speech on the floor and filibustered the bill, I had no real background knowledge...that one event, which was made possible through social media, gave her the opportunity to run for Governor of Texas, because I think about it, and she wouldn't have been able to have such a large backing, and just the fact that my friend had the same sneakers as her. That picture was just sent out, and it was like, "Oh my gosh, you have Wendy Davis' sneakers!" Just the fact that I know about that and am aware of Texas politics, even though I've never really been to Texas, I think more just awareness of specialty elections and issues.

Student 3: ...I'm also really interested in transportation issues, so I follow those kind of advocacy groups, so whenever there are big projects or public hearings, they'll post relevant articles on Facebook or Twitter, and that's gotten me a lot more involved and knowledgeable, and it's gotten me to go to meetings, because they post reminders and it hits me on Twitter. Then I know a lot more on the topic, and I feel like I have more of a stake, especially in the local issues.

Student 4: I also think in general, with gay marriage...the attention it gets on social media, people kind of feel like it's trendy to be for gay marriage, and there are more people around it. As a progressive person, I've always supported it, but you see more fiscally conservative, or right-leaning young people on Facebook and say, someone gay in their school can't go to prom, they might take to Facebook. I know it happened in my

high school, there were sit-ins, expressing their outrage about how the school denied a gay couple to go to prom together, and they used Facebook as their platform for that also.

The student reflections from this focus group provide samples of the ways in which social media have an impact on student civic engagement. The offline engagement, in which students participated in rallies, organized sit-ins, and attended local meetings, are illustrative of the power of these online tools.

Social Media as Tools for Organized Civic Participation and Learning

Student participants spoke of social media from two primary viewpoints. First, they spoke of social media from a macro perspective in which they considered social media's wide impact as it relates to their lives and the increasing way in which all media contains social functions. Second, the students discussed social media from the micro level and in so doing they considered social media platforms in terms of the utility of each. Thus, in a broad way social media were understood to be a growing force across nearly all areas of life – relationships, information consumption, education, and so on – yet, these users also felt that platforms served distinct, separate roles when considered individually. It is from this latter perspective, with platforms considered individually, that the theme of social media as an organizing tool emerged. Students spoke of the organizing power of social media largely based on the notion that different social networking applications and sites served different organizing purposes. Taken as a whole, however, students addressed the many ways in which social media tools serve to organize communities and organizations.

Facebook: Students' Personal Planner and Interactive Directory

Facebook serves as the organizational backbone of these students' lives. Although most students reported declining activity in terms of producing *most* forms of content on Facebook, the platform was still consistently referenced as an essential part of every day. Much like any other daily errand or routine, students spoke matter of factly about Facebook use that reflected a social obligation to checking in on accounts.

The primary reasons for Facebook use as a regular, necessary activity were to check daily events (and the associated events calendar and reminders) and to look up and connect with others in a simpler manner than would otherwise be available. In terms of events, students saw Facebook as the best way to find out about events organized by others and to promote their own events. At the Progressive Political Students focus group, participants spoke about the platform's use:

Student 1: I use Facebook to figure out what's going on...I just feel like I'd be out of the loop on a lot of things, especially during the school year. In terms of campus events, a lot of ticketed events are announced through Facebook...[at a recent event, organizers] posted the ticket release information and logistics about [the event] on there. There wasn't really an alternative place to get that information.

Student 2: [It would be hard to quit Facebook, because] so many things now, especially social events, people plan them through Facebook, so it would be hard to be in the loop. I found that...now that I'm older and my friend groups are more established and people are planning stuff, like using it as a means of invitation.

Student 3: ...It seems like it's more...functional in its use, and it's not as fun to go on. It's more like, you're doing it out of boredom, kind of what you said.

Later in the same focus group, students discussed the directory aspect of the platform, the other recurring theme for Facebook use as an organizing tool:

...I think that it's almost become a database for people. It makes things so simple. Oh, I'm throwing a party this weekend. Who am I inviting? Add them on Facebook, look at the invite kind of thing. It takes out paper for sure, and then it takes out me having to text a group of people. I think that people don't necessarily like sitting there and stalking people, but at the same time, if you want a picture of something, you know it's on Facebook. Everything's there. I would say people use it more as a database than anything. It's kind of old school to post stuff and post your status and whatnot.

Both of the organizing themes around Facebook use reflected students' reasoning for why Facebook remains popular on campus. Facebook has become intertwined in students' lives in such a way that even though they are less likely to post a status update than they were in years past, they still all have enough valued content in their networks that it remains a necessary tool. To these students, Facebook represents a digital reflection of their offline social networks, and a primary value of this imprint is that they can use its reach to organize and communicate.

Throughout interviews and focus groups, students reinforced the theme of Facebook as an organizational tool for both event organization and use as a directory. Facebook's convenience was addressed during the Conservative Political Students (CPS) focus group, and one student noted, "I look at Facebook as the new phone book, so if I need to find someone... for a group project or something I have to reach out to them and don't have their phone number, Facebook's really helpful." This theme was evident across the data, and during the Student Aid focus group, both the directory and event aspects again came up:

Student 1: I look at Facebook a lot, but I don't do a lot of status updates. It's just events.

Student 2: For me, I use Facebook for, a lot is if you meet someone and you just want to look them up. It sounds a little stalkerish, but at school, you're meeting a lot of new people and you're joining a lot of new groups. It's very easy, someone's name will come up and what school they're at. You can just type in their name and be like, oh. It's to look up certain people.

Student 3: Yeah, I think Facebook's better for seeing events blow up... That stuff happens once every week or few weeks. There's something everyone is talking about, and you know about it because of Facebook.

On the organizational level, student views of Facebook's use as an organizational tool manifest themselves in how the groups use the platform to promote their own events. In addition to using Facebook to learn about other campus groups' events, they themselves use the feature to create and promote notifications to involve other students. At the Student Aid focus group, this usage was described:

We use [social media] for events, mainly on Facebook, just trying to spread the word, get knowledge out there that [an event] is coming up. We post the links to [event information] and to volunteering at events, and we have the members start inviting all their friends... I think it's one of the main things that draws [CU] students.

Overall, students saw Facebook as a platform designed with event organization in mind. An interview with a student from Participation Now articulated his largely representative viewpoint on this usefulness:

I think that for our club in particular, that's one of the main tools we are able to use to gain publicity about an event... I think when you get all of your event notifications on Facebook in that little events tab it makes it more, it makes it a lot easier for people to

kind of keep track of, and then you get in return for the club a better turnout, because people are able to keep track and organize the events that they want to attend.

Hashtags and Spontaneous and Sustained Data Organization

For reasons outlined in Chapter Three, the collective action area of civic engagement (Adler & Goggin, 2005) is not fully examined within this study. However, through the data collection process, aspects of the activist culture and behavior were revealed among the participants. Not all students were active within this realm, but some students expressed involvement, either directly or on the periphery. These student experiences provided an insight into social media's organizing capacity in a related, but distinct way from traditional student civic organizations.

Collective action movements often form around specific issues or events, and they can be impermanent in nature (Howard, et al., 2011). Due to these qualities, social media can be particularly powerful for this area of civic engagement. To participants who expressed involvement in these forms of collective action, social media provide tools that can organize individuals quickly, and as a result membership can grow virally around an issue for which large numbers of people feel passionate. Additionally, social media platforms come equipped with a variety of tools that allow for instantaneous organization and distribution of information. One student, a member of Students Against Racism, had become involved in several movements over the years as a result of her social networks:

The activist culture in general, it's just been so easy, like it's been easier to basically educate a lot of people en masse, because it's the Internet and the far reaching effects of social media, especially globally...just having that Internet platform just makes it so

much more accessible to a lot of different people rather than making it a local community thing. It's become like an Internet community kind of thing that gets translated into real life [*note: "real life" was clarified to mean "offline"*]. . . I guess it depends on the blogs you follow [on Tumblr] but for me I do, I'm not really sure how it comes back so quickly because I don't usually follow the people from the original poster for the news, but usually it just disseminates pretty quickly. . . if you are there at that time it just kind of shows up. It happens more for things relating to activism related stuff like for Ferguson. . . that's where I first hear about a lot of police brutality incidents and things like that.

Another student, from Progressive Political Students, used social media to follow spontaneous activist movements. The access provided to users through social media broadens the information available, and as a result can bring more interested parties into the movement:

I think it's easier to follow [activist news] as it unfolds. Because of more primary sources. And one of the things we noticed back in my freshman year – I'm a senior now – was in the Middle East or North Africa when, in Tahrir Square in Egypt, when people were capturing videos and Tweeting those out of the revolution onto the Internet, that kind of opened your eyes because the media wasn't even necessarily reporting that. So maybe in terms of international events, I feel like it has an especially large impact, because media sources may be blacklisted or may not be able to broadcast from, or get into, some of those locations, and it allows for a better quality. . . or even just introducing some of the facts that you may not necessarily hear otherwise.

The student went on to describe other events that he followed online. His experiences suggest the ways in which data organization on social media aids this spontaneous form of activism:

...it's really easy to be able to do demonstrations, or organize demonstrations, or be able to organize others in that sense. I remember getting invites for a – I don't remember who was organizing, but a group wanted to do a demonstration on Newbury Street in response to some of the events going on in Ferguson, because they were arguing that business was just continuing on as normal, even though there are these major issues going on in other parts of the country, and these problems on race. So they wanted to shut down a major business district in Boston. And I didn't know who they were, or who the group was organizing it, but I heard about it through seeing other people sharing it on social media...[Facebook] will say, "this person is going to an event," or it'll pop up on my newsfeed that someone I don't necessarily know very well is going to an event that I may actually be interested in. I don't know how it works, but...[nods head to suggest approval].

Theme #2: Social Media As an Imperfect Tool in the Promotion of Civic Learning and Engagement

The relationship between social media use and civic learning and engagement among participant students is complex. Although the data suggest a multitude of ways in which social media promote civic learning and engagement, there also exist factors that indicate detrimental, or at least complicating, forces at play. Information and opportunities for engagement are robust across online social platforms, but students were faced with the challenge of sorting through an

unprecedented amount of information. Other opportunities exist online for users to quickly and easily find causes, issues, and individuals of interest, but does that degree of personalization offer too quick a path towards predilections and away from more challenging, diverse information sources? Results were mixed on this question and will be discussed in this section. Lastly, the largely public-facing nature of online dialogue serves as a Catch-22 to users; the fact that data are often public is what makes information so readily searchable and organizable, but that same level of openness was cited by students as a primary reason why online dialogue is so difficult and intimidating.

Navigating the “Information Fire Hose”

Just as social media’s role as an enormous, continuously updated database for information acquisition and follow-up among these students represents opportunity for education and sharing, the scope of information presentation on these sites and apps concurrently represents a challenge to these ends. Students readily acknowledged this challenge, citing the overwhelming amount of information at their disposal as problematic in certain contexts. The information also comes from such a diversity of sources that the process of learning *whom* to trust can be as important as learning *what* to trust. For these students, identifying the primary source of information (a news source like ABC or NBC, for example) is a portion of the filtering process, and identifying the individual in the student’s own network that serves as the secondary source (an individual that they follow on Twitter who shared a story, for example) is a second part of filtering. The colloquialism “drinking from the information fire hose” is often used to represent this challenge of sorting through the overflow of data online. As a student from Participation Now stated, “...there’s such a mass of people just saying whatever, that it, sort of deludes the quality of the information...it can make it more difficult to...find out who is actually

informed. Because when you just give everyone a megaphone, it tends to make things more difficult, I think.” Similarly, a different student from Conservative Political Students felt the burden of having to personally filter online information:

...it can be information overload, or you can get caught up, and then sent down the wrong path and start thinking things are true that aren't necessarily true, just because enough people start to talk about it, or post about it, or tweet about it...One of the other ones that sticks out in my mind is the Boston [Marathon bombing], and that's always tough to talk about, but I just remember...a lot of what was going on with people who falsely accused or had false claims on social media, and how that can sometimes lead in the wrong direction. And I noticed a lot of that while I was following it here, from my dorm...because people started tweeting about bombs [on campus] and threats like that. And so that was another one of the moments of following a live-breaking news action, kind of, unfold on Twitter.

The theme of difficulty in navigating a large amount of information, quickly, was present throughout individual interviews and focus groups. Some students recalled specific incidents in which facts were difficult to verify, such as in the Boston Marathon example, and others spoke more generally about this navigation process as a clear trend. One student from Students Combat Depression expressed their cautious approach to online information as follows:

I think it just makes it more difficult in that, like, you do have to be more conscious of where you are getting your sources and things like that from, because there is a lot of, kind of, like, there is a lot of fake stuff out there...there is a lot of sensationalizing on the Internet, people just like to post whatever they want basically, and they could be well intentioned to have everything completely wrong. So, it's like you do have to be more

cognizant but the fact is that, like, everybody is able to access this. So, it's not just like some reputable opinion, a lot of times it's coming from more, I guess, everyday people.

Many students felt that their skepticism was well earned, and there was a sense among participants that bringing a healthy amount of caution when approaching information, particularly from breaking stories, aided news consumption. Students in the Participation Now focus group further underscored this point, and they spoke to the importance of finding trusted sources as news emerges:

I get a lot of news on Twitter, especially because you can, I mean, like, I think that when it started out, and I think more so on Facebook even, there was more of a tendency not to trust the things that were coming up on Twitter. But if you follow the New York Times, or Ezra Klein, or...*(another student interrupts and adds, "CNN")*...like a verified reporter or someone, you know, that you can trust, they'll also post a link. You can go to the article. So, I mostly trust what I see on Twitter...if it's like, a random kid from my hometown, I probably don't trust what they're saying.

