EXPLORING BEHAVIOR ON FACEBOOK DURING THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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Master of Arts

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

EXPLORING BEHAVIOR ON FACEBOOK

DURING THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

presented by Wendy Holdren,

a candidate for the degree of master of arts,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Professor Brett Johnson

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Professor Annie Hammock

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Professor Laura Johnston

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Professor Benjamin Warner

DEDICATION

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ABSTRACT

This research explores behaviors on Facebook during the 2016 presidential election. Rooted in selective exposure theory, the study builds on established quantitative research. Prior research has shown social media users are unfollowing, unfriending and blocking other users and content with which they do not agree. This research builds on the missing qualitative element — why do users engage in these behaviors? Sixteen participants were recruited for this study. Participants were asked a series of semi-structured questions to better understand their behaviors on Facebook in the months leading up to, during and directly after the election.

Overall, the researcher found this was a time of "pruning" friends from social media. Most selective exposure was not due to disagreements about candidates or policy, but due to differences in personal values. Users also indicated a hierarchy of selective behavior, as well as a set of online behavioral norms which guided their decision making. Ultimately, the researcher found that many respondents wanted to spend their time on Facebook in a leisurely way, rather than engaged in political debates.

Keywords: selective exposure theory, 2016 presidential election, Facebook, cognitive dissonance theory, social media

Chapter 1: Introduction

The Hook

More users than ever before were on social media networks during the 2016 presidential election. Nearly 70 percent of U.S. adults were actively using social media in November 2016; whereas eight years previously, during President Barack Obama's first presidential run, only 42 percent were on social media (Smith, 2017). With a majority of the voting population engaging in social media, it is a critical time period in which to study online behaviors, especially during the highly divisive 2016 presidential election.

This study is grounded in selective exposure theory, which suggests we seek content featuring not only topics in which we are interested, but also topics which confirm the ideas we already believe (Vraga, 2015). For example, if you're a staunch supporter of the Second Amendment, you're probably not going to Google, "Reasons Why People Shouldn't Own Guns." Technology has empowered its users to select the exact content they want to receive. Whether streaming a movie on Netflix, searching information on Google, or reading news online, users can select whatever type of content they desire. Special algorithms on social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, also help tailor users' online experiences. With each "share," "like/favorite" or "retweet," social media sites use that information to help populate news feeds with the type of information likely to keep the user engaged and active on the site for longer periods of time (Harris, 2017).

Just as users can tailor their content by the information they like, they can also

filter the information they receive by letting networks know what content they dislike. Don't like a Facebook post? Click “hide post.” Is someone posting too many posts you don't like? Unfollow them. Are they still trying to get the content to the reaches of your timeline or your inbox? Block them. On Twitter, users have the ability to “mute words” — for a day, a week, a month or forever. All it takes is a few simple changes under account settings. Users have more options than ever before to view and read exactly what they want, and to bar anything they don't. Most feeds can be so customized, users can essentially silo themselves from any undesirable information.

Countless anecdotes of blocking, unfriending and unfollowing were reported in the months before and after the election (Fottrell, 2016). Facebook says it does not track data on these behaviors, but stories of severed ties and strained relationships were prevalent. Research shows politically minded individuals are more likely to unfriend other users on social media (Bode, 2016), but even a small percent of “those who never talk politics” engaged in selective behaviors. This study seeks to explore the “why” behind certain behaviors seen on Facebook during the 2016 presidential election. As Prior (2007) writes, “The impact of changes in the media environment depends on how people use new media... To understand changes in the media environment, we need to examine both the new opportunities and how people use these opportunities” (p. 24).

The 2016 election cycle is an ideal time frame for study. Although more people were online than ever before, America was also more politically divided in 2016 than ever before (Achenbah & Clement, 2016; Gramlich, 2016). In 2004, Pew Research Center reported 31 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaning Independents had

political values that were mostly or consistently conservative (Gramlich, 2016). That percentage rose to 53 percent in 2015. The same can be said for the opposite side of the political spectrum. In 2015, 60 percent of Democrats and Democratic-leaning Independents had values that were mostly or consistently liberal, up from 49 percent in 2004.

Both political parties also grew increasingly negative in their evaluations of presidents representing the other party (Gramlich, 2016). For example, during George W. Bush's presidency, 81 percent of Republicans approved of the president, while 23 percent of Democrats approved. During Barack Obama's presidency, 81 percent of Democrats approved, while 14 percent of Republicans approved. The demographic profiles of each party have changed, too (Gramlich, 2016). Democrats are becoming more diverse, less religious and better educated at a faster rate than the country as a whole, while Republicans are changing in these categories at a slower rate (Gramlich, 2016). No matter who won the election, Pew Research showed many voters believed the country would remain polarized (Gramlich, 2016). Forty-one percent of voters said they expected political division in the country to increase if Hillary Clinton won, while 55 percent of voters expected division to increase if Donald Trump won.

In their report of the U.S. divide for The Washington Post, Achenbah and Clement (2016) wrote, “One common argument in academic circles is that polarization and distrust have been intensified by the Internet, which is awash in misinformation, funnels people into echo chambers, and provides forums for anonymous hate speech.” A finger of blame was pointed at mainstream media, too, for focusing too much attention on

conflict than harmony. The report said common ground is “unreachable” in many cases, especially those of activists who feel they must stand their ground to see social change. The authors wrote, “Many people feel that their values are under attack and need to be defended vigorously.”

Two highly polarizing candidates were running for office. As highlighted in The Washington Post report, many political leaders “prefer to fire up their ideological bases” rather than focusing on unity (Achenbah & Clement, 2016). The authors wrote in the July 16, 2016, article, “Divisiveness can be a strategy or even a business model.” Donald Trump, a reality television game show host and real estate businessman, relied heavily on divisiveness during his run for the presidency. Immediately after the election, The Guardian looked at the language Trump used on the campaign. As Nunn (2016) highlighted, “Donald Trump used many rhetorical linguistic devices to tap into the raw emotions of potential voters — and it worked.” Nunn pointed out Trump's use of “us and them” rhetoric, especially in terms of religion and immigration. Nunn also pointed out Trump's use of sexist and racist language. Two of the most infamous examples were during a presidential debate — “bad hombre” and “nasty woman.” His language was often reflected in the speech of his supporters. What had once been taboo or at least impolite was common-speak during Trump's campaign, and especially after his victory.

A few of the titles used throughout the years to describe Hillary Clinton include the following: feminist; glass-ceiling breaker; the most qualified presidential candidate; Washington insider; robotic; crooked Hillary (The Associated Press, 2016). As the Associated Press put it, “There have been polarizing figures in politics before, but it's

hard to imagine any have been called as many things — wildly divergent things — as she." The former Secretary of State's email scandal (when she used a personal email server instead of a government one), as well as the Benghazi controversy (when Clinton was accused of being responsible for four American deaths in Libya, and for allegedly covering up the truth about the attacks) only added to the polarization. Both major political parties — Republicans and Democrats — were especially fractured during the 2016 presidential election.

The Research Problem

Selective exposure theory, rooted in cognitive dissonance theory, argues that human beings like consistency in their thoughts (Vraga, 2015). If they encounter opposing ideas, they will feel mental discomfort, prompting them to eliminate any "nonfitting relations among cognitions" (Festinger, 1957, p. 3). In other words, selective exposure, or only allowing oneself to view opinion-affirming information, helps prevent uncomfortable feelings.

Hart, et al., (2009) suggest people are almost two times more likely to select information congenial rather than uncongenial to their preexisting attitudes and beliefs. Selective exposure is more possible now than ever with the development of technology and filters on social media. Each action taken online, consciously or unconsciously, is helping to tailor users' experiences. Users have the ability to block other users with which they do not agree. They also can hide posts — videos, articles or opinions — that do not interest them.

Quantitative research, as outlined later in the literature review, clearly indicates

that selective exposure is happening. But little qualitative research exists. The motivations behind the behavior must now be explored. Why did users choose to limit the information to which they were exposed? How do motivations vary among respondents? For those who didn't engage in selective behaviors — did they perhaps spend less time on Facebook? Were they simply unaffected by content they were seeing on their news feed?

To seek answers to these research questions, a qualitative methodology was best to gain insight about user motivations. Additional statistics about blocking, unfriending and unfollowing would be interesting to explore in a quantitative analysis, but the "why" behind the behaviors helps build on selective exposure literature, especially through the lens of social media during a highly divisive presidential election.

In-depth, one-on-one interviews were utilized to gain insight from participants. Deeper user experiences were examined with this method. To recruit participants, the researcher made a public post on her personal Facebook account, including basic information about the research, along with a Google form seeking contact information. The researcher asked those on her friends list to share the post, so a diverse spread of participants was recruited. The researcher aimed to recruit a mix of males and females, as well as Republicans, Democrats, Independents, other political parties and those who identify with no party at all.

Based on Grounded Theory, the researcher "made comparisons among an array (of societies) to verify well-specified derived theory, using relatively fixed categories" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 121). Each new interview was coded, analyzed and compared with the previous interviews to identify recurring themes and concepts. The

researcher aimed to recruit at least 15 participants, but additional participants would have been recruited if necessary, until the researcher had reached saturation among themes identified in the interviews (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). All interviews were recorded, via audio tape recorder, for self-transcription and analysis. All participants will remain anonymous.

The Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research is to explore behaviors on Facebook during the months leading up to the 2016 U.S. presidential election, as well as motivators for those behaviors. News feeds were inundated with political information, misinformation, opinions and controversies. Some users opted to follow, unfollow, friend or block certain people and certain types of information shared. Other users chose to disconnect from social media, at least for a short time period. *Why*? Was it because they didn't agree with the content? Was it because of information overload? Was it because of fake news? Was it because of aggressive or hate-filled opinions? Ultimately, what were the similarities and differences among the behaviors of research participants?

The research helps build upon our understanding of communication on social media, as well as the selective behaviors that have been made available to social media users. The research helps us better understand why certain behaviors occur and how they impact our overall communication. It also helps us better understand why and how users filter information during a highly divisive presidential election.

Upcoming Chapters

In the next chapter, previous literature on cognitive dissonance theory, selective

exposure theory and how those theories apply to the current research will be reviewed. The researcher explores the history on these theories, as well as how they apply to politics and technology. Chapter 3 focuses on the best method to answer the research question — qualitative, in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. In this chapter, the researcher will outline how data was gathered and analyzed. In Chapter 4, the researcher provides an analysis of the collected interviews. In the final chapter, the researcher discusses implications of the findings, limitations to the research, as well as ideas for future research to add to the literature.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The Overall Research Problem

During the months leading up to the 2016 presidential election, the country became increasingly divided on a number of issues, especially politicized topics. According to a Monmouth University poll conducted in September 2016, 70 percent of American voters reported the presidential race between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton "brought out the worst in people." Further, the poll found 7 percent of voters reported having lost or ended a friendship because of the presidential race. Although Facebook reports it does not track data on "unfriending," dozens of news articles highlighted the much-talked about trend (Gomez, 2016; Lindner, 2016; Selyukh, 2016). Fottrell (2016) illustrates the trend in his MarketWatch article: "[L]eading up to America's big day at the polls on Tuesday, political arguments were raging on Facebook. And they often result in the unkindest cut of all — unfriending."

Technological innovations and social media platforms have allowed online users to highly tailor the information they receive (Dewey, 2015). From "blocking a friend" on Facebook to "muting words" on Twitter, users can filter the content they do not wish to see. Algorithms on these social sites also help tailor a user's experience by showing them content that will keep them online for longer periods of time (Harris, 2017). Oftentimes, these selective behaviors can cause isolation from different viewpoints, as users are exposed to precisely the kind of information they want to see, or the ideas and opinions in which they already believe (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012).

Through the lens of selective exposure theory, which is further defined in the following section, this researcher explored the motivations behind engaging in selective behaviors. PRRI (Public Religion Research Institute) research found an average of 13 percent of the public blocked, unfriended or stopped following someone on social media because of what they posted about politics (2016). Nearly 24 percent of Democrats and roughly 9 percent of Republicans said they blocked, unfollowed or unfriended someone on social media after the election. Similar percentages (28 percent of liberals and 8 percent of conservatives) said they removed someone from their social media circle due to what they shared online. Women were more likely than men (18 percent vs. 9 percent) to remove someone online. Democratic women had the highest percent of selective exposure overall — 30 percent. The quantitative research has shown individuals from conflicting political parties and different genders engage with uncongenial information in different ways. How will this translate to the qualitative research?

History of Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Selective exposure theory stems from another psychological concept called cognitive dissonance theory. First proposed in the late 1950s by Leon Festinger, a psychology professor at Stanford University, cognitive dissonance theory was a way to explain how humans deal with inconsistency in thought and action (Kretchmar, 2015). As Festinger (1957) wrote, "A person who believes a college education is a good thing will very likely encourage his children to go to college" (p. 1). Festinger observed that humans like consistency. If someone is met with an opinion that does not match his or her own, the individual is presented with inconsistency, causing psychological

discomfort.

To eliminate the feeling of psychological discomfort, or "nonfitting relations among cognitions," Festinger hypothesized that people are oftentimes motivated to change their behavior or change their knowledge: "Either there will be a tendency to change the sentiments involved, or the unit relations will be changed through action or cognitive reorganization" (p. 7-8). Festinger argued dissonance causes tension, which must be resolved, just as hunger prompts the need to eat to reduce or eliminate the feeling of hunger.

History of Selective Exposure Theory

Building on the theory of cognitive dissonance, Columbia University researcher Joseph T. Klapper argued that audiences were not passive or easily influenced, as much previous research had suggested. In his 1960 book, *The Effects of Mass Communication,* he suggests that rather than the media influencing people, media messages actually reinforce their preexisting beliefs. Either through filtering the content to which they are exposed or through selective exposure to the type of programming they consumed, media messages only serve to support the preconceived notions of viewers or readers. If an individual bars or blocks contradictory information from reaching him or her, it will help prevent cognitive dissonance. One of the most common ways to avoid dissonance "is to engage in selective exposure, seeking out information that confirms preexisting beliefs and avoiding incongruent ideas" (Vraga, 2015, p. 489).

Research about selective exposure theory varied from the 1960s through the 1980s (Stroud, 2014). During this time frame, some researchers were skeptical about the

theory (Sears & Freedman, 1967), while other research supported it (Cotton & Hieser, 1980). Sears and Freedman wrote, "There seems to be some evidence (although not as unequivocal as often claimed) for the existence of *de facto* selectivity" (p. 212). While Cotton and Hieser initially argued selective exposure due to cognitive dissonance had not been proven in prior research, their study supported the theory. Based on their research, they found when given the choice, individuals are more likely to choose consonant information.

As technology has developed and use of the internet has increased, interest in the research has grown. Since the early 2000s, as more media choices became available through satellite television and access to the World Wide Web, researchers argue conditions are ideal to study selective exposure theory. As Stroud (2014) writes, "When given more options from which to choose, people have greater opportunity to cater to their preferences" (p. 6). People are also able to avoid the types of content they do not wish to access (Brosius and Peter, 2011; Messing and Westwood, 2012).

Criticism of Selective Exposure

Not all researchers agree on the validity of selective exposure theory (Kinder, 2003; Sears and Freedman, 1967; Zaller, 1992). Kinder argues that people, for the most part, do not actually seek out mass communications that reinforce their political beliefs. Further, Zaller believes most people "are simply not so rigid in their information-seeking behavior that they will expose themselves only to ideas that they find congenial" (p. 151). Sears and Freedman suggest there's not "an active psychological preference" (p. 195) for supportive information, but rather, people choose to seek content in which they are

interested. For example, someone in the financial sector may choose to read the Wall Street Journal, while college professors may prefer the New York Times. The authors write, “These are not merely coincidences. Nor are they necessarily examples of selective exposure” (p. 212). And sometimes, Sears and Freedman argue, people seek information which contradicts their own opinions. To illustrate their point, they say a smoker doesn't avoid information about lung cancer, but rather, the smoker scrutinizes it. They argue, “Perhaps resistance to influence is accomplished most often and most successfully at the level of information evaluation, rather than at the level of selective seeking and avoiding information” (p. 212).

Prior (2007) suggests many users have a more passive approach to politics in *Post-Broadcast Democracy*. In scrolling through Facebook news feeds, users stumble upon information. Prior writes, “Many people do not voluntarily consume a lot of news. But when the media environment offers them political information as they go about their daily business, they often absorb it” (p. 4). This impacts the democratic process, as the information to which individuals are exposed influences their voting decisions. Instead of examining both parties' positions, “They vote if the environment reminds them of the upcoming election and provides them with a few simple reasons to pick one side or the other” (p. 4).

Further, some researchers argue people who are uninterested in politics can disengage (Prior, 2007; Kearney, 2017). Prior says some people prefer a more entertainment-based online experience, and therefore use the increased media availability to avoid exposure to political information. He writes, “From the point of view of these

entertainment fans, the flow of political information has become much weaker in recent years as media choice has increased" (p. 9). Kearney, too, argues some partisan individuals appear to be more divergent because non-partisans or moderates "are essentially 'tuning out' of politics by selecting more entertainment media options" (p. 23).

Relevance of the Theory

But much research, especially in the past decade, supports selective exposure theory. Some research has shown selective exposure is especially prevalent in political or partisan information (Hart, et al., 2009; Stroud, 2008; Vraga, 2015). As Vraga writes, "Dissonance arousal not only encourages more selective information seeking, but can also directly contribute to polarization" (p. 489). Some individuals tend to discuss politics with those with whom they already agree in an interpersonal context (Stroud, 2014), which is one element of selective exposure. Media organizations have also learned to cater to these political preferences, as seen in left- and right-leaning outlets. As Stroud (2011) writes, "If you are a conservative or Republican, you better flip away from CNN. If you are a liberal or Democrat, Fox News is not your channel… Partisanship is an appropriate criterion for making news selections" (p. 7). Stroud argues today, Democrats and Republicans "can live in completely different news environments" because people can be "picky" about their news and "can easily filter out topics that are not of interest" (p. 8).

Partisans are more likely to select like-minded media outlets (Bode, 2016; Stroud, 2014; Garrett, 2009). Sixty-four percent of conservative Republicans consume at least one conservative media outlet, compared to 26 percent of liberal Democrats (Stroud,

2008). In contrast, 43 percent of conservative Republicans consume at least one liberal outlet while 76 percent of liberal Democrats consume at least one liberal outlet. Stroud (2008) comments, “These striking percentages document the extent of partisan selective exposure in the contemporary media environment” (p. 358).

Stroud (2011) further suggests that where people turn for their news can impact their perceptions and memories of the news. Stroud writes, “Perceptions that an outlet favors the opposition, for example, may prompt partisans to avoid and discount the outlet. And remembering only the best aspects of coverage from a likeminded source may lead to entrenched patterns of likeminded news exposure” (p. 8). She argues political participation soars during time periods in which the press is especially partisan.