Students spoke repeatedly of the complex balance presented by social media as a source for civic and political information; sorting through multitudes of feeds that update by the second is not an easy task, yet this raw version of data is also what allows users to find more valuable, in-depth information than if the data had been pre-sorted and condensed for them (as with traditional media outlets). This viewpoint was expressed by a student involved with Conservative Political Students, who, when asked what social media make more difficult in the news gathering process, noted, "...understanding information because you're being bombarded with so much stuff. Like, you may have to step back and try to pick things apart...but, I think also, at the same time, it makes it easier because it's all there for you." A student from

Progressive Political Students shared a similar perspective, saying, “I feel like...I understand issues a lot more in depth [by reading the unfiltered, continuous stream of information], rather than through reading a summary or reading about it on other forms.”

Participant students also expressed a willingness and ability to actively debate the merits and challenges of the open, semi-structured information flow online. The focus group with Participation Now yielded several threads of discussion that displayed students’ thoughts on the interplay and openness of online information through social networks:

Speaker 1: We were actually talking about this in one of my classes the other day...most people in the classroom thought that it was about, like, social capital and social media and seeing if it, like, contributes to social capital...most people thought that social media helps [build] social capital, in that people interact on different levels, and I kind of feel that it hinders the process and ultimately hinders, like, political processes. Just because it allows people who aren’t informed to...gives people a megaphone to say, like, anything. And I just don’t think that is beneficial for anyone.

Speaker 2: Although, I think that there’s also a lot to be said about how difficult it is for, like, systems and for government or corporation kind of systems to control the Internet, which I think is great. And I think that we saw that when, like, during the Arab Spring when people were live tweeting what was happening. I think obviously, the down point to that is that...like in the Arab Spring for example, there’s a Google executive who was arrested because he was live tweeting what was happening. So, it was very easy to locate him and to prosecute him for what he was doing, which Americans would see what he was doing was very noble...I think that it is kind of interesting that corporations and

governments have not figured out how to control it, and I don't know that they can, necessarily.

The complex dynamics of social media, governmental forces, and openness of feeds is an ongoing topic of discussion in the scholarship (Sasaki, 2011; Tufekci, 2011;), and these participant students showed an expression of the multifaceted nature of the open, social web. As they themselves strive to navigate the “information fire hose,” they also recognize societal implications for use of the tool beyond their own personal situations.

Information Quality

For participants in this study, finding a path through dense, seemingly endless information is a constant challenge when seeking civic knowledge. A large part of this task is vetting sources for credibility. Students spoke of this from several angles, as some sources walk the line between news and entertainment, some are thinly veiled advertisements, or “click-bait,” and other sources still are intended as satire, yet not always understood as such by the online audience. As they adapt to this environment, students spoke of strategies that helped them to understand who to trust and who to disregard. Some of these methods were informal, and others were more systematic, but all descriptions alluded to the savvy that these students had developed as they worked through online information.

What Constitutes a “Credible” Source?

Students immediately filter civic news and information through one method before all others: identifying the source. If the source listed is not considered credible, students approach the information with great skepticism. Participants spoke of this first step in near-universal

agreement, although each had their own definition of what *specifically* constituted a credible source. At the Student Aid focus group, students described this step when asked how they decided if something was of quality:

Student 1: The source, where it comes from. Absolutely.

Student 2: If it's, like, from a legitimate newspaper or a news magazine or a writer or a reporter from one of those outlets. That's the only reason I would trust them. If it was some random person Tweeting something...I wouldn't think twice.

The students went on to elaborate on an important distinction in determining information quality, noting that the process is part identifiable environmental signal, part intuitive:

Student 1: Sometimes, if you don't know who the source is but, like, sometimes just the format and the fonts kind of give away that it might be click-bait. Like especially on Facebook, I feel like a lot of the time you're like, oh yeah, I kind of know that's just going to a bullshit site. Like, I'm not even going to click on it.

Student 2: Twitter verified also [*note: on Twitter, the platform will add a light blue icon next to users that have been "verified," or identified by Twitter as the actual, usually famous, user*].

This balance between using intuitive sense and environmental cues was brought up in other focus groups and interviews, including during the Students Against Racism focus group:

Student 1: Usually it's like a really weird website, sometimes.

Student 2: Like rpxy.com

Student 3: It's very obscure...

Student 1: I mean, if you hover over the link and it comes up with the URL.

Student 4: I think the format, too. I know my parents have trouble. I can just blatantly see when a website looks sketchy or weird. I think it's just embedded in my development to spot those kind of things, and they can't.

Student 2: Also the ads on a webpage, like if they have stock photos of weird people looking at something, then I'm like, this probably isn't a legit thing, but if it's like a Neutrogena ad on a New York Times webpage, I know this is probably real.

Student 3: Like, quality of article, or weird, over-enthusiastic stories.

Student 5: And sensationalism, also. Probably not real.

Odd images, web addresses that seemed out of the ordinary, and strange advertisements all were clear red flags for the participants as they browsed online information. Students triangulated sources by identifying problematic visual cues, using intuitive sensibilities, and drawing on personal experience to decide quickly how much a source could be trusted. A student involved with Progressive Political Students articulated his process as a learned behavior:

I think a lot of it just comes from experience and identifying the source. Like if somebody posts something, posts a link, you're caught by the headline, and then usually there's a little icon, or link to the website, or the actual whoever published the article. I think that's always important – to see who the link actually is – because that, or the source, actually, because that can explain a lot. And usually, that's how I can tell if something is credible or not, just because you learn from experience...Or if it's something I don't recognize at first, I'll probably end up discrediting it. That's good for Facebook, and then on Twitter, I think I end up reading the bios of users a lot, so then that can help to determine whether – what kind of position they're in, if they're a news agency or whatnot, or if they hold a position in government...A lot of it seems intuitive,

and the cues are probably – the first thing that jumps out is the banner image...the main featured image on the article.

Students also leveraged their social networks as another tool for source verification.

Sources that were one degree of separation from another already trusted source had an implicit endorsement of trust. This pattern creates a snowball effect for users, in which social networks can expand into broader networks of reliable sources. One student discussed this during the Participation Now focus group:

Student 1: [I trust sources] if they're verified on Twitter. Or if you know, like, how I ended up following them. Like, sometimes I...I follow this guy named Binyamin Applebaum. And he's a reporter. I'd never heard of him, except that he got retweeted a couple of times by someone else I followed on Twitter, and he said interesting things. And now I follow him and I completely believe what he's saying, he's like a verified reporter. So, I think it's an interesting way to kind of expand who you know.

Participants expressed a confidence that they were skilled in sorting news by credibility. While they acknowledged that whether something is or isn't factual is not always immediately apparent, participants felt that they could come to a well-reasoned decision of how much trust to place in a story quickly. The students also repeatedly noted that their peer group was better at discerning fact from fiction than older generations. In the Participation Now focus group, the conversation directly addressed this issue:

Student 1: You know it when you see it.

Student 2: Except that with, like, my mom I know that's not true. I mean, she gets pulled into all of them.

Student 3: Oh yeah, I think it's generational.

Student 4: You know, I think part of it is generational. And I mean that might be just [my mom] doesn't read as much news and she's not as informed. But, like, she also is just...

Student 3: My mom forwards me emails from, like, Zimbabwe and princes who want money to...yeah, it's generational.

Student 4: Well, my Chinese teacher from high school still forwards me, like, video emails of things. I'm like, "Stop. This is clearly a, like, spam. I don't want this. I haven't talked to you in three years. I don't want this."

Satire vs. Authentic News

Much like the challenge of examining the credibility of a news source that may be an advertisement or have a misleading agenda, students spoke of satirical news and information as a potential barrier to quality information online for the average user. Participants talked about the rise of satirical websites that are designed to be funny but produce content that is often confused for genuine news articles. Again, much as was the case with misleading news sources, students spoke of a learned ability to discern between satire and actual news. Still, in this realm, users had to go through this process of deciding what to trust as news and what to disregard or take as humor.

Student ability to bring personal experience, environmental cues, and an intuitive sense to the challenge of identifying satirical information was again key to the process of learning what to trust online. One student from Conservative Political Students noted the set of abilities a user must bring to the process:

There tends to be, like, a tone. Like a tone of the writer when he's writing his article if it's satirical or not. Like, I don't know, I guess it's, for me at least, I can kind of pick up

on it sometimes if it's like, maybe even the name source. Like, if I can see something in the writing or if I know the website itself is a satire news source then I can probably easily pick it up...It may be more intuitive actually [than environmental]. Because you kind of have to pick up on things, like, it's...I would say it's some of both. Because sometimes some headlines are, say, like, The Onion, some headlines are so outrageous it's like, that can't be real. So you got to take it with a grain of salt that it's satirical.

Another student from Student Aid expressed a similar sentiment, noting that he was generally confident in his ability to sort satire from authentic news:

I think I'm a pretty good judge of satire. I don't know, I think it's a you-know-it-when-you-see-it type of thing. I think I'm very rarely fooled by satire. But then again, I guess I wouldn't know if I was being fooled...I've seen [others get fooled]. Yeah, if there's something like Kanye West scores a hundred points on, like, handicapped basketball players or something like that. It's, like, a joke, in an Onion article or something...obviously, it was a joke and this other person posted it. But yeah, I consider myself to be very critical of sources...that I can, like, tell.

At times, it can be difficult to know for sure what information is satire and what is genuine news. In an interview with a student from Progressive Political Students, one participant spoke of the confusion that can arise when the humor is grounded in reality:

It's funny, one of my friends shared a link with me that was like a quiz game, and you had to guess if a Joe Biden quote was a quote from The Onion or an actual Joe Biden quote. So I think that in terms of satire it can be a little difficult. But everyone knows The Onion, and Clickhole is quickly becoming a more popular source as well. But I always...actually, no, there's always a lot of times where people can't quite determine if

it's satire or not. I think *that's* pretty funny...I can't remember any instances off the top of my head, but I think I've definitely fallen for it a few times. And then you always get the few people who are like, "this is an outrage," or, "I can't believe this would happen," and then you're like, "this is clearly not a real article."

Overall, students felt well equipped to parse information and detect satire. They did often note that they had personally seen examples of others being fooled by satirical articles, and they mostly all acknowledged that it could be a challenge at times. Notably, however, the process for deciding what constituted quality news and information followed the same general pattern when looking at satire as when students found themselves confronted with misleading articles and other information. The skill set for understanding information in both contexts was largely the same, and participants felt that over time they had honed these abilities to a point that they now were generally successful at identifying quality information.

The Filter Bubble

A complicating factor in the relationship between social media use and civic engagement among students is the personalized design of many platforms. A development in social media's recent history is the movement towards services that adapt and change based on user actions. As platforms grow, user data are collected, organized, and re-applied to the architecture of social applications and websites, in an effort to customize the user experience. From the company's perspective, the result of this work is that users are more likely to engage with their application, and they are likely to spend more time using the platforms. From the user perspective, however, this design aspect is largely out of view, and it can result in individuals being sorted into narrow areas of interest (Pariser, 2012). The result of this new personalization is that social media

platforms may reinforce user predilections, deemphasizing content that may run contrary to personal beliefs. Student discussions around several topics raised questions about the implications of this function of the embedded architecture of social media.

Questions Around Partisanship and Homophily Online

Although the framework on a social media platform is the same for every user, once individuals begin interacting with a social network, the experience changes. Soon after registering, no two user experiences are the same. Algorithms process user data to produce social feeds designed around past user behaviors. This customization, based on what the user chooses to engage with on the site, impacts the content that reaches the user. Students were very aware of this aspect of social media, and many had already given thought to the implications of such variance. One student involved with Students Combat Depression spoke of the impact that social media can have in this regard:

I think [your online experience] depends on things that you like, or follow, or are in tune with. So, one person's experience with social media could completely go against everything that you stand for, civically, or things that you care about. Especially, like, in a social justice perspective, things that are extremely biased can be on both ends of the extremes. So like, I think sometimes it's hard to find the middle ground with a lot of sources and things that people follow. Someone else's experience on this campus could be very different looking than mine, and the things that they follow, or care about, or look into could be very different. But, it's similar, it's just different from maybe your views or things that you align with civically, but it's the same kind of input of information and how you access it.

This idea of a familiar, but altogether different, online experience was addressed throughout interviews and focus groups. Students felt the push of their online networks in such a way that they did, at times, approach information skeptically. Similarly, students across organizations spoke of social media as a tool that can amplify the most opinionated content producers. For this reason, social feeds were a source of frustration at times. A student from Student Aid spoke about this sentiment:

...in my experience, using social media to share information becomes very opinionated and I think it creates a lot of bias towards things, because certain opinionated people express their views more often than others...So, I think versus having a conversation with someone where usually both points of view can be shared. It's turned into something where a select group of people are constantly sharing their opinions on something.

The dominance of fringe voices online serves as a deterrent to online engagement for these participants. Students spoke of highly partisan content on both ends of the political spectrum as one form of content that rose above strictly personalized information, but it was often undesirable. Instead, students hoped for a middle ground, in which broader, less hyperbolic information reached their feeds. There was a desire among participants to hear dissenting opinions online, and they saw value in hearing from people with diverse perspectives. Despite the comfort level in knowing that your networks were made up of individuals who support your own viewpoints, students acknowledged that they benefited from civil discourse. A student from Conservative Political Students expressed this understanding during an interview, noting:

...it's nice to have people who agree with you to talk to, but at the same time it's good to have a discussion with someone who doesn't agree with your beliefs if you want to, like,

talk with them. As long as it's, a, you know, it's a civil discussion and not like fighting or argument or something like that...I think it's stimulating. Because it's interesting to have someone whose beliefs don't align with yours to talk with, to see, like, how it goes while you're debating with them or something...I think it's a challenge to express yourself, and show what you believe to other people.

Another student from Students Against Racism echoed this sentiment, going so far as to say that even when content was offensive, it was important to still see these sort of posts:

I kind of find it interesting when people share. I don't know if you guys know Young Conservatives that are on that Dartmouth student website. It shares the most, like, the undertones are so racist and bigoted, and I have kids in my high school that are just really conservative and I kind of like, continue to stay friends with them and follow them, and sometimes argue with them on it. I really kind of find that interesting. I think that's a really biased other side, but I think it's important to see the other side of the argument.

The students described social media's organization of content as both an easy way to connect with others of similar interest and background, and as a way to find yourself quickly, unintentionally surrounded only by similar ideas and individuals. To participants, there is a perception that social media use promotes homophily, due in large part to the personalization of many platforms. This sentiment is supported in past data and theorization (Barberá, 2013; Pariser, 2012; Yardi & Boyd, 2010).

The Complexities of Strong Ties

Digital issues around homophily and partisanship speak to the complex nature associated with social capital strong ties. Social media provide students with tools to quickly and easily

organize themselves around issues of collective interest. For students working to combat long-running social problems, as with Students Against Racism, this aspect of social media is of great value. Social platforms allow for individuals with an interest to connect and share information and resources with others that share the same passion. Further, this aspect of social media that promotes strong ties allows marginalized populations to organize themselves and amplify their collective voice. This degree of social empowerment, along with the promotion of diversity within democracy, are important drivers of civic engagement. However, this same design feature can make it more difficult for organizations to grow as desired, because other students can enter college with a predisposition away from an issue or towards other issues and stay in the same interest area easily. Participants from the aforementioned organization's focus group spoke of the challenge of bringing in new students from diverse backgrounds:

The work that we do at [CU] is very... we have a lot of the same people who come to our events, and a lot of those people are already familiar with the things that we're discussing and trying to teach the BC community. I think in some sense, sometimes it's difficult because we want to touch those students who have never talked about any of the things we're talking about, or who don't have the knowledge base, and they walk away learning one thing, even... I think I would personally get discouraged if we have the same people coming – which is wonderful – but, if we don't have new people coming, we aren't reaching more people that we would like to.

Bringing together students from marginalized populations, and the resultant bonding social capital, can be a valuable force to promote identity development. Yet, bridging social capital, which results from connections between individuals of dissimilar backgrounds (Putnam, 2000), is also important for students to develop and learn from the experiences and knowledge of

others. Strong ties between individuals, then, are of significant value, but these ties work in tandem with weak ties to benefit both individuals and communities. If the students sense that they are quickly and easily sorted by their social networks with little exposure to dissimilar students, they may be missing out on developmentally beneficial experiences.

For many students, the strong ties that social media enable are to friends and family from home, and these connections provide needed support and encouragement. One student from Students Combat Depression noted that Facebook would be too difficult to ever quit, because that is the primary way she stays in touch with family members:

I'm from Peru. I have tons of family in Peru and I see them every three years at most. So like, for me, that would...if I were to quit Facebook it would just be completely disconnecting from them. I mean I'm not going to call them all individually, like every once in awhile, you know. So like, it's how I see how they're doing, and I might call them once in awhile, that kind of thing.

From the perspective of this student, social media allow for the benefits of strong ties that aid the college experience. This example, contrasted with experiences of students that feel overly pushed towards others of shared backgrounds, illustrates the complex ways in which social media's promotion of strong tie formation can serve as both a positive and negative to college engagement.

To some students, a resultant effect of social media is that civic dialogue can feel futile. One student spoke of a feeling that, with users being sorted into separate categories, at times it can seem as though there is little to no overlap between news and information feeds. This can make debate difficult, because common ground is challenging to find if debate participants have

read completely different sets of information. The student, from Progressive Political Students, elaborated:

It feels like both sides are arguing different points. And if I don't understand something like that, I'll either ignore it or go on Wikipedia or try to figure something out...I feel like on the Keystone XL pipeline, people were arguing against it for saying that it...hurts the environment, but other people were arguing the energy and the jobs aspect of it. So we were both, both sides not necessarily replying to the other side's quarrels with the legislation...So everyone had a different reason for supporting it or not supporting it but weren't necessarily on the same page going back and forth. It didn't seem like a direct conversation where you have to reply to someone directly.

The student went on to explain a theory on why arguments from different sides can sound as though they are derived from different realities, positing, "If you're an ideologue who follows certain accounts, or likes certain pages, you're going to tend to shy away from the ones that constantly disagree with you, because no one wants to be wrong."

The Ease of Ignoring and Blocking Opposing Views Online

Perhaps the most resonant issue with students around the narrowing of social media feeds was the relative ease of blocking, unfollowing, or otherwise ignoring users. There were many reasons students gave for wanting to hide certain individuals, organizations, or content from their feeds, but across all discussions, it was clear that social media platforms make the process very

simple.¹ The participants face issues of whom and what to follow daily on their social networking applications, and it was a topic of great interest.

As discussed in relation to the “information fire hose,” students felt overwhelmed at times by their social media feeds. The type of content that they came across could lead to this feeling at times, and for a variety of reasons, students removed unwanted content from their feeds. Students debated this topic in the Students Combat Depression focus group:

Student 1: I tend to feel strongly about that, because, there’ll be times when I didn’t know somebody that well, you just end up being friends with them...and like, I don’t agree with the things that they post, or I don’t have the same, like, perspective or standpoint, I’ll get rid of them. That’s a big thing for me, is that if it’s negative, or if it’s instigative, or bothers me, I just don’t want to see it. And a lot of the time too, I think the big problem to quit social media is that you feel like you’re disconnected. But there’s been a lot of times where I’ve just wanted to be away from it, because it’s overwhelming and at the same time you want to...be in the know without being so immersed in kind of, this pretend world of everyone.

Student 2: People I’m friends with on Facebook, I’m friends with them because I know them as a person. And then, their opinions are kind of shoved in your face on

¹ It should be noted that different social media platforms have different rules for connecting with other users. For example, on Facebook, the primary way that individuals are connected is when they are connected as “friends,” which is a two-way relationship. Users that are friends are automatically subscribed to each other’s feeds. You may unsubscribe from a friend’s posts, but the default system is set to show you the content produced by friends. The main one-way connections on Facebook are for “pages,” which can be brands, organizations, or individuals, and users can subscribe to updates by pages (but the pages do not see the user’s posts in return). On Twitter, connections are one-way by default, meaning that users choose to “follow” other users, and the user that is followed is under no obligation to follow the original user back.

Facebook... Whereas people that I follow on Tumblr are people I'm following because I like the stuff that they post. And so those people I tend to agree with, like almost everything I see on Tumblr. But on Facebook, I'd say there's a decent amount of people who I don't agree with. I think it can be intermixed, and that can be good, because then you're like, "oh, let me look into this, maybe I'm not informed about it." And then sometimes I see something and it just really pisses me off.

Student responses as exemplified in this focus group related back to the issues of homophily, partisanship, and strong ties online. Participants spoke of a constant push and pull between the value that comes with having exposure to a diversity of viewpoints and the frustration of being greeted with displeasing content when using social media. When coupled with the ease of just removing said content, many students felt it was easier to unfollow others when they came across objectionable posts. While they didn't always see posts as a personal offense, they felt it was not worth the angst, and as one student from Student Aid phrased it, "I think it's their right to [post whatever they want]... I also think it's my right to block and unfollow them, or unfriend them." Another student, from Students Against Racism had a similar perspective, stating, "I think there's a point where you realize it's not going to be helpful if you comment on something, comment on a post. You just know that that's not going to be productive and you just kind of unfriend them, it's better off and simpler that way."

Facebook in particular was the platform through which this topic incited the most interest among the students. Due to the fact that 1) it is the most widely-used platform, 2) it has been around the longest of all major social networking applications, and 3) there was a "social obligation" to accept friendships, as one student noted, Facebook was where students were most likely to have acquired an excess of content producers in their feeds. Students spoke of people

that they were friends with on Facebook that they had met only one time, or who were distant relatives, or family friends, and so they saw those feeds as more cluttered than was the case on other platforms. For this reason, participants actively looked to further narrow their Facebook feeds. One student from Students Combat Depression discussed the state of her feed:

...[I have] like 1,000 something [Facebook friends], and you just don't interact with 1,000 something people. It's really unnecessary. Just things like, people from high school that I actually don't talk to and don't necessarily need to know their business...it's a discussion about weeding out people that you don't really talk to. Also, I feel like I've unfriended people if they post things that are extremely conservative. I'm not a fan of the whole Fox News thing, I hate that. I also know someone...he ran for public office [in the state] and he posts the opposite, it's all extremely liberal stuff, but it's not necessarily always true. It's very hyped up and the titles are really controversial, and it's very opinionated in the same respect [so I hid his posts]. I respect him, but I don't necessarily like all the stuff he posts, even though I would say that I'm more liberal in my views than conservative.

On Twitter, users decide what accounts to follow, and the social obligations associated with friendship were less significant, according to participants. One participant from Progressive Political Students described the difference by noting, "...it's weird because on Facebook I would feel like I'm a lot more tolerant of seeing people post...I feel like it's a little bit easier to ignore it on Facebook [than on Twitter], because you're overlooking it and you're seeing it as a friend."

Another student, who was from Participation Now, spoke about the differences in platforms:

I feel like I see more posts on Facebook that I ignore than on Twitter. But most of the Tweets I read or at least skim...[On Facebook] I mostly am just scrolling through things

from kids from my hometown who I haven't talked to in years. It's, you know, irrelevant...And I'm like, okay, I need to, I don't care. Like, "I'm scrolling past you." I feel like I see a lot more of that on Facebook. But, that's also, you choose who to follow on Twitter. So it's a much more personalized experience, I think.

While social media platforms do make it possible to unfollow, unfriend, or block other users, many students spoke of just learning to skip, or ignore users. Rather than go through the formalized process of taking action, many students were content with knowing whom they could scroll past immediately. During a synchronous ethnographic tour, one student from Progressive Political Students demonstrated this process:

...I'll just check Facebook and see what's been updated...[Regarding the speed of scrolling through a feed], it depends. I can see, like, this guy I know I'm not going to enjoy what he has to say. So I'll scroll past him very fast. So like, this guy is [in the leadership of a political organization], and nothing against [political organization], but he just posts a lot of [things I don't like], so I just scroll past that very quickly. And then, like, if I see a news blurb posted, if I find it interesting, I'll click it. Maybe, like, one out of five I'll click on.

Just as the tools for sharing and connecting are readily available for students engaging with civic knowledge, so too are functions to disconnect from sources and content that users dislike. Even when participants reported just "scrolling past" or "ignoring" posts, rather than actually blocking or unfollowing another user, it is still common for them to find ways to circumvent disagreeable information.

The Boldness of Active Debate Online

Participants viewed online debate as an activity that required a willingness to publicly declare a strong viewpoint. From this perspective, students reported that engagement in online debate always eventually proved difficult and largely futile. Social media platforms encourage public, outward-facing dialogue that can bring in unwanted commenters, and students had personally witnessed many confrontations over sociopolitical issues. Several factors had led students to report a recent history of avoiding online debate. First, students expressed concern that on some platforms, but primarily Facebook, their social networks had grown too large to post anything controversial. Due to the fact that their audience consisted in part of people that they knew disagreed with their own views, they knew that posts could stir up anger. Second, participants spoke of a certain “type” of person who is willing to engage in debate online. Repeatedly, there were stories of confrontational, highly partisan figures looking for arguments online, most of who were dogmatic and unwilling to listen to opposing viewpoints. Lastly, students reported frustration with the performative aspect of online dialogue. When participants created content online, they knew that they had an audience. Mostly, this was desirable, and students sought larger audiences for their posts, but at the same time, they knew they had to curate their posts so as to not project a poor image, especially if potential employers viewed their profiles. The students also spoke of seeing posts by peers that felt disingenuous, from the perspective that they could see the transparency of content that was trying to project a certain type of image of the poster.

Social Network Features and User Comfort with Civic Discourse

The architecture of social media platforms played a role in how students viewed civic dialogue. Due to the varying ways in which social networking sites construct environments, students found that the audiences for their own posts, as well as the content that they themselves saw online, also contrasted greatly. The social contexts in which students created content were a factor in helping them to determine what posts they found desirable and what posts they felt were inappropriate. Students in Participation Now discussed the differences across platforms during a focus group:

Student 1: A lot of my friends from high school are very conservative in terms of their political views. I'm friends with all of them on Facebook. So...maybe it's like ten to fifteen percent I [tend to agree with on sociopolitical issues]. But on Twitter, I'm following liberal reporters...So yeah, Twitter, maybe it's like ninety percent because I choose more...Because Twitter, you pick and choose, sort of, more than you would on Facebook.

Student 2: ...[the people] that now post actively on Facebook are so radicalized. I think so many of the posts on Facebook are very, so harshly opinionated that even if I agree with the beginning of it, I don't agree with most of what they're saying.

Student 3: Too extreme.

Student 2: Yeah, and I think on Facebook, I see a lot of extremes on both sides. And I think that it's not because people are more extreme while they're on Facebook. I think it's because the people that still post statuses are more extreme. I think that people in the middle just don't post things like that. I never post political views. I posted that I voted – I clicked the “I voted” Facebook banner – but that's the last time I posted anything about politics...because it's hard to talk about...I have people on both sides of my

Facebook page. I have a girl that posts almost every day...radical right-wing posts. And I don't want her comments on my pretty middle-of-the-road, slightly lean left, you know, posts. It's not even relevant in my mind.

Students in the focus group went on to elaborate, noting the challenges associated with online debate. They felt strongly that the current structures online do not promote healthy, active civic discussions:

Student 1: I just don't think Facebook is an appropriate...it's so easy for the conversation to become, devolve into...

Student 2: Crazy.

Student 1: Yeah, exactly.

Student 3: Politics requires debate. Debate over Facebook, there's no way to have a thorough, legitimate discussion.

Student 2: Plus, everyone becomes involved, sees it and gets defensive. And it gets rude.

Student 4: People who will comment are the same people that would have posted. So they're either way far left, way far right, or they're out to, like, may you all look like idiots and they're just trolling. And none of those people do I need to interact with, and they're not my friends.

Student 3: Yeah, they're not trying to have a productive conversation, where they want to challenge their own views. They want to push their own.