Research shows more politically minded individuals are also more likely to unfriend other users on social media (Bode, 2016). Bode's *Washington Post* article said only 2 percent of those who never talk politics unfriended someone because of a political post. The rate was 8 percent for those who “sometimes” talk about politics, and 10 percent for those who “very often” talk about politics. Overall, the results document that partisan selection occurs across outlets and social media. But the missing element is the qualitative research on *why* this partisan selection occurs.

As witnessed during the months leading up to, and even following, the 2016 presidential election, political news was at every turn — on the radio, on television, in newspapers and on social media feeds. Understandably during a presidential election, political news and information is going to be well-circulated on all available platforms. But how does this research apply to today's climate? Today, nearly nine in 10 Americans

are online, which is up from about half of all Americans in the early 2000s (Pew Research Center, 2017).

Roughly 77 percent of Americans now own a smartphone — up from 35 percent in 2011 when Pew began surveying on the topic. In the 18- to 29-year-old demographic, 92 percent own a smartphone (Smith, 2017). Not only are a majority of Americans online and actively using their smartphones, they're also engaged on social media — where politics were hotly debated during the most recent election. An average of 69 percent of Americans now use social media, compared to only 5 percent in 2005. Broken down by demographics: 86 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds; 80 percent of 30- to 49-year-olds; 64 percent of 50- to 64-year-olds; and 34 percent of 65 and older are social media users. Roughly one-third of the 18- to 29-year-old demographic named social media as the most helpful type of source for learning about the 2016 presidential election (Gottfried, et al., 2016).

Selective Exposure in a Technological Age

Research conducted by Dvir-Gvirsman, et al., (2016) showed that during the 2013 elections in Israel, ideological content only accounted for 3 percent of participants' total browsing history. But the authors still remained concerned about polarization and the democratic process, as they did not seek answers about "what audiences *do* with the ideological information they receive" (p. 872). A major limitation of the study was that measurements were only collected for the web activity from computers, not mobile devices. The study also did not have access to password-protected material, such as Facebook pages. With the statistics cited from the 2017 Pew Research Center, this was a

major limitation.

Another study, conducted by Dylko, et al., in 2017, built on the Dvir-Gvirsman research. In the study, the researchers analyzed social media and the technology within it. As their research revealed, the addition of social media and filtering options has only exacerbated users' ability to access the content they want and to block content they do not want. They found that "various forms of customizability technology (especially, system-driven customizability) increase selective exposure in the context of online political news consumption" (p. 181). System-driven means software code modifies the users' environment, whereas user-driven is where users modify their information environment.

In his article for *Slate,* Oremus (2016) highlights the role of algorithms on Facebook. The platform collects data about everything a user posts, likes and shares, along with posts from the users' friends, those they follow, the groups they belong to, and the Facebook pages they follow. According to a "closely guarded and constantly shifting formula," Oremus says Facebook's news feed algorithm ranks the content, "in what it believes to be the precise order of how likely you are to find each post worthwhile." The power of the social media giant is immense, and many users don't realize how isolated they're becoming simply by interacting with the content and users on the site. As Oremus writes, "Facebook's news feed algorithm can be tweaked to make us happy or sad; it can expose us to new and challenging ideas or insulate us in ideological bubbles."

Dylko, et al., (2017) found customizability technology has a stronger effect on minimizing exposure to counter-attitudinal information than it has on increasing exposure to pro-attitudinal information; therefore, political selective exposure was increased. In

their discussion, Dylko, et al. (2017), write, "We believe that due to its automatic and unobtrusive operation, customizability technology might be particularly effective at reducing cognitive dissonance associated with the avoidance of challenging information" (p. 188). And in the aftermath of the fake news eruption on Facebook, the platform not only offered a way for users to mark the story as a potential hoax, but also a built-in option beside the flag to either message the user who posted the content or block them entirely (Chappell, 2016).

As Dewey (2015) points out in his piece for *The Washington Post,* "avoiding discourse and dissent has never been so easy" with the plethora of left- and right-leaning news articles and with the prevalence of content-blockers, "like" buttons, "unfriend" and "block" buttons. With the prevalence of online use, smartphone use and social media use, these behaviors are sure to increase, but the question of *why* still remains. What specifically drives social media users to engage in selective behaviors, or to disengage entirely?

Facebook — Purpose and Power

The social networking giant was established in February 2004. Initially the service was available only to Harvard University students, then students at other Ivy League schools. Facebook later allowed access to anyone with an email address ending in ".edu." Since 2006, anyone 13 years or older can create an account. The social network reported more than 2.13 billion monthly active users worldwide at the end of 2017.

Users can connect with others by adding them as "friends," send messages through the built-in messenger application, post status updates, post videos and photos,

“like” or react — love, haha, wow, sad or angry — to other friends' posts, share news articles and other content, join groups of others with common interests, play games with friends through third party applications, and receive notifications about other users' activity. Users can also “like” or follow pages maintained by news organizations, entertainers, politicians, political organizations, brands, celebrities, and more. Just as easily as users can connect with others and pages, they can disconnect. The simplest way is by logging off the social media platform. But many users, as this research will show, see Facebook as a way to stay in touch with friends and family. Many users do not want to leave the site altogether, so they engage in selective exposure in one form or another to make their time spent on Facebook more enjoyable.

Selective behaviors on Facebook include unfollowing, unfriending and blocking. If you unfollow someone, you will remain friends (you can still tag each other and message each other), but you will no longer see that person's posts on your news feed. If you unfriend someone, the two of you will no longer be on each other's friends lists, and communication will be limited — unfriended individuals can still communicate through Messenger (Facebook's private messaging service), but their exchanges will be sent to a folder outside the normal inbox. If you block someone, they will no longer be able to tag you or see things you post on your timeline. Blocking disallows communication via Messenger. Blocking someone also removes them from your friends list. Unfollowing and unliking pages will remove that content from your news feed.

Just as media consumers once selected their morning newspaper to read or television station to watch, social media users can now select the information to which

they are exposed as they scroll through their online news feed. Many users, as this research will show, now use Facebook as their primary news source. Instead of seeking information from media publications on their own, they read what has been pre-selected and shared by the people, organizations and pages they follow. Facebook is a powerful tool for connectivity, but if users choose to engage in selective behaviors, their feeds can become echo chambers.

The Partisan Divide

While PRRI research showed Democrats were more likely to engage in selective exposure on social media in terms of blocking, unfriending or unfollowing, other research has shown Republicans are more prone to selective exposure in terms of web browsing and limiting their exposure to left-leaning news sources (Carnahan, et al., 2016; Dvir-Gvirsman, et al., 2016; Swift, 2016). Democrats, in some studies, were exposed to more websites or content from the other side of the political divide (Dvir-Gvirsman, et al., 2016). The authors argue "although our data indicate that ideological exposure accounts for only a fraction of web use, it may still be the case that it fosters polarization among the part of the audience that consumes congruent information" (p. 873).

Research has explored the unfriending that occurred during the Israel-Gaza conflict of 2014 (John and Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). Of 1,013 Jewish Israeli Facebook users, 16 percent of them either unfriended or unfollowed a Facebook friend during the fighting. John and Dvir-Gvirsman (2015) found that unfriending was more prevalent among ideologically extreme and more politically active Facebook users. They write, "Weak ties were most likely to be broken, and respondents mostly unfriended people

because they took offense at what they had posted or disagreed with it" (p. 953). While this research builds a foundation for my study, more research is needed, especially in the United States during such a profound political divide, to delve deeper into the motivating factors behind unfriending.

According to Swift (2016), Republicans have historically shown much lower levels of confidence in the media than Democrats. The Gallup poll revealed 14 percent of Republicans express trust, down from 32 percent the previous year. Swift (2016) said this number is "easily the lowest confidence among Republicans in 20 years." Another study, however, conducted by Frimer, et al. (2017), found similar levels of selective exposure across a variety of issues among individuals on the political left and right. While more research indicated Republicans/conservatives are more prone to selective exposure, the studies did not investigate their motivations. These findings beg the question, will there be differences between Republicans' and Democrats' motivations for unfriending, blocking and unfollowing on Facebook?

Differences in pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal news consumption is yet another element of selective exposure and the partisan divide (Garrett & Stroud, 2014). The authors argue there is a distinction (p. 681) between selective approach (seeking information consistent with one's prior beliefs) and selective avoidance (avoiding contradictory information). Prior research treated the tendencies to avoid counter-attitudinal information and to seek pro-attitudinal information as "inseparable" (p. 682), but this research highlights a distinction — the magnitude of attractiveness of pro-attitudinal information is greater than the magnitude of aversion to counter-attitudinal

information (p. 690). Their research also found that Republicans show a greater aversion to counter-attitudinal information than non-Republicans (p. 691), and Democrats exhibit a clear preference for pro-attitudinal information (p. 692).

Partisan Behaviors Before an Election

Carnahan, et al., (2016) points out most literature on politically-motivated selective exposure tends to center on the prevalence of partisan fragmentation. The authors write, "As a result, little attention has been paid to questions of when and under which circumstances partisan selectivity is at its highest (or lowest)" (p. 578). To fill this research gap, several studies (Carnahan, et al., 2016; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012; Kearney, 2017) focused on how behaviors differ in terms of selective exposure specifically before an election.