Participants spoke of both the challenge of engaging with people of opposing viewpoints and of trying to voice an opinion amidst a channel of extremes. In this sense, students did feel somewhat isolated by the content that they were exposed to online. This finding is consistent with a recent Pew Research study, which found that social media users were less likely to share

views on sociopolitical issues if they felt that their followers did not agree with their positions (Hampton, Rainie, Lu, Dwyer, Shin, & Purcell, 2014). This relationship between the willingness of people to share opinions and their perceptions of the viewpoints of those around them is known as the “spiral of silence.” Pew has done the early quantitative work in this area of online dialogue exploration, and the qualitative findings of this dissertation further support their data.

Throughout interviews and focus groups, there was mention of the many paths to frustration that online debate delivered to participants. To some, there was a sense that they had a duty to share information and opinions with others, but that this sharing might not lead to constructive dialogue. Still, some students couldn’t resist engaging online, as exemplified by one student from Progressive Political Students, who reflected, “When you Tweet something, you almost feel like you have to stand up for it, so you almost feel obligated to defend yourself and not concede.” Examples of students carrying out what they considered to be fulfilling and useful discussions online were infrequent, and some students had just become disillusioned with the prospect of online civic dialogue. During the Students Against Racism focus group one participant explained:

It’s kind of like if you have something to say that’s not radical, it’s been said before, and if it’s radical enough to be different, it’s on the Internet forever and you can’t get that back. And if there’s something you need to address to a friend, I wouldn’t do that over Facebook. I would do that personally.

Performative Aspects of Online Dialogue

To many students, the challenge in online dialogue relates to impression management. There is a balance at play in which the user wants to reap the benefits of having open, public

accounts, but when knowing their accounts are openly viewable, they find themselves trying to be both authentically represented and acceptable to potential employers and other gatekeepers who might see their content. Students discussed this issue during the Participation Now focus group, with one participant sharing recent personal experiences:

Even as private as you may get, there's always the idea that somebody that's trying to hire you could see what you've posted. So even on Twitter, I would be more likely to post something about my opinion, but even there, I'm very careful about what I post. Just because I'm very wary, I mean, I leave my Twitter account public because of things that I've done in the past where I want my Tweets to be seen [to help promote myself]...Like this week, my blog post that I wrote for work was Retweeted by a big lobbying firm in Boston. And I wanted my Twitter account to be public for that, because that was a good moment for it to be a public Twitter. But I'm also not afraid for people to see my Twitter account, because I haven't posted anything about drinking, or drugs, or my political views.

Later in the same focus group, the dialogue turned to the reasons why a user might share certain kinds of information. Students were in agreement that social media accounts can be used to project a particular type of image:

Student 1: I think that especially during a time when it's, like in a presidential election, and more people are posting about politics, I think it becomes like, more socially okay to talk about politics on social media...I think on a normal day, people wouldn't talk about politics, wouldn't post about politics. But during a presidential election, people that would never bring it up with you, probably because they know if you ask them a question, they wouldn't know the answer, they would post something on Facebook.

Student 2: I also think that goes up so that everyone else knows, like, “Oh my God, I’m following the election.” Like, “I’m paying attention!” Just so people know that you’re actually paying attention.

Student 3: Look how informed I am!

Student 4: [*Sarcastically*] So educated. I know someone like that. So informed!

Theme #3: Social Media Use Trends

This dissertation was designed with the intent of exploring the convergence of two major components of student life, social media use and civic engagement. As this study was designed to elicit conversations among undergraduate students around social media use, some findings relate to the broad understanding of students’ interactions with the technology, beyond just in the civic realm. Still, these findings allow for more comprehensive insight into the relationship between students and digital media. As such, this work may further elucidate a great many areas in which technological advances can and will impact student life, including those areas that relate to civic learning and engagement.

Participant data speak to the emergence of several trends related to social media use. First, data indicate that specific features implemented by each media platform relate directly to use outcomes of the media. This distinct architecture around a given platform (Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, etc.), along with the resultant user environment, led participants to report varying outcomes of use relating to trust, content creation, and authenticity. Second, social media platforms have begun to incorporate features that encourage anonymity, and this trend has also had an impact on how users create and consume content online. Third, applications have shifted from primarily intended for use on a full-sized computer to primarily intended for, and in

some cases exclusively available for, mobile devices. This finding relates to the final point, which is that much of current social media use is centered on convenience (including speed) and media consumption as a transitional activity, or an activity that is done between other, more structured activities.

Media Features as Predictors of Use Outcomes

For these students, there are multi-directional hierarchies upon which social media platforms can be understood. Students spoke of implicit rankings of their networks, based on category. Overall, certain platforms were viewed as more representative of the individual than others. As a result, there were certain types of content that seemed more appropriate to post on one social media platform over others. There were a variety of reasons given for why a social media application made the students feel like their profiles were more authentic representations of their “real” self. The relationships were not precise, but in general, the factors that impacted perceptions of user authenticity were 1) how broad a user’s network reach was, which was often represented in how many friends or followers they had on the platform, 2) how anonymous or public the user felt when using the application, 3) how the user viewed the openness and level of judgment from the community of users on the platform, and 4) how “filtered” user content was, in terms of how actively individuals curated their posts and how much digital enhancement was applied to posted content. These relationships are represented in Figure 4 below.

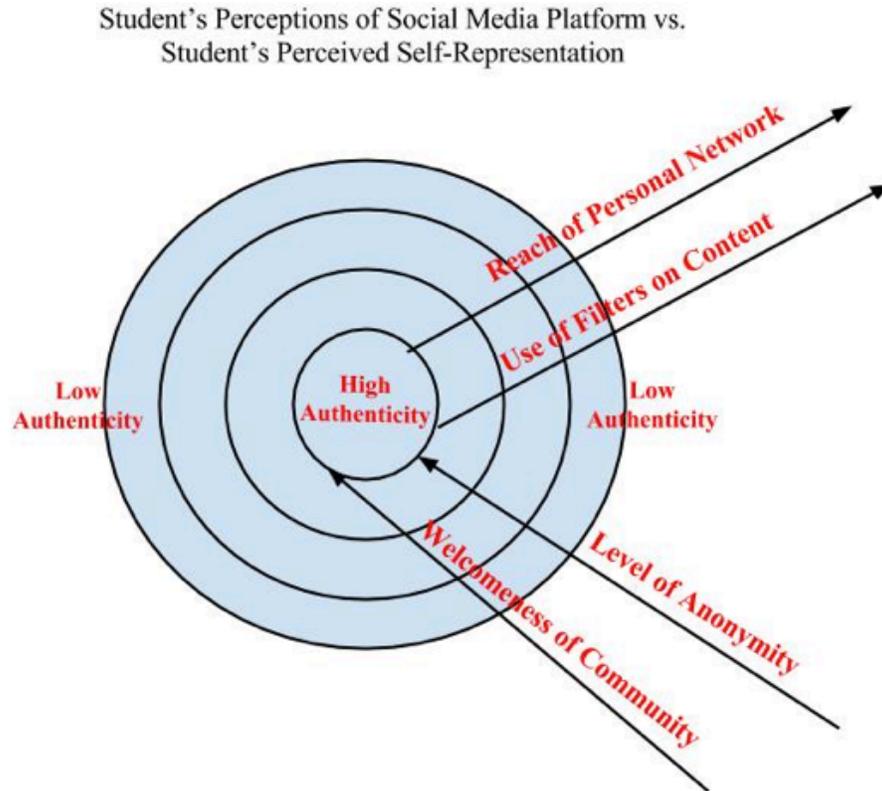


Figure 4. Student's perceptions of social media platform vs. student's perceived self-representation.

Participants continually referred to the distinct purposes that social media platforms serve. While individual students had unique perspectives on the networks as they applied to themselves, there was a clear consensus regarding the overall notion that social networking sites and applications each serve a distinct purpose. During the Students Combat Depression focus group, one student explained:

I have a different, like, *need* for each of my social medias. Like on Facebook, I'm, like, the [CU] student. Like, this is what I'm doing, this is how I'm doing. Twitter, I'm like, a sassy person. I just don't like any of you guys, I just do what I want, and I don't care.

And then on Tumblr, the people who follow me on Tumblr, like, you definitely would know the real me if you followed my Tumblr.

An important factor for participants in terms of how close to the “real” self that they were on a social media platform was the reach of their network. For most students, the broader the network, the less representative they felt on a platform. Snapchat, then, was reported to be a largely authentic representation of a user, because content was shared to small, close groups of contacts. Facebook, where users had often accumulated large numbers of friends across a wide sampling of contexts, was considered to be an unrepresentative network, because participants were more hesitant to post content. This topic was addressed during the Participation Now focus group:

Student 1: There’s like, different levels of who you are friends with on different social media, like Snapchat. Like, you wouldn’t Snapchat with someone that, like, you don’t know very well, because it’s picture messages. But like on Facebook, it’s just a general life thing.

Student 2: Facebook is more of an extension of, like, real life.

Student 3: Yeah, like I feel like I’m friends with almost everyone on Facebook that I’ve interacted with since freshman year of high school.

Student 2: [Facebook is] like, everyone you know, kind of.

Similar conversations arose during the Students Against Racism focus group:

Student 1: ...I rarely post statuses [on Facebook], because those would be weirdly personal for everyone to see because I have over 1,000 friends on Facebook, but I probably should only have 200 or something, but I don’t want 1,000 people.

Student 2: I would think twice before sharing an article that's at all about politics or something, like if it leans in one direction or another because of how broad the scope is...but if it was on Twitter where I had 200, 300 followers of people that were in college or my high school friends, I would be more comfortable with sharing. They would probably know that already about me. I would share it there, but not on Facebook.

Student 3: ...I would say that Twitter is more specific than Instagram for me, because I would post something random and personal that happened to me throughout the day and if it was funny or interesting...but I could never do something that annoying and random on Instagram or Facebook. But I would just do it on Snapchat or Twitter.

Student 4: I think it depends, too, when you started those accounts and when the bulk of your followers are from, because I don't really use Twitter anymore because I don't know that many of my college friends are on Twitter, but it's a lot of people from high school, because Twitter was really active during that timespan. I think that also affects how specific or how broad you're willing to be, depending on who you're following and who follows you.

Another major determinant of how authentic students felt on social media was how anonymous or public they perceived a network to be. This perception was based primarily in the privacy controls and in how likely it was that someone could easily find their account. One student from Conservative Political Students spoke of Yik Yak, an anonymous posting application, as a social media platform that allowed for authenticity because it allows a user to avoid having their name associated with anything controversial, stating, "I feel that it does affect how you post. Because if you know that you're not going to have your name on something, you

can get away without any criticism directly towards you.” Another student from Participation Now explained some of these issues across several platforms:

Why do I think I’m the most authentic [on the networks where I see myself as authentic]?

With Twitter and Instagram, you can approve of who follows you. Oh, and I suppose with Facebook you can, too. But Facebook, I don’t know, the way that Facebook works is you’re more likely to, I think, accept friend requests. And a person can just search your name. Whereas Instagram and Twitter, that’s more difficult to just search my name. Because I think names, when your username is like, my first initial and last name, it’s not difficult. But a person would have to, like, you know, try multiple combinations. Like, find who I am if I wasn’t already following them. Whereas Facebook is just like, if you know someone, you add them and their name is their name. I think maybe that’s why...because I’m more picky about who my followers are and who sees things.

Perception of how open and welcoming the community of a social media network was served as another important factor for how authentic students felt on a platform. If participants felt as though their posts would be judged harshly, then they were hesitant to create content. On networks that they felt were safe and welcoming, participants reported a willingness to be open with who they were and what they posted. Tumblr was a platform that students repeatedly referred to as a community of positive, open users. Subsequently, it came up as a social media application that allowed users to produce authentic content, as exemplified during an interview with a student from Students Against Racism:

...Tumblr has a certain community of people on there, a lot of it is like teenagers and artists but there is also like a heavy, a sense of community activism and things like that too. Which for me personally makes it more, makes me able to present myself

authentically, but also to like challenge myself more and listening to other peoples' opinions and makes me more open to sharing my own experiences.

Tumblr also contrasted with other platforms like Facebook for other students, because the community had cultivated an environment that encouraged creativity and individualism. In another interview with a student from Students Combat Depression discussed this sentiment:

I would say that my Tumblr probably aligns more with myself than my Facebook, but I don't think that Facebook is a personal forum in the way that Tumblr is. I don't think that [Facebook] involves self-expression, I think that it involves getting information from place to place, or learning something about someone, or figuring something out...on Tumblr, where, I mean, I don't post a *lot*...[but I do post] things that I find creative, or inspiring, or things that I'm passionate about...whereas I feel that Facebook is not a place to kind of, get that out there or cloud other people with that...I think that [on Facebook], I probably would be more hesitant to post something that's extremely personal. And if you do, it's kind of a brave thing, I think, to do that. And it depends on what it is too, and the quality of the information and what you're throwing out to people and what kind of feedback that you'll receive.

A final major determinant of how authentic students felt they could be on social media platforms was how "filtered" content was on the platform. This discussion largely centered on Instagram, a social networking application that encourages users to use filters on photos. The filters have an effect that can make photos look more appealing, and users also tend to only post the highlights of their lives on Instagram, according to participants. The result of these aspects of Instagram is that students felt as though the platform was not very authentic representative of a user's life. A focus group discussion with Students Against Racism exhibited this sentiment:

Student 1: I think Instagram is not, I think it's probably the furthest thing from peoples' true self. Instagram is like a collection of the best parts of everyone's life. Maybe that's dramatic, but it's all in filters so you can further optimize.

Student 2: It's literally filtering their lives.

Student 3: It's cool in one way because you do have your own personal record of the best parts of your life, but as far as it being true to your actual existence, I don't think it really is.

A student from Students Combat Depression discussed Instagram and the filtering it allows for in similar terms:

Instagram is a site where you post your best moments. So I think...you can try to be as authentic as you want to, but I know personally, and I hate this, but I'll get insecure if I post something and people don't like it or respond to it...I feel that's probably a form where a lot of it is make-believe for the most part. Because you're sharing, I mean, photos are supposed to capture special moments or things that you're proud of or want to share more. And with the whole, like filters and captions and things you can do to make yourself look unique or cool or interesting, it's not necessarily always the case.

The Rise of Anonymity Applications

A recurring theme across interviews and focus groups was the increasing role that anonymity plays in the structure of popular social media applications. While many of the most established social media platforms have designs that suggest openness and public-facing content, students talked at length about new applications that incorporate elements of privacy and anonymity. The prime example of this trend was the application Yik Yak, which students were

split on. Some students were stridently opposed to its use, and other students felt the application had a value that other applications did not. The immediate reaction from students when asked about Yik Yak during the Students Against Racism focus group was a microcosm for the overall nature of participant division:

Student 1: [I use] Yik Yak.

Student 2: Oh God no!

Student 1: Heck yeah.

Student 3: [Conversations on there get pretty bad], but it has rules that you can't slander someone. When I signed up for it, it was like, "these are the rules."

Student 4: yeah, but then people don't follow them.

Student 1: That started because when they first started it, it was nasty, and it still is. But they created their rule. When you sign up you're not allowed to [slander], but I don't know if it gets followed.

Students who were opposed to Yik Yak and other anonymity applications felt as though there was little positive to see in the application. It was seen among these participants as a platform that produces much more negative content than they were comfortable with, and they tried to avoid exposure to the application as a result. One student from Progressive Political Students explained his reasoning behind disliking Yik Yak:

From what I've seen and what I've heard, it tends to bring in a lot of bullying and it really brings out the worst in people, and that's just not what I want to be a part of...I think that especially at a school like [CU], where everyone's very PC, [people] tend to have those thoughts that might be funny, but they don't want to necessarily bring them out because they're not sure how people will react, or they don't want their name associated with it.

So I think that a lot of those thoughts are going through people's heads and it provides an outlet for those thoughts that may not necessarily always be positive or add to the fabric of society.

A student from Conservative Political Students that was a regular user of Yik Yak felt that the anonymity that comes with this type of application is a welcome freedom. Rather than feeling constrained, as they did on other digital social platforms, the student viewed Yik Yak as a way to be more expressive of authentic opinions:

Yik Yak, it's anonymous. So you just, you post something and your name is not tied to it. You can just like, put your opinion out there and like, let it sit... [Yik Yak allows for better self-representation because] you don't really feel pressured to really like, not offend anyone. Because if I'm like, if my name is out there, I don't want to go say anything and some people try to like, I don't know. I'm trying to think of a way to say this. But it's like, if I have no name tagged to myself, it's easier to say something because that way none of the backlash like, lands directly on me.

Many participants had witnessed malicious behavior on Yik Yak, and there were debates around the cause of the rise of this sort of content. Some students speculated that the platform encourages cruel behavior, while others felt that the content was reflective of the campus culture (Yik Yak uses geolocation technology to limit users to posting only in their immediate physical boundaries, in this case a college campus). Overall, students saw reason to believe that the malicious behavior was a product of both the application and the environment. The focus group with Students Combat Depression included a debate around this issue:

Student 1: I think people know there's kind of a stigma that goes along with Yik Yak. They know that people will post offensive things on it, but I don't think that will cause them to delete it or anything...

Student 2: ...I think the platform gave the culture of the students the means to say what they're thinking. And I do think they wouldn't just say [offensive remarks] on Yik Yak if they didn't talk about it with their close friends, or if they didn't believe it themselves. So I definitely think that it's a reflection of the culture and not just because of the app.

Mobile vs. Computer Access and the Evolution of the App

When asked how they access social media, students overall expressed a general preference for having the large screen afforded by a computer, but admitted that they use mobile devices much more often. The primary reason for mobile use among participants was the convenience of having the device in hand at all times, but they also referred to the increasing prevalence of applications designed for mobile devices. For example, Instagram and Snapchat were two popular applications used by the students that were designed exclusively for mobile devices (although there is now a partial version of Instagram for computer use).

A main driver of mobile application use among these students was the constant desire to stay connected. Since they were unable to carry computers around all day, phones served as a reasonable substitute. Participants from Student Aid spoke about this topic:

Student 1: [I check my phone] every couple of minutes.

Student 2: Literally every few minutes, at least on Twitter. I'm on Twitter every ten minutes, except for maybe a class, if I'm interested in the class...I also though, if there's

any red number on my phone in any app [to indicate a message notification], I have to go check it. Like, more for the number to go away than anything.

Student 3: In aggregate, [I use my phone] probably like at least two hours a day I spend scrolling through my phone.

Student 4: First thing, I wake up [and check my phone] before I get out of bed.

Participants also explained that some of their most used applications were never intended for use on a computer. Instead, certain applications were designed for use on mobile devices, and that is where they first began to use the platforms. Students from Students Combat Depression spoke about this during a focus group:

Student 1: [I use my phone to access social media] because besides Facebook, really, most of them are just only on the phone. Like, I've never gone on Instagram on my computer, or Snapchat.

Student 2: They just started that in the last year. Like, you could go on the web.

Student 1: You can? I love that it's on a bigger screen.

Student 2: It's kind of an awkward experience...

Overall, participants indicated that mobile access was the primary path to social media platforms. The convenience (and design) of mobile use allowed users to easily access their accounts from nearly any location, which superseded desires of having a larger screen for viewing.

Social Media as Transitional Activity

The driving force of convenience, and the associated ability to access social media from a mobile device, relates to another major trend in participant social media use. Rather than sitting

at a computer and setting aside time to access social networking sites, students largely viewed social media checking as an activity that happened in a flexible timeframe between other activities. As one student noted during the Participation Now focus group, “I would say it’s excessive to sit there and scroll through Facebook for like an hour or something. I wouldn’t say it’s too frequent, it’s...when you’re not doing anything, waiting for coffee, standing in an elevator.”

Nearly all participants relayed a description of social media use as the activity that fills blank space throughout a day. In this sense, it was difficult for some students to describe exactly how much time they spend browsing social media, because it is naturally intertwined throughout all parts of daily life. Yet, participants saw value in their quick checks of their accounts, as they often found themselves at ease switching back and forth between using their mobile devices and other activities. One student in the Student Aid focus group commented, “I mostly just use [social media] as a distraction whenever I’m waiting in line...I just look at it as a mind distraction when I’m waiting in line for lunch or something like that.” Much of the feedback about how students check their accounts was of a similar casual nature, but when they elaborated on how much time they spend and how attached they felt to their accounts, they portrayed social media as a constant fixture. Within the focus group conversation with Students Combat Depression a discussion occurred that represented an extreme, but not entirely unique, amount of use:

Student 1: [Throughout a given day, I use some form of social media for] twelve hours.

Student 2: Like, all day, unless I’m sleeping or in the shower. Realistically, because it’s on my phone and I always have my phone, I feel like I can always just check Facebook really quickly.

Student 3: I get really anxious if I have a notification on my phone that I haven't checked, so whenever that red circle is up on an app and I click it to go check...I feel like I spend a lot of time on social media because it's in the background of things that I'm doing. Not that I'm actively engaging in Facebook, but I'll have my computer up and Facebook will be in one of the tabs [*multiple students of the focus group agree aloud*].

Observation Data as Limited Support for Thematic Findings

As this study progressed, it became clear across initial focus group meetings, and then through subsequent individual interviews, that participant CU students felt as though social media use among their respective organizations was not used to full capacity. The blended nature of online and offline activity among the students resulted in a civic reality in which students used personal social media accounts more than organizational accounts for promotion and dissemination of organizational information. Several reasons for this practice were referenced, but the primary theme was convenience, or lack thereof.

For these students, it was simply more convenient to use personal profiles to share event and news information, because in many cases, their own personal profiles had accumulated more connections than actual organization profiles, so from a logistical standpoint, the reach was greater when all students invited other students personally. Also, with the transient nature of student involvement, with students changing over every four years or sooner, the act of planning and implementing a long-term social media strategy for an organization appears too time-consuming and inefficient. Lastly, these CU organizations did not always have a member dedicated full-time to working on social media marketing. As a result, marketing efforts were often performed by committee.

Still, while the students may have felt as though their organizations did not utilize social media as well as they could have, participant organizations did have some notable use histories. To the extent that social platforms were used, the CU organizations did leverage technology for activities including promotion, dissemination of information, event organization, and outreach to potential new membership.

Organizational meetings were also somewhat limited in terms of the usable data provided to this study. Within the overall research work, attending and observing organizational dynamics helped to set the context for understanding individual organizational purpose and leadership structures, but little could be concluded with relation to social media use and civic learning and engagement.

Digital Presence of Participant Organizations

Organizational use of digital media fell into three major categories: use for news and information dissemination, use as means to organize, and use to generate enthusiasm around particular topics or the organization's brand.

The most common use of social media by participant organizations was as a tool for sharing news and information, something that all the groups had done during the data collection period of the study. The organizations shared news articles, positive messages of support to students, posts from related organizations, and information about upcoming events via social media. Across all of the groups, engagement was limited on these posts, as they were sporadic and dependent on each organization's number of followers.

A common form of sharing that occurred across CU organizations was for the groups to share event pages on Facebook (and links to these Facebook pages via Twitter). This form of

sharing was the primary way for organizations to coordinate participants online and offline. As was indicated during individual interviews and focus groups, participant organizations relied heavily on Facebook's event pages to organize meetings and other events for members. These event pages constituted the large majority of posts by participant organizations, and they allowed for the groups to see attendance estimates and field questions from potential attendees. As most communication on Facebook is conducted through asynchronous channels, event organizers could accept questions and comments from interested parties at any point and respond at their own convenience, which was the trend displayed on participant organization pages.

The asynchronous design of social media also allowed CU groups to plan campaigns around particular issues and around the overall organization. Several participant groups used this aspect in successful campaigns. The CU organizations that were most active in this regard were the social issue-focused groups, both of which released multimedia (video, image, audio) to advance civic knowledge around a particular issue. These media were notable for the fact that they shared a common set of traits; they were each presented as a series in short, similarly branded bits, they included images and dialogue that were shareable, they included CU student voices, and they were designed to elicit emotional response. Engaged audiences emerged as a result of these campaigns, and the numerous comments, shares, and "likes" on the content reflected this impact.

Organizational Meeting Observations

As focus group interviews with participant organizations took place following regularly scheduled organization meetings, these meetings were attended and observed for data collection. As part of the design of the study, there was an expectation that student meetings would include

discussions that referred to digital happenings of, and relating to, the participant organizations. For the most part, this assumption did not carry into reality. It might be a fair hypothesis that if every participant organization meeting had been attended across a semester, or a full year, discussions would have arisen around the role of social media in driving conversations and in expanding each group's reach. However, attending one meeting per organization did not yield significant data.

At each meeting, the CU organizations had structured conversations around current activities, discussed updates and upcoming events, and there were vague references to possible online marketing and other digital strategy. However, the meetings attended for this study revealed little with regards to social media's role in civic learning and engagement.

CHAPTER Five: Discussion and Implications

This chapter will present an interpretation and analysis of this study's findings on the undergraduate experience with relation to social media use and civic learning and engagement. This discussion will include an examination of the relevance of these findings to the overall research question, as well as in relation to emergent research questions. These questions will be addressed through an analysis of themes and implications, with a focus on how these data might fit into larger conversations within and beyond higher education. This chapter will then conclude with an assessment of the study's research considerations, suggestions for future study, and final thoughts.

The primary research question at the outset of this study was: How do students understand the connection between social media use and their civic engagement while in college? This question is answered throughout this chapter, but it is the particular focus of the first three themes presented: The Path from Social Media Use to Social Capital to Civic Engagement, Social Media Use & Civic Development, and Quick, Critical Consumption of Media Among Students.

As anticipated, several questions emerged during the data collection process. These questions are: 1) How do college students use social media as a tool for civic understanding and action? 2) What positive and negative civic engagement outcomes does social media use promote? 3) What do current social media usage trends look like? As with the primary research question, all three of these emergent research questions are addressed throughout this chapter. Specifically, emergent Question One, which looks at the behaviors of students with regards to social media use as a tool for civic engagement, is addressed within every theme of this chapter.

Question Two is addressed primarily through the discussions on civic development, and the tradeoffs of social media. Question Three is primarily addressed through the section on evolving platforms and evolving trends.

The Path from Social Media Use to Social Capital to Civic Engagement

Prior to this study, researchers had explored the connections between social media use and social capital formation (Ellison, et al., 2007; Ellison, et al., 2011; & Valenzuela, et al., 2009), as well as the connections between social capital formation and civic engagement (Putnam, 1993; 2000). Within these works, there are allusions to a common thread between social media use, social capital, and civic engagement. Data from this study support the notion that these three concepts can be considered as a sequential pathway.

Throughout data collection, students spoke of two major areas of connections that social media help to facilitate: links to others with similar backgrounds and interests, and links to others that provided them with new information and resources. These experiences are a direct representation of the weak and strong ties that sociologists describe as the major components of social capital (Granovetter, 1973; Lin, 2001).

In terms of links to similar others, participants in this study found many of these connections valuable, because it allowed them to quickly and easily join together around areas of interest. In many cases, this was how students determined what news sources to follow and identified organizations that worked with topics they cared about. Students also referenced trusted connections as the individuals that they most relied on to show them who *they* trusted, subsequently growing personal networks. These strong ties connections also ushered students into organizations through the design of social networking sites; platforms including Facebook

and Google displayed a user's friend activity, and the platforms subsequently recommended possible groups of interest based on behaviors of peers.

Participants also found social media to be adept at the promotion of weak tie connections. Social networking sites, particularly those on which the students had developed broader networks, provided information streams that were diverse enough to connect them with new general news and information. In these examples, participants spoke of the blend of content that they received when their connections were accrued from varying junctures in their own lives. Of course, the growth of personalized content on feeds tempered the growth of these ties, as will be discussed later in this chapter. Students also discussed the proliferation of university administrative and organizational presence on social media. These accounts required low levels of commitment from the students that connected with them, but they provided valuable information regarding the information and resources that can make navigation of college difficult. These accounts also removed traditional barriers for students for whom there may be a level of intimidation to approaching a university or peer organizations.