Carnahan researched citizens' willingness to use counterattitudinal sources during the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections. They found citizens' behaviors were impacted by their level of vulnerability. Citizens were more vulnerable if they expected their preferred candidate to lose. The researchers argued feelings of vulnerability would elicit psychological reactions that made counterattitudinal information more valuable and attractive (Carnahan, et al., 2016).

Vulnerability is a difficult emotion for many people to admit experiencing, but for this research, individuals may feel comfortable expressing a feeling of "uncertainty" about the 2016 presidential election results because both candidates were so polarizing. As King (2016) suggests in a TIME article, committing to a certain candidate and not knowing whether he or she will ultimately win the election is anxiety-inducing. King

adds:

> "But engaging with media that constantly plays with this uncertainty by speculating over who may win or lose a given primary, who is up by how many points in a recent poll, and what the outcome of upcoming debates will be likely only fans the flames of anxiety, causing us to feel more unsure, and thus more desirous of information that will give us answers."

Could this uncertainty about the future have prompted selective behavior? If so, how did it differ among research participants?

Research conducted by Carnahan, et al. (2016) found those who supported Republican candidates were more likely to use counterattitudinal information sources the more vulnerable they perceive their preferred candidate to be on Election Day. In their discussion, Carnahan, et al., wrote "supporters of McCain and Romney tended to express higher levels of perceived vulnerability for their preferred candidates, consistent with the polling data at the time" (p. 592). The researchers suggest liberals and conservatives experience vulnerability in different ways. They suggest liberal voters "retreat to more familiar, reassuring sources when perceiving their candidate to be vulnerable, whereas conservative voters become more surveillance oriented in their approach to political information" (p. 592). The researchers said there is some precedent for partisan difference in information-seeking strategies, but more research is needed to determine how partisans search for information when "vulnerable, anxious, or threatened."

But Knobloch-Westerwick found that people are still more influenced by attitude-consistent information than counterattitudinal information. The research found "when

faced with many attempts of political campaigns to sway one's opinion before an election, media users may have an even stronger interest in defending existing partisanship through selective exposure" (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012, p. 640). And in follow-up research focusing on political online messages accessed in online searches before the 2012 U.S. presidential election, Knobloch-Westerwick, et al. (2015) determined that "a strong bias in selective exposure" (p. 181) was found toward attitude-consistent online search results. Attitude-discrepant messages were not completely avoided, but 64 percent more time was spent with attitude-consistent messages.

Results from Kearney's (2017) research on partisanship on Twitter during the 2016 general election suggest partisan users form highly partisan networks, while moderate users tend to avoid politics. He writes, "Over the full range of data, findings suggest these patterns — partisan users with politically homogeneous networks and non-partisan users with mostly entertainment-focused follow decisions — held and, in the case of partisan users, intensified as the election got closer" (p. 68).

His research indicated moderate users did experience a "minor up-tick" in the number of partisan accounts they followed in the months leading up to the election, but generally, if someone was uninterested in politics before the election, they were unlikely to follow a substantial amount of political accounts simply because of the highly covered general election. In summary, Kearney writes, "In other words, social media does not inherently increase exposure to diverse viewpoints nor does it inherently shelter uses by creating self-reinforcing filter-bubbles. Rather, social media amplifies and reflects trends found in broader media environments" (p. 71).

Anecdotal Reports

Regardless of political affiliation, many anecdotes of lost friendships and tattered relationships with family members were reported. In his CNBC article, Bukszpan (2016) wrote, “In the run-up to Tuesday's hard fought presidential contest, social media users on Facebook and Twitter found themselves regularly embroiled in heated political arguments. For many, the only way out was through the practice of unfollowing, blocking or outright 'unfriending' those with whom they disagreed — even family members.” Bukszpan interviewed a U.S. Marine Corps veteran, a Clinton supporter, who was blocked his own brother, a Trump supporter.

Another account, reported in Politico, detailed the survival of a Democrat's relationship with his conservative uncle throughout many presidential elections prior to 2016 (Samuelsohn, 2016). However, the Clinton-Trump face-off was the breaking point — the two severed their Facebook ties, “and in the process (the two) got into a nasty name-calling spat that consumed parents, siblings, cousins and anyone else following along in his 2,300-friend social network” (Samuelsohn, 2016). Many anecdotes just like these were reported in the months leading up to and following the election; however, these reports only scratch the surface in determining the motivating factors for selective exposure. What actually pushed these users, these family members, over the edge to cease communications?

Linking the Research Problem with the Theory

As the literature review has revealed, selective exposure has been an ongoing issue for decades, only exacerbated by the implementation of new technology.

Smartphone users can be inundated with content, but it can be filtered to best match their preferences. Social media users, too, have the capability to filter the content they receive in a number of ways, especially on Facebook. On Facebook, users can "hide" posts, unfollow the posts of certain companies or individuals, or even block or unfriend certain users. Selective exposure is a way to minimize cognitive dissonance. And those with strong political affiliations have been known to engage in these behaviors more often than their nonpolitical counterparts. But what is it about seeing uncongenial information that pushes users over the edge, to the point where they simply can no longer be exposed to certain links, ideas or posts?

This research explores motivations behind selective behaviors on Facebook during the 2016 presidential election. While there is an abundance of quantitative research about selective exposure — in terms of politics, technology and elections — the qualitative research is sparse. To further build on the literature regarding this theory, qualitative research examining the "why" behind these behaviors is necessary. This research helps us better understand online communication on Facebook during a highly divided time in history.

Research Questions

With the foregoing synthesis of key literature in mind, this study seeks to explore the following research questions:

RQ1: What behaviors, specifically related to selective exposure, were displayed on Facebook during this divisive time in history?

RQ2: For users who engaged in selective behaviors, what were their motivations?

RQ3: How did users decide which selective tools to utilize?

RQ4: For users who did not engage in selective behaviors, what were their motivations?

Chapter 3: Method

Research Materials

In effort to answer the "why" behind behaviors on Facebook during the 2016 presidential election, qualitative, in-depth, one-on-one interviews were conducted. To gather data, the researcher recruited individuals through Facebook. A brief summary about the research was included in a public post, along with a Google form requesting contact information. The researcher asked those who saw the post to share it, so a diverse pool of candidates was reached. The recruiting goal was a mix of 15 individuals — males and females; Democrats, Republicans, Independents and those who identify outside those political parties; as well as a diverse age range — who spent time on Facebook before, during and after the 2016 presidential election.

The researcher aimed for 15 individual interviews initially, but planned to recruit additional participants if necessary. As Glaser and Strauss (1967) write, "The researcher can always try to mine his data further, but little value is learned when core categories are already saturated" (p. 226). While keeping an open mind to developing themes, the researcher was interested in how the interview responses were similar among respondents, as well as any outliers in the data.

The researcher made a public Facebook post Jan. 3, 2018, asking for participants. The post was shared nine times, and eight participants were initially recruited. Another recruitment post was made Jan. 8, which was shared 12 times, and an additional four participants were recruited. A final recruitment post was made Feb. 4, which was shared

11 times, and the final three participants were recruited. A total of 16 individuals were recruited — 10 females, six males. Eight reported their political beliefs as left-leaning; three reported their beliefs as right-leaning; and five reported their beliefs somewhere in the middle. The median age of the participants was 30, and the mean age was 37.5. States represented include: California, Florida, Michigan, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, Virginia, Washington and West Virginia.

As each participant was recruited, they were given a unique code. For example, the first female recruited was assigned to the code F-1 and the fifth male recruited was M-5. Fourteen of the 16 interviews were conducted via telephone, upon the participants' request, either due to distance or time constraints. One interview was conducted in person in Beckley, West Virginia. One interview was conducted via FaceTime. Interviews lasted an average of 35 minutes, with the shortest interview around 18 minutes and the longest interview around 50 minutes. All interviews were recorded with an audio voice recorder. Notes were taken throughout to safeguard against equipment failure. The researcher transcribed each interview within 48 hours of it being conducted. Each interview was compared with previous interviews as they were collected to identify outstanding themes and recurring concepts.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews, with a set of pre-established questions, were conducted, one-on-one, with all identified participants. As Brennen (2013) writes, qualitative research questions should be open-ended in nature, which will allow a variety of potential responses, experiences and connections (p. 20). Having a set of pre-

established questions, however, will generally steer the conversations toward seeking answers to the research questions. Rather than structured interviews, Brennen says semi-structured interviews allow more flexibility for researchers to vary the order of the questions, ask follow-up questions, or clarify answers given by the respondent (p. 28).

To help explore behaviors on Facebook during the 2016 presidential election, as well as any potential acts of selective exposure, the interview subjects were asked a series of semi-structured questions. Creswell (2014) recommends beginning research questions with the words "what" or "how" which will convey an open and emerging design. The following template of questions was utilized during the qualitative interviews:

- How much time would you say you spend on Facebook each day?
- How would you describe the people on your Facebook friends list?
- Tell me about your Facebook news feed on an average day.
- What types of original posts do you typically make?
- What types of posts do you typically like, share or comment on?
- What do you do when you encounter political information of any kind? How does it make you feel?
- If you encounter information with which you do not agree, what do you do?
- If you encounter information which you do not believe to be true, what do you do?
- How much time would you say you spent on Facebook each day in the months leading up to the 2016 presidential election?
- Tell me about your Facebook friends list during that time frame.

• Tell me about your news feed during that time frame.

• During that time frame, what types of original posts did you make?

• During that time frame, what types of posts did you like, share or comment on?