Across this study's data, the connections between student social media use and social capital were clear. The question in analysis then becomes: does this social capital subsequently translate into student civic engagement? The answer to this question is yes, according to participant data. The students in this study described social media use as an activity that pervades nearly every aspect of their lives. The continuous, omnipresent nature of social media allows these students to remain connected and engage with news and information at any time of day. Social media allow students who were previously unengaged to have some exposure to topical matters, allows students who had some level of information to seek and further develop knowledge around issues, and it allows the most engaged students to bring peers into the process,

through resource sharing and organization of events. Further discussion of this point is included in the next section on civic development and social media's ubiquity in student life.

Understanding social media use to social capital formation to civic engagement as a process is vital to conceptualizing the utility of social platforms, and it also provides a new way for examining social capital theory. Social media platforms can serve many purposes, and student data speak to an increasing specialization of use as new media reach the marketplace. However, for the purposes of this study, we can understand different platforms as varying ways of organizing individual offline social networks. Across these many applications, students expressed the ways in which connections are made, from the cultivation of long-held, closely trusted friendships, to the ability to follow a journalist who provides real-time access to otherwise unseen civic news. These connections, and the associated capital that students access through these bonds, provided participants with a desire and ability to become further engaged, both online and offline. As a result, students reported exploring issues in great depth, joining campus organizations, and volunteering within their communities, among other civic actions. Vivid examples of these behaviors emerged from the data, including students that participated in offline rallies, sit-ins, and organizational meetings. In this sense, social media can be seen as a valuable conduit to civic engagement.

Social capital theory has traditionally been explored through non-digital behaviors, as much of this work was conducted prior to the rise of social networking sites (Burt, 1992; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993). Such digital environments not only provide a new layer for understanding and analysis within social capital theory, they actually may transform traditional notions. Whereas in the past the interactions between individuals and groups were seen primarily as in-person or as through one-to-many media (as through radio and television), social

media create powerful new forums for connections. Individuals can harness the clout of their personal networks through the same one-to-many communication that only large organizations previously held, online message boards provide many-to-many communication, and communication can now occur between the individual and a select, curated few. As social media provide conduits for individual and group connections, we can see a more seamless way of conceptualizing social capital formation. Online actions are faster than in offline environments, and connections can form, dissolve, and reform quickly. Therefore, the opportunities for social connections and resource exchange are robust and not as easily tracked as in past social capital research. These notions run contrary to Putnam (1993; 2000), yet this past work does provide a useful starting point for scholars exploring digital spaces. These many pathways for information flow present a set of newly available contexts for sharing of information and resources. Phrased differently, social capital formation is possible in previously unforeseen ways. The implications of the rise of social media for social capital theory represent a rich area for future study.

Social Media's Ubiquity and Civic Development

Students speak of social media use as a natural extension of offline life. There is a seamless “switching” that occurs for them between the digital and the in-person, in such a way that behavior is blurred across this line. Thus, it may not always be an easy task for students to conceive of social media activity as a separate part of a day. As the Chapter Four discussion around social media's role as a transitional activity outlined, students' digital activities exist in the gaps of daily life. This leads to a ubiquity that drives a sense of constant connection. For these students, answers to questions are never out of reach, and news and information are not

only easily retrievable, they are delivered automatically. Social media thereby provide the opportunity for individuals to engage with civic issues more often than in the past.

This integration of social media use in student life creates an unprecedented situation for analysis, because traditional media consumption required a focused dedication of time. This new form of consumption requires less commitment from users and adapts to individual convenience. Within the context of civic engagement, the fact that social media are intertwined in daily life can lead to a simplistic interpretation of student activism. Often derided as “clicktivism,” or “slacktivism,” the civic activities of individuals online are not as straightforward as they may appear. It is for this reason that it may be simultaneously as easy for critics to mock the most visible aspects of digital civic involvement as it is for individuals to actually benefit from social media use.

Traditional conceptions of civic engagement center upon the “ends,” or quantifiable, offline actions, including activities like voting, participating in a rally, and community volunteerism. The data of this study suggest a need for an updated, broader, and more complex view of civic engagement that accentuates the “means,” in which the value of civic learning as a vital building block of civic engagement is recognized. As one student noted during a volunteer organization focus group, “the first step to making any sort of change in our society is knowing what the problems are.” This promotion of knowledge acquisition, along with the ability to explore issues in great depth, is the value of social media as a force for civic engagement.

Student descriptions of their own social media use, as well as that of their peers, speaks to an interpretation of digital media as a positive, but at times subtle, force for civic engagement. The path taken by many participants was from 1) awareness, to 2) understanding, to 3) deep knowledge acquisition, to 4) personal engagement, to 5) engaging others (depicted in Figure 5

below). At every step of this process, social media factored in to the civic engagement of the students. Individual participant paths to civic engagement varied, but the sequential view depicted in Figure 5 illustrates the most prevalent description by the students of engagement behaviors.



Figure 5. Student path through civic development, as aided by social media use.

Participants described an implicit civic value of social media for students that did not have much interest in, or engagement with, sociopolitical issues. This value derives from a basic exposure to the images, ideas, and arguments around contemporary issues. Essentially, students could go out of their way to avoid topical stories of the day, but the simple act of logging onto certain social media platforms forced users to engage through content posted by their networked peers and through trending topics aggregated by the site. In this sense, it was difficult, or even impossible, for students that used social media to be completely disconnected from civic issues. Even in the case of students that do not design their social network feeds to proactively feature civic news, the convergence of “trending topics” and the tendency of social media users to post about relevant topics of the day reach into even the least sociopolitical of feeds.

The tools provided by social media also aided the civic development of students for whom there was a basic awareness of issues, but not yet a more in-depth understanding. Students spoke of social media as a facilitator for learning, and social platforms’ ability to connect users to information outlets helped participants to easily develop a greater

comprehension around topic areas. Students used their social networks to bridge the divide between desired and acquired knowledge. These digital tools helped students to develop understanding of issues and subsequently form a deep knowledge around topics of interest.

Data from this study also indicate that there is actual civic value in media that is often derided as “infotainment.” The tendency of long-respected media outlets towards producing content that walks the line between news and entertainment, or steps entirely into entertainment may still actually produce positive civic ends. Social networking feeds that are vacuous by design still create content that has *some* civic learning component. Sites like BuzzFeed, which began as a source of entertainment and light diversions now mixes in sociopolitical content within their social media posts. Other outlets with a long history of public trust as respected news outlets, like the New York Times, NPR, and the Boston Globe, now mix entertainment stories with harder sociopolitical coverage. These converging forces, along with social media platforms that feature trending topics culled from across the entire user streams, result in the delivery of a minimum of *some* content with civic value to *all* users. This means that for the least civically engaged users, there is a base level exposure to topical issues of community importance that adds value to their civic learning.

For many online, the learning and understanding enabled by social media use among participant students provoked engagement on a deeper level. During interviews and focus groups, students talked at length about issues that they were passionate about and felt a connection to as the ones that they engaged with most frequently. This engagement took on several forms, including deeper exploration of issues, in which participants were more likely to follow an issue over long periods of time and share their knowledge with others, offline participation in events and civic activities, and formalized involvement with organizations

focused on issues of interest. The clustering of topics and interest areas into easily formed and discovered digital enclaves (Bellah, 1985; Pariser, 2012; Sunstein, 2002) can in this respect be seen as a positive force for the promotion of civic engagement. Individuals can search online for others doing work in their areas of interest and join the cause, and in the case of participant students, they did follow this path to engagement.

Lastly, many participants discussed social media tools that allow for users to bring others into the engagement process. Such digital tools include Facebook event pages, shared calendars, the organization of peers into searchable lists, and hashtags for information dissemination. Highly engaged participants referenced social media tools as a means to engage others around a topic. Once students felt comfort with their own knowledge and abilities, social media advanced beyond a tool for personal civic knowledge and engagement and became a tool for recruiting and involving others.

This model serves to illustrate the role of social media as a catalyst for gradual, cumulative civic involvement. The effects, especially those occurring at early stages of civic engagement, are not highly visible, yet may help to build interest in civic issues, particularly in young social media users. The in-depth exploration of civic issues that the media allow for, along with the tools for involving others, speak to the advancing civic knowledge and organization that social media promote.

Quick, Critical Consumption of Media Among Students

An information age in which digital media provides users with an unending flow of data is not without its drawbacks. One such challenge cited repeatedly by participants was the unrelenting need to parse information. Students spoke of learning to distinguish fact from

fiction, satire from hard news, and more generally, what it means for information to be of quality. Ultimately, data from this study portray participant students as highly adept at this challenge.

Students within this study identified multiple ways in which they filter digital information. First, students rely on the design of social media platforms, along with the content creation choices of the users in their own personal social networks, to provide an initial screening of material. The basic type of content, along with how it is arranged, is determined through this first filter. Second, students use a combination of environmental cues, personal experience, and intuitive sense to quickly identify the quality of information. Lastly, students relied on search engines, most prominently Google Search, to follow-up and confirm information. Performing an online search allowed students to quickly verify material across numerous trusted sources in a matter of seconds. The participants felt that these tactics for analyzing social media content were necessary, due to the nature of present day media delivery.

The self-reported speed and ease with which participant students were able to sift through and categorize media implies a high level of cognitive complexity. As students face these daily challenges, there may be positive developmental outcomes that relate to problem solving and analysis associated with digital consumption. The blend of formal and informal methods for parsing and synthesizing digital media was a learned skill, according to participants. Students were largely in agreement that it had taken some time to determine best practices for identifying information quality online, and they also acknowledged that methods must change as media adapts. There was an implicit and explicit skepticism to participant media consumption; students saw the act as a necessary cost of using media that is largely supported through advertising and user views.

The judicious consumption of media by participants also may have implications in terms of the civic habits of the students. The ability to organize and interpret civic data may serve as a reason why these students are civically engaged. The involvements of these students are driven by their sociopolitical knowledge, and so it is possible that the ability to interpret multiple online data streams may help lay the foundation for civic knowledge acquisition. Conversely, it is possible that the offline involvements of participants serve to aid their online information analysis abilities. A third possibility is that these two forces work in a mutually beneficial way, with each supporting the other. Ultimately, the data lead me to conclude that it is this third scenario playing out within this study.

The supportive nature of students' offline and online behaviors is such that as students engage in issues through practical offline application, they develop the skills and knowledge to aid their online information consumption. Conversely, as these students acquire and develop knowledge through digital social means, their civic practice is more informed. The interplay between these forces is a necessary and vital area for future study, as there may be a major role for higher education within this dynamic. The demands made on the user as they seek to decode complex online information can be supported by the offline activities of the individual. Also, if online behavior may help guide and promote offline civic involvement, traditional notions of student involvement and support services are in need of reassessment and subsequent updating. For example, a traditional civic volunteerism program offered by a university may be far more beneficial to students if the university offered structured (or unstructured) guidelines for online follow-up and discussion. According to data from this study, students would benefit from the pairing of offline civic activity and online civic learning. This is a hopeful area of discovery for

higher education, as it points to tangible interventions that could improve practice in developing civic engagement as a learning outcome.

The critical nature of participant media consumption may or may not be generalizable to a broader population. As outlined in Chapter Three, the students in this study attend a selective PWI, and the demographics of the participants are reflective of Commonwealth University's involvement opportunities, but not necessarily reflective of CU or any broader population. As noted by Gasser, Cortesi, Malik, & Lee (2012), demographics can impact how individuals seek information and determine information quality. In summation, the tools and abilities that participant students have developed to sort digital information may not be shared by students from dissimilar populations.

The Tradeoffs of Social Media: Information Overload, Personalization, and the Public/Private Balance

The students in this study did not view social media as entirely beneficial for civic learning and engagement. In fact, there were several ways in which participant use of social platforms was characterized by concern and acknowledgement of the tradeoffs involved with use. Among the issues cited by students, a sense of constant overload amidst an unending flow of content, the potential consequences of segmented, overly personalized services, and the difficulty in navigating the public/private divide online were all addressed.

The wealth of information available online provides users with the ongoing challenge of filtering through their streams and identifying quality content of interest. Participants frequently mentioned the notion of "clickbait," or content created with the sole purpose of tantalizing the reader into clicking a link, designed for increased website traffic and for the end benefit of

increased advertising revenue. The rise of clickbait, along with general misleading content and satirical news stories, had ushered in an era of skepticism for these students. To these participants, there was an erosion of public trust that had occurred in recent years, both towards online platforms and content creators. User confidence in social media as a news and information source was buoyed largely by a conviction that their own abilities to navigate online data transcended clickbait strategies.

The convenience associated with the increased personalization of social media also comes with concessions, as evidenced by participant data. Chief among these concessions is the “filter bubble” aspect of customization, the notion that social platforms selectively guess the most interesting content to share with users (Pariser, 2012). When combined with the feature across several social media platforms that allow users to decide which accounts to follow, students reported feeling as though sometimes they were presented with biased information online. Despite the fact that these students described this content as being biased in the direction of their own sociopolitical perspective, many found this feature potentially hazardous. These students felt it was important to be presented with a spectrum of information sources, because the diversity of ideas allowed for greater understanding of issues and a more informed personal perspective. Due in large part to this aspect of social media, participants expressed limited confidence that their algorithmically driven feeds served as a fair perspective on the news. To date, there is no definitive study on the effects of this personalization on civic outcomes. Perhaps there never will be any such study, as the rapidly changing social platforms hardly provide an easily measurable content stream. However, the data within this study speak to, at the very least, the ease of creating these sorts of personal interest enclaves. For many of these students, the only barrier between the user and an almost entirely predisposition-centered media

silo is the user's choice to keep opposing, diverse viewpoints within feeds. The simplicity of hiding such content is documented in Chapter Four, yet many users still recognize these forms of information as valuable.