• During that time frame, what did you do when you encountered political information of any kind? How did it make you feel?

• During that time frame, if you encountered information with which you did not agree, what did you do?

• During that time frame, if you encountered information which you did not believe to be true, what did you do?

After the first two interviews were conducted with F-1 and F-2, it was clear another set of questions regarding behaviors after the election were necessary. Both respondents addressed what they were seeing online during this time frame, as well as how they were feeling. Post-election behaviors were not part of the researcher's initial emphasis, but after hearing directly from two participants, the data seemed to be a natural fit for the research. The following questions were added for the remainder of the interviews:

• Post-election, how much time did you spend on Facebook?

• Post-election, how would you describe the people on your Facebook friends list?

• Post-election, describe your Facebook news feed.

• Post-election, what types of posts do you typically like, share or comment on?

• Post-election, when you encounter political information of any kind, what do you do? How does it make you feel?

• Post-election, if you encounter information with which you do not agree, what do

you do?

• Post-election, if you encounter information which you do not believe to be true, what do you do?

Why This was the Best Method

A qualitative approach was important for this research in order to gain deeper insight behind the motivations for behaviors online during the 2016 election cycle. Quantitative research has shown politically-minded individuals are engaging in selective exposure, but the researcher wanted to further examine the reasons why. This research contributes to communication research, as well as builds upon existing research on selective exposure theory.

To learn more about motivations for selective behaviors, a more personal, qualitative approach was utilized. As Brennen (2013) writes, "Qualitative interviewing is less concerned with data collection and instead strives to understand the meanings of information, opinions and interests in each respondent's life" (p. 28). Research has already proven selective behaviors are occurring, especially among politically minded individuals. What the research hasn't shown, however, is why these individuals are blocking, unfollowing and unfriending Facebook friends, pages and posts. To obtain these answers, listening was key. In qualitative interviewing, the interviewer's role is to encourage authentic, useful, in-depth responses from each respondent (Brennen, 2013). In some instances, this took patience, questions for clarification, and a willingness to sometimes let the respondents steer the conversation.

Malterud, et al. (2015) argue the quality of the dialogue between researcher and

respondent will be essential in determining the sample size. As a journalist working in the field for the past six years, the researcher felt highly comfortable conducting one-on-one interviews. She applied her skill set in making the respondents comfortable to answer the questions openly and honestly. The respondents were promised anonymity through the researcher's coding system. Participants' names were recorded on a master sheet for the researcher's use, on her password-protected Google Drive. Once an individual was coded, their code was listed at the top of the interview transcript, along with the following demographics: age, location and political identity. By allowing anonymity in the interviews, respondents felt more comfortable to answer freely and share more personal anecdotes about their time on Facebook before, during and after the election.

How Data was Analyzed

All interviews were recorded with an audio voice recorder. All participants granted consent to recording via consent form, and the researcher received verbal consent before the recordings began. Interviews were transcribed within 48 hours after they were conducted. Creswell (2014) writes that qualitative researchers build "patterns, categories, and themes from the bottom up by organizing the data into increasingly more abstract units of information" (p. 186). Essentially, this inductive process allowed the researcher to work with the data collected from the interviews until a comprehensive set of themes have emerged. Then deductively, the researcher examined the themes to determine if more evidence or support would be needed in additional interviews. Creswell writes, "Thus, while the process begins inductively, deductive thinking also plays an important role as the analysis moves forward" (p. 186). When new data no longer reveals

groundbreaking information, the themes are considered "saturated" and data collection may cease. As Glaser and Strauss (1967) write, "The theory should provide clear enough categories and hypotheses so that crucial ones can be verified in present and future research" (p. 3).

Each interview was recorded and transcribed, as "it is much easier to work with a transcript of each interview rather than continually referring back to audiotapes" (Brennen, 2013, p. 36). After the transcription and notation of each interview, the researcher worked to identify insights, key concepts, patterns and themes. Interesting anecdotes and experiences were also noted. As themes emerged, the researcher was cognizant of the sample size to determine whether additional data was needed. As Malterud, et al., (2015) conclude, "Information power indicates that the more information the sample holds, relevant for the actual study, the lower amount of participants is needed" (p. 1759). Ultimately, the researcher ascertained 16 interviews was an adequate sample size based upon the themes and patterns which emerged among them.

How the Method and Data Helped Answer Research Questions

Qualitative, in-depth interviews were the best approach to explore behaviors and motivations for engaging in selective exposure on a major social media platform during a highly divided presidential election. Research has shown selective exposure is occurring, especially among highly partisan individuals. But the research had not yet explored the reasons why these behaviors are taking place. The questions posed in this study have yielded insight into the behaviors seen online during the election, including selective exposure, such as unfriending, unfollowing and blocking.

How the Method and Data will Relate to Selective Exposure Theory

Data obtained from in-depth interviews conducted with Facebook users has helped not only answer the research questions posed in this study, but it also contributes to communications research, especially in terms of selective exposure theory. The theory has often been studied throughout the years, but oftentimes in a quantitative manner. This study contributes qualitative data to the research.

The researcher believes the 2016 presidential election is an ideal time in history in which to study. Anecdotal reports brought the researcher's attention to selective behaviors, such as unfriending, blocking and unfollowing. But in researching further, no formal qualitative research has been conducted on these selective behaviors. Because Facebook claims it does not track data on selective behaviors, the researcher wanted to conduct qualitative research to explore overall behavior on the social media platform, as well as any reports of selective exposure during the Trump-Clinton election. The researcher was interested in more than just the numbers. This research explored the "why" behind the numbers, which contributes to the understanding of communication on social media during the election.

Chapter 4: Results

Selective Exposure

The months leading up to, during and directly after the 2016 presidential election were a time of pruning for a majority of the respondents in the study. Some individuals referred to removing friends on their list as a “purge." One respondent, F-9, unfriended a couple hundred individuals during this time frame. Another respondent, M-4, blocked or unfriended a quarter of his friends list. The friend lists of the majority of respondents, however, weren’t drastically changed. Weak ties, as indicated in the study conducted by John and Dvir-Gvirsman (2015), were the most easily broken.

Respondents indicated there were tiers of selective exposure — unfollowing being the least severe, unfriending in the middle, and blocking the most. Unfollowing, which means no longer seeing another Facebook user's posts, was the most frequently utilized tool. Respondents said they utilized this option most frequently so they could remain friends on Facebook with the individual and continue communicating with them through tagged posts and private messages without having to see their posts as part of their daily news feed.

Unfriending was the next move up on the hierarchy. If someone is unfriended, their posts are no longer seen and they are no longer on the individual’s friends list. Someone will not know they’ve been unfollowed, but they can find out if they’ve been unfriended. Blocking was the least frequently utilized and most extreme of the selective exposure tools. Individuals cannot even find someone in a search if they’ve been blocked. As F-6 said, "More than blocking, I just unfollow. We’re still friends, but I just don’t

follow their posts anymore." Another respondent, M-6, said he only unfollowed a couple people. He added, "I don't like to unfriend people." He indicated he has roughly 3,000 friends on Facebook — real life friends, family, colleagues, former students and business contacts. He said he sees Facebook as a networking tool, so he does not like to severe any ties that could lead to potential opportunities for himself or his former students.

In a majority of instances, casual relationships were severed, such as acquaintances, former colleagues and lost connections from high school. These individuals were the most frequently cited as blocked, unfriended or unfollowed. Some respondents expressed these individuals "added no value" to their lives or they "saw no validity" in their posts. As F-8 said, "I didn't end anything monumental, or close friendships because of the election." As F-2 said, "If I feel very strongly and care about a person, I'm willing to give them a little bit more leeway with opinions than I am a colleague I just met or an acquaintance on the street." One respondent, M-3, didn't block, unfriend or unfollow folks he knew, only individuals he encountered and disagreed with in the comment section of posts. A majority of these selective behaviors took place in the months leading up to the election, rather than post-election.

A couple respondents did detail the unfollowing of family members. As F-3 said, "The only time I wouldn't unfriend someone, I would unfollow them, is if it was a family member. Some of my in-laws and distant family members, I do not agree with their political opinions, and because they're family and want to see pictures of my son and what we're up to, I don't delete them, but I do unfollow them or hide their posts." In very few instances were close relationships ended, or family members unfriended or blocked.

One respondent, F-9, was forced to unfriend an aunt after a heated political discussion escalated into her aunt calling her a "baby killer," despite her well-known activism for the pro-life platform. Another, F-2, unfriended her brother because of his political postings about Hillary Clinton, particularly him calling the presidential candidate a vulgar four-letter word beginning with the letter "c."

This anecdote brought the researcher to the next of her major findings about selective exposure: most selectivity occurred, largely, not due to political disagreements about candidates or policy, but due to disagreements in personal and social values. Many respondents cited seeing racist, sexist and homophobic comments, as well as the continual sharing of misinformation or articles from illegitimate news sites, as reasons for blocking, unfriending or unfollowing someone on Facebook. Essentially, posts deemed "intolerable" or "unacceptable" to the respondent's set of personal values was likely to be nixed from their news feed.

Respondent F-2 did not unfriend her brother because of his dislike of Clinton's political platform, but rather, due to what she considered a sexist comment. As she elaborated, "I'm completely open to hearing other opinions, but when it gets to the point where it's treading on homophobia or racism or sexism, that's just not how it's going to fly. I think it's toxic and I don't want that in my mental drawer." Respondent F-4 referenced when one of her friends used a racial slur used to describe former President Barack Obama: "I have no tolerance for that. I unfriended him flat out… I don't want that information showing up on my news feed."