Lastly among emergent social media tradeoffs, the divide between public and private information represented a point of concern for participants. Students benefited directly from the mostly public nature of social media content, as it was the very system that allowed them to quickly find and confirm news and information. However, there was also trepidation that came with online participation because potential employers or other significant leaders could see their content and find it objectionable, a sequence of events that they had seen through personal experiences. The unease was more subtle, but equally influential, for many other students. The public nature of online dialogue had led many to disengage from civic debate. The act of social media content creation represented a willingness to engage in dialogue around this content, and in the case of social and political posts, this was usually not a worthy endeavor. Participants felt that opening up this public forum would not result in constructive dialogue, and they instead decided to keep their thoughts offline. The ways in which students described the decisions that went into how they performed, or did not perform, online impression management can be interpreted through the notions of "frontstage" and "backstage" social performance literature.

Eliasoph (1998) built off of earlier work by Goffman (1959) to describe civic discourse as understood through the analogy of "frontstage," or public facing, and "backstage," or more private, personal setting. Eliasoph observed that American society produces citizens that do not actively engage in civic life. Her work found that the most honest and expressive civic dialogue happened during backstage moments, where there was a sense that individuals could speak freely without fear of backlash. Frontstage behavior was found to be more reserved, with individuals

less likely to share opinions. Eliasoph's data were collected in offline environments, but this dissertation's data corroborates these behavioral trends within an online context. As described in Chapter Four and in this chapter, the more that participants viewed a platform as reaching a broad audience, the less likely they were to engage in civic debate. This broad, wide reach of social media can be seen as the digital parallel to the frontstage, while more closed social networks, where participants reported acting as more authentic, represent backstage environments.

To the participants, there are known tradeoffs involved in social media use. Taken collectively, these areas for user concern could be interpreted as one side of a choice that these students must make; are the negative consequences of social media use enough to make the platforms not worth using? However, when considered within the context of not only the college landscape, in which there is a ubiquity of use, but also in the broader world, in which social technologies permeate much of society, is it actually a choice? This study's data indicate tangible benefits to use of social media, as well as a clear perception that *not* using these platforms would exclude students from daily opportunities. Social media platforms are these students' news source, their research hub, their social calendar, their communication system with friends and family from home and from college, and their campus bulletin board. Students not only spoke of social media as the activity that they do continuously throughout the day, but they also pinpointed every aspect of their lives that now depend on social technologies. To willingly remove ones self from social media would mean unplugging from the social structure that has been adopted by nearly every person and organization in their social sphere.

Evolving Platforms, Evolving Trends

As addressed in the opening pages of this dissertation, the social media landscape is constantly in a state of flux, and as a result, research in this area presents a unique set of challenges. Popular media coverage of social platforms can present a hyperbolic perspective of digital trends, but a more nuanced perspective is called for when approaching this topic. An example of this can be seen within the data of this study.

In recent years, popular media often describe Facebook as a platform on the decline among young users, but this study allows us to consider a more complex view. For users that understand Facebook within a stagnant context, it might seem as though the platform is on the decline. For example, a primary function of Facebook in its earlier years was the “status update.” Users routinely posted comments on daily life, and for this study’s participants, this has changed. Students in this study described posting a status update as “kind of old school,” and noted that they were unlikely to post in this way. Across the data, there was a sense that Facebook was used not because it was the “cool” platform, but because it served several vital and useful purposes. So, despite the fact that students explicitly declared Facebook less “fun” to use than it had been in the past, it did not matter. Students were very reliant on Facebook as a messaging platform and as an organizational tool. These actions are more likely to be hidden from public view, and as such, a superficial, anecdotal view of the platform may lead one to conclude that the application is on the decline. However, this trend is *not* indicative of a dying brand; it is indicative of the ways in which social platforms may change, and user behaviors on these platforms may change accordingly. Participants spoke of Facebook as an essential social media tool that they used daily.

Participant students described social media platforms as constantly evolving. The shift away from desktop computer applications and towards mobile applications was one that students

identified as promoting convenience of use. Similarly, students addressed the rise of anonymity-focused applications as a need that the social media market filled. New elements had been introduced to social media in recent years that have shaped the digital landscape, thus altering student use of these platforms. While it may not be possible to fully know what changes are on the horizon, we can anticipate that changes *will* happen. For researchers, this acknowledgement is key to building strategic research agendas and interpreting data. It is also vitally important that researchers account for mediating variables in this area of study. Due to the fact that there is so much rapid change around social media, it can be easy to misinterpret data. The example of Facebook's implementation of a messaging feature within their application, which may change how users communicate, is an example of how user trends can impact data collection and interpretation. For those analyzing social media data from either a civic engagement or a higher education lens, the importance of vigilance around adaptation and interpretation remain relevant. Social media research is not a static field of study; the certainty of future developments exists only in the knowledge that change will occur.

Implications for Higher Education

As higher education professionals seek to develop an understanding of undergraduate civic engagement, along with other contemporary concerns, they must broaden their perspective of student life to match present day realities. The assumptions of the past may no longer hold when considered in a modern context. This study's data speak to a need for constant assessment of student environments and university engagement practices. Specifically, higher education leaders must consider the ways in which online settings are impacting, and will continue to impact, student learning and development.

While digital environments may not be controllable by higher education institutions, university leaders should not use this as a reason to ignore the fact that a “campus” now extends online. Certainly, this does not mean that higher education leaders should attempt to mirror administrative practices online. Rather, they must first develop a working knowledge around digital trends and then determine best practices for serving students in digital contexts. This basic level of understanding must be accompanied by a commitment to regular reassessment, as the online tools of the moment will continue to change.

In an era where higher education institutions are under constant scrutiny for not focusing on student preparedness for the workforce, this study points to areas for opportunity. This study supports the notion that social media use contributes to social capital formation. Social capital has been shown to be beneficial in terms of employment, as it can help students to find jobs, internships, and other workforce opportunities. This connection has been explored elsewhere within the literature, and the implication is that social media use should be embraced and guided by administrators, as opposed to dismissed (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Saguaro Seminar, 2000).

Social media may also serve as a welcome pathway for students that are identified as at-risk, or those students who are otherwise unable to access campus resources. Utilizing the social bonds that social media can facilitate, along with the resultant social capital, may benefit universities as they seek to reach diverse populations of students. Institutions should implement university structures that aid the formation of both weak ties, which will help at-risk students to bridge gaps that accompany a lack of college preparation, and strong ties, which will help these students to find peer groups that will help to build cohorts that aid identity development. As

evidenced within this study, social media can be used to build such bonds. These online tools may prove to be developmentally impactful for these students and aid college success.

We now have a growing body of evidence that digital tools can be used for the development of educational outcomes. In this study, we see evidence of new ways of conceptualizing these uses as well. The student descriptions of the process that occurs when quickly navigating complex sets of online information speak to how students may benefit from technology use. These digital puzzles that students solve as they deconstruct online news hint at possible new methods for educators to push students to think with greater cognitive complexity.

The data in this study also indicate that social media use can promote civic engagement. This is an important area for buy-in among faculty and staff, because although civic engagement is a desired outcome of higher education, there is not much research work around social media, social capital, and civic engagement. As these connections are made, popular views of social media as purely a waste of time or social activity may be countered by these new findings that highlight societal benefits of use.

Additionally, it is imperative for higher education professionals that value civic learning and engagement to grapple with the potential effects of digital personalization and the “filter bubble.” The consequences of increased sociopolitical polarization and sorting of young people into enclaves of interest are numerous, and these avenues for civic separation undermine democratic efforts. The primary concern with this function of the social web is the notion that personal beliefs may go largely unchallenged online, and as a result users can settle into increasingly narrow perspectives. If this is the case, then civic discourse may suffer greatly, with individuals unwilling to engage and challenge themselves. This underscores the important role that higher education can play in student civic development. Student affairs initiatives, including

multicultural programming, diversity initiatives, leadership activities that bring together students of dissimilar backgrounds, and other events in which cognitive dissonance is facilitated are all ways through which higher education can promote positive civic behaviors and knowledge acquisition. As students are exposed to progressively narrower viewpoints online, student affairs work that facilitates cognitive dissonance becomes increasingly vital to the university mission. These experiences that challenge student intransigence can combat some of these negative digital forces.

Lastly, this work should be considered from a developmental perspective. Earlier in this chapter, a call to rethink social capital was raised, but might it also be time to rethink student development theory? Early work in this area frames digital spaces in a binary fashion – disconnected or connected – but in actuality, students spoke of their digital lives as something that is more seamless, with weaker boundaries than previously thought. Many other developmental questions must be considered in light of this research as well. As we grapple with new social media platform features, like the ability to post anonymously, we might ask: What is it about social media spaces, especially anonymous ones, that map onto college student development? Do these spaces actually fit within traditional student development theory? What can a platform like Yik Yak, where some students may feel a great deal of comfort in anonymity, tell us about a student's individual developmental process, if anything? If social media are now being used by students in fragmented ways, are there some platforms that are more useful for practitioners that are trying to reach students with developmentally impactful programs and outreach?

It is likely that as college environments change due to social media, so to should the notion of informed practice. Taken from a developmental standpoint, the old methods should be

held up to critical light, and outdated notions should be noted as such. To rely heavily on work that was done in an almost entirely pre-social media and a nearly universally pre-Internet is to ignore the realities of today's students.

Research Issues

As discussed in Chapter Two, social media as a topic of study is an area characterized by broad, fast-paced growth yet relatively little empirical research to date. A result of this research landscape is that as topics are initially explored, certain methodological concessions must be made. Within this study, several concessions relate to this work's position within a largely unknown research context.

First, this dissertation study sought to ask broad questions regarding student social media use as it relates to civic engagement. In order to provide a baseline understanding of how these two areas interact for college students, there was a methodological decision to simply identify and group participants based on involvement in student organizations. This allowed for questions to be asked of students that related to these involvements and to garner general feedback in the topic area. The purpose of this study called for such data collection, but a more granular study, in which participants were identified and grouped by such demographics as race/ethnicity, gender, income level, and so forth would have allowed for a much deeper sociological analysis. Demographics do impact social media use (Gasser, et al., 2012), so the design of this study did not account for this mediating variable. These more in-depth areas of inquiry are essential for a true understanding of the phenomena at hand, but regrettably this level of research is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Another issue that came up during the research process related to the online organizational observations. Again, there was an absence of previous work in this area that could have potentially offered guidance in this aspect of the study's design. The methodological decision to look at organizational social media presence was helpful to provide context, but it was not ideal for advancing an understanding of the research question. The overall unit of analysis for this study is the individual, engaged student at CU. However, in categorizing students by organization, the online observation data was mostly limited to the behavior of the participant organizations. Due to the fact that individual students post content for organizations, the unit of analysis did not necessarily *change*, but it might have been more useful to approach online observation differently. It would have aided the study to either study an organization in which one student runs all social media posts and interview that student, or it might have been beneficial to simply study individuals' posts outside of their work for an organization. The latter method would have required more complex IRB considerations, longer periods of analysis, and possibly screen capture software (which would have added significant cost to the study). Future work around actual tracking of user behaviors, while beyond the scope of this study, would potentially benefit researchers.

In relation to the dearth of empirical social media research, one final research issue emerged. As I discuss in Chapter Two, nearly all of the extant research on college student social media use employs quantitative methods. While this study's positioning within the literature as a qualitative work is needed, the findings underscore the necessity of mixed methods work in this area. The value of mixed methods work is best understood when considered within the context of the social media landscape. Due to the continuous shifts and updates within the social media market, data often serve to provide a snapshot of a moment. Contexts change with such speed

that to analyze qualitative data without accompanying quantitative figures feels incomplete. As within this study, quantitative data can be used to approximate current measures to inform qualitative data collection and analysis, but an ideal research design around such an unstable subject would call for simultaneous mixed method data collection.

Areas for Further Study

There are several clear areas for future research based on the results of this study. First, the data from this dissertation was gathered over a relatively short period of time, with all but one of the focus group interviews occurring over the course of one semester. Although an extremely lengthy study may provide its own set of issues, as the patterns of social media use may change dramatically over a long period, an extension of data collection to a full academic year may prove worthwhile. This period would be useful to learn more about student perspectives on social media use and civic engagement because there may be some mediating factors that alter student perceptions throughout the academic calendar. For example, the sociopolitical variations that occur throughout a given year would likely be more represented across one year than across four months.

A related consideration for future study would be to design the study around a major, predictable event, such as a presidential election. Students within this study spoke repeatedly about how their social media feeds had changed during the last presidential election cycle. It would be interesting to contrast the findings of a presidential election year with an off-cycle year, as there may be particularly unique themes around partisanship and public debate for each data set. Similar studies could also be conducted during years or months in which contentious political issues are due for debate, such as during months when the Supreme Court hears cases.

Although this study explores some implications of Pariser's (2012) "filter bubble" as a possible obstacle to accessing diverse information online, more work can be done in this area. An example of a future research project in this area would be to identify a current issue and evaluate the effects of multiple media streams on civic discourse. Participants that follow mostly conservative or mostly liberal news outlets can be grouped by ideology and interviewed as the story develops. Interviews that focus on how participants frame and explain a news story can be coded for keywords and themes that expose potential warring narratives across media. Although participants in this dissertation alluded to a sense that sociopolitical debates occur in silos, with each side arguing past the other, a follow-up study that actually explores a single topic's media narratives could provide further insight.

This study's purpose was to begin an exploration of the relationship between student social media use and civic engagement. However, this exploration was done in such a way that it merely creates a framework for studies of greater specificity and depth. The most pressing need for a follow-up study on this work, then, relates to an expansion of this study's demographic reach. Future researchers can use this study's findings and discussion to design research that looks at similar issues within colleges of different classification, for example. Researchers could also identify participants by demographics, rather than civic engagement area, which would allow for greater understanding of differences by race, gender, socioeconomic status, or other characteristic. These areas for exploration would add many dimensions to future understanding of civic engagement and social media use, and I believe they are necessary.