A handful of respondents just didn't like seeing so many political posts. For F-6,

this was one of the “intolerable acts” or “deal breakers." She said she unfriended roughly a dozen acquaintances because, "I’m not trying to read their stuff all day. All they’re doing is posting political stuff.” Respondent F-9 reported unfriending a couple hundred people because of too much political sharing. She said, “They’ll share stuff over and over and I just got tired of seeing it.” M-4 says his friends list gradually grew smaller during the election, not only due to “aggressive hate speech,” but also due to “too much political stuff I don’t want to see every day.” M-5 emphasized his unfollows were not due to political alignments, but because, “I was tired of seeing people bicker back and forth… I’m just not going to clog up my day with people arguing over who they’re supporting and why.”

Throughout the political season, at least two respondents expressed disinterest in the extremes. Posts that were considered too far left or too far right were unacceptable to respondents F-9 and M-6. As F-9 said, “I try to hide people who either are bashing our president or are extremely praising our president consistently.” She expressed an interested in a more middle-grounded news feed. M-6, who has a couple thousand friends on his Facebook, said he unfollowed some individuals on the left and right sides of the political spectrum, “because I got so tired of seeing so much Bernie Bro crap leading up to the election and so much alt-right crap… That’s my big thing — I really dislike people who are too far each direction."

At least four of the respondents commented on how curating the information seen on their news feeds felt. As F-2 described it, “It felt better. You can’t control everything that’s on the internet, but my goal was to control what I was seeing.” Three of the male

respondents, M-3, M-4 and M-6, said unfriending and unfollowing certain people and certain content allowed them to have a more enjoyable time online, as they could see more of the content they wanted to see. Essentially, these respondents would rather use their time on Facebook in a leisurely way, rather than getting caught up in political debates.

Information Overload

A majority of the respondents, 11 of 16, reported feeling overwhelmed with the amount of information they encountered before, during and immediately after the 2016 presidential election. Some individuals referred to it as "information overload" or being "bombarded" with information. F-9 said before 2016, logging onto Facebook was relaxing. During the election, however, she said, "It was a complete political overload. Complete saturation."

Several respondents expressed some level of anxiety associated with the amount of content they encountered. F-3 said seeing so much political content on her news feed raised her anxiety or stress level. She said, "It was a short timespan, and there was so much information coming out, I don't think anyone really had time to digest something properly and really think about it before the next big thing happened." Many respondents said so much new information was being shared on a daily, sometimes even hourly, basis and they couldn't keep up. As M-2 illustrated, "At first it was like, 'Oh, cool, more information.' But then it gets overwhelming… It was coming from everywhere at that time. Every other thing was political."

In addition to feeling overwhelmed, respondents felt a wide range of emotions,

including disgust, worry, “a real sense of doom,” anger and “flabbergastedness.” As F-2 said, "You know the eye roll emoji? That pretty much sums it up. If you’re spending multiple hours per day on a website and you’re getting inundated with negativity from both sides, it just feels gross.”

Despite feeling overloaded with information and having a variety of emotional responses to that information, a majority of the respondents did not slow their Facebook consumption during the election. On average, most respondents reported spending two hours on the social media network. During the election, most reported their time on Facebook increased by at least an hour. In some instances, time spent on Facebook doubled. Being on Facebook, seeing the news and the responses to it, was seemingly a form of social currency. As M-2 said, “That platform has become a wealth of information. Yes, it’s good and bad. But I think I [engaged and spent more time online] just because everyone was able to share it.” Sharing in the information, even in the frustrations with it, was a common bond among Facebook participants.

In many instances, the drama of the political season, even if considered stressful by many, caused many individuals to stay on longer, to read more articles, to read more commentary on posts, and to do more research on what they believed might be misinformation. F-6 said she tried to stay out of the political commentary, but she read articles shared by her friends, which resulted in roughly an extra hour spent on Facebook each day. She said, “Everybody was getting heated. Everybody wanted to talk about it. There was always something to read.” Even though getting on the social site caused her to feel “a real sense of doom,” F-7 reported more time spent on Facebook to read shared

articles. She said she wanted to feel informed. F-3 said Facebook was where she got the majority of her news during the election. She wanted to check the political standings, especially during the primary election. At least two respondents, F-8 and F-10, said they spent more time online specifically trying to drum up support for their political candidate of choice.

Instead of disconnecting during the height of the political drama, about a third of the respondents waited until after the climax of the political season — election day. After the election, most respondents reported spending slightly less time online, or taking "a breather," as F-3 called it. She said, "I remember just not wanting to be on there, not wanting to see the posts, one way or another, and just taking some time off." F-1 had a visceral reaction to the election results, and therefore felt the need to disconnect for a few days. She said, "I had to take some time. I've never felt a strong emotion about something political, but I cried when I woke up the next morning… It affected me emotionally more than I thought it would for a couple of days and I just stayed off everything." Three respondents maintained their presence on Facebook, but chose not to engage with any political posts.

About a third of the respondents reported taking a brief hiatus from the social network. "Taking a break" from Facebook typically only meant a few days, but no longer than a week. For F-1, it was two days. For F-3, it was five days. F-9 explained her disconnection in this way: "I want to see things I enjoy, so it's me making a choice to mindfully use my time and respect myself most of all and not put myself in a position where I'm going to get angry or frustrated or say something about that person I

shouldn't." Even individuals who expressed satisfaction with the outcome of the election shared their relief that the election was over. They, too, looked forward to a disconnection. As M-2 put it, "I think we were all just burnt out with it." M-3 added, "I just wanted it over and done with. It was a long election, it seemed like. It felt like the longest one I can remember."

At least four respondents, however, remained engaged or even increased their time on Facebook after the election. As M-1 put it, "Post-election, I just really had a craving to understand what happened and I did use social media a lot to try to get to the bottom of that." F-7, too, wanted to stick around to see what her conservative-minded friends were thinking post-election and try to make sense of the political chaos. F-8, however, was online to connect with others commiserating about the election of Donald Trump as the next president of the United States. She said she stuck around for the light-hearted jokes and memes.

Engagement

As far as engagement on the social media platform, a majority of respondents reported they were much more likely to "like" a post than they were to comment on it or share it during the election. The researcher focused solely on "likes," as opposed to "reactions," as Facebook implemented the reaction options, including like, love, haha, wow, sad or angry, in February 2017, after the election was over. F-3 said liking posts, in her eyes, was a more neutral way of engaging. She said, "I tend to like, but I do not comment on political posts. It leads down a rabbit hole that I normally don't want to [go down]." Shares were deemed by most respondents as a confirmation or approval of the

information contained within the content shared. Shares are immediately visible on the user's Facebook timeline and show up in the news feeds of the users who follow them. The posts someone “likes” on Facebook are searchable, but they are not displayed with the prominence of a share. A “like,” for most respondents, felt more casual.

As M-2 illustrated, "I do like a lot of politics stuff. I don’t share it as much as everyone else. If I do share something, I always fact check it first. I’m very picky, and that’s why I don’t share a lot, too — I don’t have time to fact check everything.” Source credibility was an issue for at least a third of respondents in terms of sharing a post. As F-7 said, “I tried to not share things I didn’t know to be true. If I shared it, I had read it.” Again, a share was essentially a stamp of approval.

Special knowledge or heightened personal interest in a post could tip the scales, and prompt someone to make a comment. As F-3 said, "I usually ignore it unless it’s something I feel like I’m educated on, something I can speak to appropriately.” As F-4 indicated, she would not comment on a post “until I know what I’m talking about,” but she said she is especially interested in politics, so she did not mind debating once she felt confident in her knowledge base. F-5 said, “Usually I just pass it on by unless it’s something I’m passionate about,” such as education, as she’s a long-time teacher.

One respondent, F-9, said she to try to lighten the political mood on her Facebook by posting photos poking fun at Donald Trump’s hair. But her attempt at light-hearted humor was quickly quelled: "When I would do that, someone would get mean and turn my post into something negative, so I would delete the whole post.” She said the posts quickly became “overly aggressive” in defense of Trump, even though her post was

meant in jest. While a couple respondents, F-3 and M-1, did not experience this behavior on the original posts they made, they did witness aggressive debates between outside parties in the comments of the post. As F-3 illustrated, "Friends on opposite side[s] on an issue would engage on my post against each other," which she said sometimes ended in name calling. M-1, too, said that although he tries "to encourage open discussion with people who want to comment," he found himself deleting a number of posts due to vulgar comments. He said he would respond by saying, "I appreciate you want to express yourself, but this is off topic, or crass, or counterproductive, so I'm going to delete the post."

A minority of respondents, however, actively disengaged from political posts. M-5 said he didn't share, comment on or post about anything political. F-5 said she has an inherent belief that politics do not belong on Facebook, so she did not make any original posts about the election, nor did she comment on political posts. As she put it, "I didn't want to get involved in the negativity." For M-6, he said he has so many friends with such a variety of political beliefs, he does not like to make his personal politics known on Facebook. Another couple of respondents, F-6 and M-1, while they "liked" many political posts made and shared by others, said they likely would have created more original posts if it were not prohibited by their employers.

At least half of the respondents acknowledged the news feed to which they were exposed was at least somewhat politically slanted. Most of F-1's friends and family just happen to skew left, so that wound up being the political makeup of her feed. In one instance, a respondent had already narrowed his friends list so as to only be exposed to

other like-minded individuals. As M-5 said, “I’ve blocked most of the people I don’t really care to see… Most people have been blocked for years.”

Nearly a third of respondents acknowledged their feeds were politically skewed based on their level of engagement. As F-6 illustrated,

> "I liked a lot of the Bernie Sanders stuff, so I was constantly seeing posts from his memes page I added, post from him. I was actually shocked by how things were actually going versus what my feed looked like. If I would have went by my newsfeed, Bernie would have won by a landslide. I guess I see more biased stuff that lined up with my views because of things I’ve liked and stuff I follow.”

She said she wasn’t trying to silo herself on purpose, but she did acquiesce, “You [click the 'like' button on] things that you agree with, so of course, that’s going to be more of what you see.” F-7, too, had a tendency to only like liberal-minded posts. In the early months of the political season, M-4 said he was seeing content that skewed more conservative. But based on his posts and likes of more liberal content, he suspected Facebook’s algorithm readjusted to his liking. He said, "Between Facebook’s algorithm and eliminating a fourth [of my friends from] the list, I don’t see a lot of opposite points of view.”

While some selective exposure happened more passively through “likes” and shares based on Facebook's algorithms, M-3 was an outlier among the respondents. He said he actively blocked or unfollowed individuals who expressed interest in the opposing candidate. He said, “If somebody posts something I don’t like, you’re gone... A lot of times, I would get into arguments. I would just block them. I didn’t care, if they didn’t

like something I posted, they could block me. That's the good thing about Facebook, if you don't like it, you don't have to see it."

The researcher did notice a slight contrast between some of the younger and older respondents, especially those who had reached retirement. Some younger respondents expressed time constraints in online debating, while a couple of the older respondents indicated they could spend more time engaging. As a 30-year-old respondent said, "It wasn't worth the time and energy. I already felt kind of drained by it. I don't have the luxury to spend time online arguing." But a 63-year-old respondent said, "I was retired at that point, and I had a lot of time." She indicated she make a lot of comments on political posts, and "didn't mind" calling people out for posting what she believed was false information.

Content

Every respondent said they encountered at least some information during the 2016 presidential election they believed was not true. Roughly half of the respondents engaged in some way with what they believed was misinformation, while the others found no value in engaging, so they simply scrolled past. F-9 did not feel confident in her political knowledge, and she did not want to argue, so she continued scrolling. As she said, "I usually don't invest my time in telling that person it's not true. I didn't consider myself to be an expert, so I didn't feel I had a proper voice."

Two respondents, F-5 and M-1, said they like to find the original source for information. M-1 said he would share the information he found from his research directly in the comments of the post, sometimes with a link attached. He said, "Once I posted,

they usually deleted the whole thing. I just felt like, at the time, there was so much misinformation out there and so much negative stuff that's actually true, let's not add more negative stuff that's false. It's not my responsibility, but I guess, in a way, it's everybody's responsibility."

A number of others said they utilized Snopes or other fact-checking websites to verify the information they saw. Some of them fact checked for personal reasons, while others shared the fact-checked information with the individuals who were posting misinformation. As F-3 said, "Even if I didn't know them well, I would post something saying, 'Hey, check your source. Here's an article saying the exact opposite.' Or I would say, 'Make sure you're getting your information from legit sites,' trying to be respectful as possible."

F-5 took a different approach — she fact checked information, then sent the results via personal message to the person who made the original post. As a teacher for more than 20 years, she said she didn't want to start a public debate, but she did want the individuals to know they were sharing misinformation. She said, "We teach facts. When you see people sharing and believing misinformation, it makes me wonder, 'What are they thinking? Do they not know any better?'" Essentially, she felt it was her duty to educate individuals who posted what she believed was untrue information. M-4 tried yet another approach. He engaged the individuals in person about their online posts. He said, "I didn't try to debate people publicly online, (but even in-person, confrontation about misinformation) was not well received." Another reaction, as illustrated by F-7, was to report the post with misinformation as spam.

Some respondents, like M-4, after finding his comments were not well received, gave up trying to correct misinformation. He said, "I originally tried to correct it with peer-reviewed facts, but I just keep moving now. It wasn't effective. Once an opinion had been formed, there was no changing it." His initial motivation to correct misinformation quickly turned to apathy. M-5 echoed this fatalistic sentiment. He said,

> "Usually another friend of mine has already beaten me to this and posted the Snopes article or the truth article to it, and I will like his post. I'll typically just move on. It's not worth my time. People have already formed their beliefs, and when people tell them they're wrong, even with empirical data, it's not going to change their mind."

Overall, the respondents reported seeing on their news feeds "a lot of misinformation," "alternative facts," "fake articles," "one-sided political news," "a lot of opinions," and "political information overload." Some of the respondents had a more extreme account of the content seen, such as "white supremacy" posts, "people attacking each other for no reason," and "unsolicited harassment." As F-7 put it, "In the months leading up to the election, we began to reveal ourselves." She also said it was clear to her that some of her Facebook friends "had watched a news source, a singular news source, and believed all the things that came into their feed." M-6 said he saw constant confirmation bias among his friends. He said, "Whether the information in it's true or not, you start thinking, 'Everybody agrees with me, so it must be true.' Popular appeal can be a fallacy."

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

Findings

Weak ties were more likely to be severed than strong relationships. As indicated in the literature review, in their research on selective exposure, John and Dvir-Gvirsman (2015) found that among more than 1,000 Jewish Israeli Facebook users during the Israel-Gaza conflict of 2014, "weak ties were most likely to be broken." This research, too, conducted among 16 Americans, found that "weak ties," such as online friendships with acquaintances, former co-workers and unmaintained relationships from high school or college were the most likely to be ended during the 2016 presidential election. Several respondents indicated these relationships "no longer added value" to their lives; therefore, they did not want to see their posts in their news feed. Individuals in the "weak ties" category were unfriended at much higher rates than individuals in other categories — such as family, close friends, and current co-workers.

A couple respondents severed ties with a substantial amount of the people on their friends lists, but the majority of respondents found this time period to be a time of pruning. Only two of the respondents indicated ending some a relationship online with a family member. In both instances, the individuals cited a personal attack on their beliefs as the reason for unfriending the family member.

Outside of "weak ties," personal beliefs were the other deciding factor in selective exposure. Many respondents who engaged in selective exposure, if they weren't simply pruning their friends lists to remove weak ties, said they did so because someone had violated one of their personal beliefs in a post, comment, response, etc. Several

individuals said they could not tolerate racist or sexist comments. Others cited the continual sharing of misinformation as the reason they unfollowed, unfriended or blocked someone. Essentially, anyone who posted something that violated another user's personal belief system could land on the chopping block.

Selective exposure tools fell under a specific hierarchy. As indicated in the literature review, there is a distinction between seeking pro-attitudinal information and avoiding counter-attitudinal information (Stroud & Garrett, 2014). This research supports that distinction. Selective approach was as simple as clicking "like" on a Facebook post, and Facebook's algorithms shifting the content on the user's news feed to more desirable information. The threshold was much higher, however, for selective avoidance. As Stroud and Garrett (2014) found, "Selective approach may be easier to enact than avoidance" (p. 682).

Respondents indicated unfollowing was the easiest and most frequently utilized selective tool. Unfollowing was a way to bar information from reaching your newsfeed, without actually barring the person from interacting with you. Individuals will not know if they have been unfollowed, which eliminated any potential confrontation about the selective behavior. Next on the hierarchy was unfriending. If an individual wanted to remove someone entirely from their friends list, disallowing tagged photos and shared content, they could utilize the unfriend option. Unfriended individuals can still communicate via Messenger, but their messages go to a separate folder outside the standard inbox. The least frequently used option was blocking. Blocking bars an individual entirely — allowing no communication whatsoever. As indicated in the

literature review (Dylko, et al., 2017), technology has been tailored to best suit our needs as a society — to filter the information or communication which we do not want or need.

Online societal norms dictated certain behaviors on Facebook. In deciding which selective exposure tools to utilize, most respondents first considered their relationship with the troublesome individual. Were they a close friend or family member? If so, respondents said they were more likely to look over or give more leeway to their postings. If they were a weaker connection, they would likely be removed from the friends list. Second, respondents considered the content within the post. If the content was simply undesirable, unfollowing would be utilized. If the posts were intolerable, but they wanted the friendship to remain intact, unfollowing was utilized. If the posts were intolerable and the friendship was not valuable, either unfriending or blocking was utilized. Blocking was considered by respondents the most severe form of selective exposure.

Respondents said “likes” were far more common in terms of engagement with political posts than comments or shares — “likes” aren't as publicly visible as comments and shares. Most respondents would not comment on a political post unless they felt knowledgeable about the subject, or if they had a personal interest in the subject matter. Respondents also suggested that shares were a “stamp of approval,” so they came much less frequently than likes.

Although prior research (Carnahan, et al., 2016; Dvir-Gvirsman, et al., 2016; Swift, 2016) indicated differences in selective exposure among political parties, this research found online societal norms were similar among all respondents — left-leaning,

right-leaning and those who identify somewhere in between. PRRI research (2016) also indicated females were more likely to engage in selective exposure. Selective behaviors were similarly reported between males and females in this research. Additional research focusing specifically on differences among demographics is needed to explain the incongruence between this research and past research.