Finally, it is worth noting that this study would also benefit from future replication absent of any changes. The central variable of social media within this research will change, regardless of all other variables within the study. Due to the constantly evolving social media marketplace

and associated user trends, this study's findings could look very different within a single year. As such, snapshots of different periods of time may be the best way to understand larger trends in this topic area.

Concluding Thoughts

Civic engagement is a vitally important component of a democratic society. Colleges and universities seek to promote civic behaviors, yet the concept is not fully understood as it relates to today's students. The gap that exists between the desired civic outcomes and the lived experiences of undergraduate students may be partially understood through study of online environments.

Students within this study rely so heavily on social media platforms in their daily lives that it can be difficult at times for them to articulate the line at which the digital ends and the offline begins. Through extended conversations with participants, though, it became clear that many students do care deeply about civic issues, and much of the learning and involvement begins for them in online environments. This is where they find out about issues as they occur, learn more about topics of interest, and identify ways to become involved and involve others. Although it may be an imperfect tool for catalyzing civic engagement, student use of social media represents an overall positive force for promoting undergraduate civic involvement.

Higher education professionals speak often of "meeting students where they are," but what does this really mean? Rather than relying on a series of assumptions and guesses about student behavior, truly understanding the undergraduate population requires an amplification of student voices. This study was designed to ignite a new conversation around civic engagement and social media within the higher education environment. Civic learning and engagement are

vital to the maintenance to a democratic society, and as we seek to develop it in all citizens, developing an understanding of the many ways in which college students become engaged is an important starting point.

Appendix A

Focus Group Protocol: Students

Introduction

First, thanks so much to all of you for taking part in this project. I appreciate your participation and hope to learn more from you about the ways in which student use of social media can potentially affect civic engagement and perceptions.

Probes/Themes

- I know that you have lots on your plate, so we can get started right away. Can you please tell me about:
 - What social networking websites/apps do you use?
 - Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube, Tumblr (probe about each as they are mentioned, and follow up to ask about the others if they are not mentioned)
 - How often do you use each? Hours/day, days/week?
 - Describe how you use them (if you do) – is it via your phone/tablet? Is it on your computer?
 - How big a role do these sites play in your life?
 - What do you use them for?
 - Who do you communicate with (family, friends, professionally, academically, fan pages/groups)?
 - how do you interact with others on the sites – do you reply, ‘like,’ retweet, share, reblog, etc?
 - Do you think you could quit using these sites? What would you do instead (to replace current purposes they serve within your life)?
 - What about today? What social networking sites/apps did you use today? This week?
 - What are the big apps/social media sites here (at Commonwealth University)?
 - Has that changed while you’ve been here at all?

[Transition to bringing in **Civic Engagement**] OK, let’s shift gears for a bit. I want to talk about your involvements, activities, and interests/views.

- How would you describe your involvements outside of the classroom?
 - What (other) clubs or organizations do you all belong to?
 - On-campus, off campus?
 - Over the course of your life, have you been involved in many/any clubs and organizations? Walk me through those involvements and how they’ve changed over the years.
 - Do you think of yourselves as “active citizens?”
 - What issues (civic, political, social) do you care most about?
 - Where do you get most of your news?
 - Probe: websites (which ones), newspapers, television, etc?
 - Do you post your views on any issues online?
 - Do your friends/people you follow put up posts on their views online?
 - What do you think about posts that you see online?

- Who here would say they get angry at posts online? Tell me about it.
 - Is it because a view was posted, or because you disagreed with it?
 - Do you engage in these situations in any way?
- Is it appropriate for political/social issues to be shared online? When/Why or why not?
 - Are there some websites where you'd prefer to see this sort of thing (rather than others)?
- Have you ever felt like you learned something about an issue because of something you saw posted online by someone you are connected with?
 - If so, when? Can you elaborate?
 - If not, why not? Do you think it is possible in the future?
 - Are there people you trust more than others (in terms of what they are posting) online for these purposes? Are you more likely to click their links or read their posts more carefully? Can you talk about this more?
- Have you ever had a personal view or stance changed because of something you saw posted by someone you are connected with online?
 - If so, when? Can you elaborate?
 - If not, why do you think that is? Do you think it is a possibility in the future?
- Can you talk about a time when an issue came to your attention via social media that you had not previously known about?
 - Can you talk about that process a bit? How did it come about? What steps did you take to learn more about the issue?
- During presidential election years (as in 2012), are any of the aforementioned issues changed for you?
 - If so, how?
- Do you find social/cultural/political posts funny?
 - What about the use of memes to address issues?
 - Are there images you've seen online that have made you more likely to read them/click them? Probe: Colbert, Stewart, MSNBC/Fox contributors, writers, celebrities, etc. – Do any cause you to pause and read?
- Do you believe that your beliefs have been shaped due to your use of social networking websites?
- How does your organization use social media?
 - Has it been effective?
 - How do you see it evolving over time?
 - What are some examples of organizations/groups around CU that use social media well?
 - Do you use social media differently as a representative of this group compared with when you use it for your own purposes?
 - How so?
 - What is the overall environment like here at CU for social media use? Is it widely used/accepted?
 - What are issues/challenges to using social media within your organization?

- What expectations do you all have going forward for how social media will be used at colleges? In student organizations? What about official campus departments?
- Can you recall an occasion when something you read on a social networking website caused you to become active offline?
 - Probe: Participation in an activity, seeking out/engaging in a discussion, asking someone else about an issue, volunteering in some way – any of these?

Anything else you think might be relevant on this topic?

Wrap up: Thank you so much for your participation. The time that you took today will greatly help for my coursework and will help me to begin looking at some of these issues.

Appendix B

Individual Interview Protocol: Students

Introduction

First, thanks so much for taking part in this project. I appreciate your participation and hope to learn more from you about the ways in which student use of social media can potentially affect civic engagement and perceptions.

Probes/Themes

- I know that you have lots on your plate, so we can get started right away. Can you please tell me about:
 - What social networking websites/apps do you use?
 - Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube, Tumblr (probe about each as they are mentioned, and follow up to ask about the others if they are not mentioned)
 - How often do you use each? Hours/day, days/week?
 - Describe how you use them (if you do) – is it via your phone/tablet? Is it on your computer?
 - How big a role do these sites play in your life?
 - What do you use them for?
 - Who do you communicate with (family, friends, professionally, academically, fan pages/groups)?
 - how do you interact with others on the sites – do you reply, ‘like,’ retweet, share, reblog, etc?
 - Do you think you could quit using these sites? What would you do instead (to replace current purposes they serve within your life)?
 - What about today? What social networking sites/apps did you use today? This week?
- Focus Group Themes Follow-Up Questions:
- Information Quality:
 - -Breaking news stories vs. general news?
 - -How can you tell if something online is credible?
 - -How can you tell if something is satire?
 - -Filter Bubble:
 - -What does it take for you to unfollow/unfriend someone? Can you think of a recent example?
 - -Do you find that there is a theme in the pages/news/information sources that you follow?
 - What is it if so?
 - -Do you think your peers online read the same news as you?
 - -Leveling Up:
 - -What does social media make easier/more difficult in terms of:
 - -news-gathering?
 - -organizing others?
 - -sharing what you know about issues?

- -learning?
- -Org Use:
- -How do college organizations use social media? Do different orgs use them in different ways/or different platforms for different uses?
- -SM Usage Trends:
- -Can you order your social media apps in terms of how close to “the real you” they are? Where are you the most authentic? Why?
- -Why are you less open on ____? Who else is on there?
- -What % of your social media time is “in-between other activity” time?
- -Do you think that someone seeing your profile/actions on Instagram vs. Facebook vs. Twitter etc. would have different views of who you are based on your posts/profile? How so?
- -Big Questions:
- -How do you think social media use impacts your civic engagement and sociopolitical awareness?
- -How do you think it impacts your friends?
- -What about the campus as a whole?
- -What about college students nationally?

[Transition to bringing in **Civic Engagement**] OK, let’s shift gears for a bit. I want to talk about your involvements, activities, and interests/views.

- How would you describe your involvements outside of the classroom?
 - Are you currently a member of any clubs or organizations?
 - On-campus, off campus?
 - Over the course of your life, have you been involved in many/any clubs and organizations? Walk me through those involvements and how they’ve changed over the years.
 - Do you think of yourself as an “active citizen?”
 - What issues (civic, political, social) do you care most about?
 - Where do you get most of your news?
 - Probe: websites (which ones), newspapers, television, etc?
 - Do you post your views on any issues online?
 - Do your friends/people you follow put up posts on their views online?
 - What do you think about posts that you see online?
 - Do you ever get angry at posts you see online? If so:
 - Is it because a view was posted, or because you disagreed with it?
 - Do you engage in these situations in any way?
 - Is it appropriate for political/social issues to be shared online? When/Why or why not?
 - Are there some websites where you’d prefer to see this sort of thing (rather than others)?
 - Have you ever felt like you learned something about an issue because of something you saw posted online by someone you are connected with?
 - If so, when? Can you elaborate?
 - If not, why not? Do you think it is possible in the future?

- Are there people you trust more than others (in terms of what they are posting) online for these purposes? Are you more likely to click their links or read their posts more carefully? Can you talk about this more?
- Have you ever had a personal view or stance changed because of something you saw posted by someone you are connected with online?
 - If so, when? Can you elaborate?
 - If not, why do you think that is? Do you think it is a possibility in the future?
- Can you talk about a time when an issue came to your attention via social media that you had not previously known about?
 - Can you talk about that process a bit? How did it come about? What steps did you take to learn more about the issue?
- During presidential election years (as in 2012), are any of the aforementioned issues changed for you?
 - If so, how?
- Do you find social/cultural/political posts funny?
 - What about the use of memes to address issues?
 - Are there images you've seen online that have made you more likely to read them/click them? Probe: Colbert, Stewart, MSNBC/Fox contributors, writers, celebrities, etc. – Do any cause you to pause and read?
- Do you believe that your beliefs have been shaped due to your use of social networking websites?
- Can you recall an occasion when something you read on a social networking website caused you to become active offline?
 - Probe: Participation in an activity, seeking out/engaging in a discussion, asking someone else about an issue, volunteering in some way – any of these?

Anything else you think might be relevant on this topic?

Wrap up: Thank you so much for your participation. The time that you took today will greatly help for my coursework and will help me to begin looking at some of these issues.

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form: Students



Boston College Consent Form

Boston College Educational Leadership and Higher Education
Informed Consent to be in study: #CivicEngagement: An Exploratory Study of Social Media Use and
Civic Engagement Among Undergraduates
Researcher: Adam Gismondi
Type of consent: Adult Consent Form

Introduction

- You are being asked to be in a research study that explores the question: How do students understand the connection between social media use and their civic engagement while in college?
- You were selected to be in the study because of your involvement with a civic engagement-focused student organization at Boston College.
- Please read this form. Ask any questions that you may have before you agree to be in the study.

Purpose of Study:

- The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which college students understand the connection between social media use and their civic engagement while in college.
- People in this study are undergraduate students currently enrolled at Boston College. The total number of people in this study is expected to be 40.

What will happen in the study:

- If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do one or more of the following: Participate in one 60 minute focus group, participate in one 60 minute individual interview that will include your guiding me through your use of social media, allow me to observe an organizational meeting. The aforementioned may also be audio recorded with your consent. You may also be asked to respond to follow-up emails, and you may be asked to review draft text to provide feedback and ensure accuracy of research work.

Risks and Discomforts of Being in the Study:

- The study has the following risks. Interview and focus group questions may broadly address sociopolitical topics that may be uncomfortable. This study may include risks that are unknown at this time.

Benefits of Being in the Study:

- The benefits of being in this study are that participants may enjoy and learn from reflection on behaviors both online and offline relating to personal civic engagement behaviors.

Payments:

- You will receive the following payment for being in the study: \$10, in the form of a gift card, for each specific area of participation, including focus groups and individual interviews.

Costs:

- There is no cost to you to be in this research study.

Confidentiality:

- The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we may publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked and/or password-protected file.
- All electronic information will be coded and secured using a password-protected file. Audio recordings will be accessible to the primary investigator, the dissertation committee, and a transcriptionist (if necessary). After transcription, audio files will be erased from all digital storage spaces.
- Information will be primarily be accessible only to the primary investigator and the dissertation committee; however, please note that regulatory agencies, the Institutional Review Board at Boston College and internal Boston College auditors may review the research records.
- I will make every effort to keep your research records confidential, but it cannot be guaranteed. Records that identify you as well as your signed consent form may be looked at by the Boston College IRB or government agencies overseeing human subjects research.

Choosing to be in the study and choosing to quit the study:

- Choosing to be in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to be in this study, it will not affect your current or future relations with the University.
- You are free to quit at any time, for whatever reason.
- There is no penalty or loss of benefits for not taking part or for quitting. Participation or non-participation in this study does not jeopardize grades nor risk loss of present or future Boston College relationships.
- Participants will be given gift cards, provided that they attend scheduled interviews and focus groups, even if they decide to withdraw from the study after arriving at the interview or focus group.
- During the research process, you will be notified of any new findings from the research that may make you decide that you want to stop being in the study.

Getting Dismissed from the study:

- The researcher may dismiss you from the study at any time for the following reasons: (1) it is in your best interests (e.g. side effects or distress have resulted), (2) you have failed to comply with the study rules, or (3) the study sponsor decides to end the study.

Contacts and Questions:

- The researcher conducting this study is Adam Gismondi. For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact her/him/them at GismondA@bc.edu or (631) 241-3797.
- If you have any questions about your rights as a person in this research study, you may contact: Director, Office for Research Protections, Boston College at (617) 552-4778, or irb@bc.edu

Copy of Consent Form:

- You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records and future reference.

Statement of Consent:

- I have read (or have had read to me) the contents of this consent form. I have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received answers to my questions. I give my consent to be in this study. I have received (or will receive) a copy of this form.

Signatures/Dates

Study Participant (Print Name) : _____ Date _____

Participant or Legal Representative Signature : _____ Date _____

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