While many instances of selective exposure were conscious decisions, some selectivity happened in a more passive way, just as part of daily interaction with the site. As users spend time on Facebook, they tend to click “like” on the types of content they find interesting or with which they agree. They sometimes “hide posts” or simply don't engage with the content with which they do not agree. As Facebook's algorithms learn what types of content engage a user for the longest, more of that content will be generated on the user's feed. Some respondents were aware of this — they saw the content evolve to best match their political ideologies throughout the 2016 presidential election. Other individuals, however, may not be attuned to the changes. They may simply find themselves spending more time online because the experience is more pleasant.

Many individuals see Facebook as a leisurely place to connect — not as a political platform. Most users expressed some displeasure with the amount of political content they saw, whether or not it aligned with their own personal political views. Many also expressed displeasure with the negativity and aggression they saw during this particular time frame. For some, engaging in selective exposure allowed them to get back to the content they enjoyed seeing most — photos of a friend's new baby, funny non-

political memes, or sale posts about muscle cars. They wanted to spend their time on Facebook in a more leisurely way, rather than a drama-filled encounter.

In addition to connecting with family and friends, many users also indicated they utilize Facebook to gather news. In some instances, respondents said they utilized Facebook as a primary news source. Instead of seeking news from traditional outlets in a formal presentation, such as the front page of the daily newspaper, many individuals now prefer to "stumble upon" the information deemed important by their friends and family as they scroll through their Facebook feeds. Essentially, respondents indicated they did not want to disconnect from Facebook for fear of missing out on the information, but they did not want the attached partisan commentary and debate that oftentimes accompanied the news articles.

Being online during the 2016 presidential election was a form of social currency. Many respondents reported feeling overwhelmed by the amount of information they encountered, but no matter how "bombarded" they felt, no one reported a decrease in time spent online. Connecting with friends and family and reading the news were cited as two reasons users could not disconnect. But the researcher argues being online in the months leading up to the election was a form of social currency. Reading the news, the commentary, and the debates was akin to watching the Super Bowl: even if you don't care who wins the game, you tune in for the experience — to be part of the conversation. Even commiserating with one another in person about the online drama was a form of social currency.

If a respondent did feel the need to disconnect, he or she waited until after the

election. Disconnection times were short-lived, too. No one reported disconnecting for longer than a five-day period after the election was over. A few respondents, however, said they remained engaged after the election, or even increased their time online, to try to make sense of the chaotic election cycle. Some individuals needed to continue the connection — either to celebrate or to commiserate.

Significance

This research is particularly significant for communication on the world's biggest social media network. Facebook does not readily share data about its users. The social giant reports it does not even track data on unfollowing, unfriending and blocking, so researchers are left to their own devices. This study is a snapshot of behaviors during a particularly divisive time in history, one in which more people than ever before were online. The social network seemingly listened to their user base after the election, as they rolled out the "snooze" option. Introduced in December 2017, the "snooze" button was, and still is at the time of the publication of this research, a discreet way to temporarily block someone's posts from your news feed (Bonnington, 2017). The "snooze," found in the upper right corner of an individual's post, will hide content from that individual for one month.

Bonnington says if users aren't happy online, that's a threat to Facebook's longevity. Bonnington poses, "In an ideal world, Facebook wants you to spend lots of time interacting on the social network — and be happy about it — so you keep coming back for that dopamine rush again and again. If you're constantly barraged by negativity, such as one person hijacking your news feed with ill-informed opinions, you might start

distancing yourself from the platform." The researcher believes this feature would have been utilized much more frequently than unfollows during the election, had the feature been available at the time. The researcher suggests family members and close friends posting unwanted content would have been "snoozed" rather than unfollowed. However, the researcher still believes unfriending would have been utilized to disconnect from those "who no longer added value" to their lives.

Overall, these findings help build upon existing research on cognitive dissonance and selective exposure theories. The research supplements the ongoing quantitative studies of selective exposure online. The researcher believes this work is valuable to the field of communications as the respondents offered insight into their behaviors — engagement and disconnection — during one of the most contentious presidential elections in history. This work is also valuable to the field of journalism, as reporters and editors must navigate unchartered online territory in terms of selective approach and selective avoidance. They must understand how information is sought out and avoided in order to properly share news content.

This research advances selective exposure theory and cognitive dissonance theory by illustrating the decisions behind and distinctions between selective behaviors. As the research shows, selective exposure is context-specific. All users have different personal and social values, as well as varying thresholds for their intolerance of certain content. Selective exposure is not absolute — the value of social media is too great for many users. And when selective exposure is utilized, it's not all or nothing. Selective exposure has many gradations, from something minimal (unfollowing) to something more severe

(blocking).

Limitations with the Study

Fourteen of the 16 interviews took place remotely. The researcher had initially aimed to conduct more of the interviews in person, but location and time constraints necessitated phone interviews. While the researcher does not believe the quality of the data suffered, additional insight could have been gathered by an in-person interaction, such as facial expressions and body language.

While the researcher did recruit a mix of males and females with varying political leanings, not enough data was collected to make demographic-specific findings. Also, the researcher recruited slightly more females than males, and slightly more left-leaning respondents and right-leaning, which could have skewed the results. M-3, one of the most conservative respondents, was an outlier in the research, as he indicated he actively blocked or unfriended individuals who made posts with which he did not agree. The researcher believes if a greater number of participants were recruited, this behavior would still be among the minority of respondents, but more research is needed to be certain.

This study also did not focus on racial, religious, geographic or other demographic qualifiers such as educational background or socioeconomic status. All participants in this study identified as either male or female, so individuals who identify outside those categories did not contribute to the research. Additional research should be conducted among a larger pool of respondents for more demographic-specific results.

The research also did not examine behaviors and selective exposure on other social media platforms, such as Twitter, Reddit, Snapchat or Instagram. While this topic

would be interesting to explore on other platforms, the researcher determined Facebook, with its dynamic user base and multiple filtering options, would be the best platform on which to focus.

Issues with Self-Reporting. The researcher felt it was important to acknowledge she did not access any of the respondents' Facebook pages for verification of the information shared within their interviews. The researcher relied solely on self-reporting from the respondents for the data included in the study. Prior (2009) points out in his research that many people reported listening to NPR, but the ratings suggested otherwise. Prior says self-reporting is not an accurate measure of news exposure, which casts doubt on this method of data collection. In his dissertation, Kearney (2017) says to make inferences from self-reported data, researchers must assume respondents are fully aware of their media-selection behaviors. He writes, “In today's fast-paced, information-rich, and technology-filled media environment, this assumption is, at best, tenuous... It is hard to imagine people are fully aware during every media-selection decision” (p. 19).

Kearney also points out that even if people are fully aware at the time of media exposure decisions, “(T)heir ability to accurately recall those decisions later on, is notoriously unreliable” (p. 20). However, the researcher stands by the findings in her data for a number of reasons. Respondents did not indicate any trouble remembering, at least generally, their behaviors during the 2016 presidential election. The research interviews took place in January and February 2018, just over a year after the November 2016 election and its aftermath. The researcher believes this was such a dynamic election cycle that respondents were more likely to remember this time frame than a more stagnate time

in history.

Directions for Future Research

Approximately three respondents made some mention of private and public Facebook groups in their responses. Study of behavior within these groups on Facebook would be especially interesting from the 2016 presidential election, as well as future election cycles. Some respondents shared anecdotes of group interactions, but to maintain the focus of the study, the researcher only included the information that pertained to the general news feed/friends list. The researcher believes these groups could be a treasure trove of information, as a couple respondents indicated they felt more comfortable to express themselves politically within the groups than they did on their personal pages. As M-2 said, "I share mostly within the groups I'm in. I don't post much to my personal Facebook."

As noted previously, additional research is needed to understand the incongruence between this research and prior research in terms of selective exposure among men and women, as well as different political parties. More females (57 percent) get their news from Facebook than male users (43 percent), as indicated by Gottfried and Shearer (2016), so a closer look at differences in selective approach and selective avoidance on social media between genders could be interesting. Further, the researcher noticed women were more forthcoming than men in their interviews about how online behaviors during the 2016 presidential election made them feel. A deeper dive into gender-based reactions to online behaviors could prove interesting.

Also, research posing the same interview questions included in this study to

different demographics — individuals in nontraditional political parties, individuals who identify outside the traditional gender framework, individuals with specific ethnicities, individuals from certain religious backgrounds, individuals with and without college degrees, individuals from specific age brackets, individuals from specific geographic regions or individuals from various socioeconomic backgrounds — could prove interesting to study. Knobloch-Westerwick (2015) found differences in age and educational level, paired with the circumstances surrounding the election, had an impact on attitude accessibility. If there are age and educational level differences in information-seeking strategies, these differences may be found in behaviors online, as well as motivations for engaging in selective behaviors on social media.

Further research about online behavior on other social media platforms, especially Twitter, would be interesting. President Trump utilizes the platform as a way to circumvent the media to get his message directly to his followers. Quantitative research about behavior, especially selective exposure, on Twitter could be revealing. With Twitter's filtering options, which allow users to hide posts with specific words or phrases, users could avoid a substantial amount of liberal or conservative viewpoints by engaging these filters. Anecdotal reports have been shared from some individuals who have tried to hide all political-related tweets, as they have barred words from "Trump" to "health care" to "immigration" to avoid political discourse. How many people are utilizing these filters? How do behaviors vary among specific demographics?

Qualitative research on behaviors on Twitter, too, would help add to the literature on communication and selective exposure. Filtering options on Twitter are fewer, but

arguably just as powerful as those on Facebook. Options to unfollow, block and hide words or phrases on Twitter allow users to silo themselves in many ways. Motivators for these behaviors would be interesting to examine on Twitter as well.

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