Social Media in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

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The 2016 United States presidential election campaign between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton marked a significant change in how social media have been used as news sources for the public. While social media have been applied in recent elections, the 2016 general election became what is considered the most influential in terms of changing technology and personable online interactions. The public has continued to use social media platforms to obtain their news, particularly taken advantage of by candidates in the 2016 general election. First, this essay will discuss the relevance of investigative journalism in modern media and the effects that scandal based news has had on the public. This will include background on the U.S. laws and rulings that support the current rights of the press. Second, the role of social media developments on the recent election campaign in the U.S. will be highlighted. Third, the essay will describe the ways in which traditional news media strategies heavily influenced the news coverage on social media sites and ultimately affected the quality of online discussion regarding the 2016 general election. Lastly, recommendations for the perpetuation of quality information and dialogue on social media will be given in order to positively influence future U.S. election coverage. Ultimately, journalists should maintain the right to free press but must recognize the need for alternative methods when sharing news stories online. While media rights should not be infringed upon, the failures of news media will be highlighted to clarify why changes must be made for future coverage. The analysis will be focused on the most relevant trends found in social media when considering their effects on the 2016 U.S. election campaign.

For this essay, social media will be defined as any Internet-based resources that provide real-time communication and information sharing amongst groups or individuals. Traditional news media forms will be considered as television, newspapers, and radio which have adapted to include the Internet as a medium. The news sources associated with traditional news media are considered to be providers of conventional forms of journalism and have existed before Internet use, often connected with longstanding corporate sponsors. This essay argues that the rights of the news media should not be limited based on the advancements in social media used during the 2016 U.S. general election. That said, the methods that traditional news media used on social media have failed to create consistently accurate news stories during the election campaign. This has created a much larger problem with far-reaching implications.

Freedom of the media is generally viewed as being an unrestrained ability to create truthful news without fear of government interdiction (humanrights.gov, ud.). The 1st Amendment of the U.S. Constitution follows this same concept. It states that the U.S. government will make no law "abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press" (United States Senate, ud.). Noteworthy Supreme Court cases include New York Times v. Sullivan (1964) and Milkovich v. Lorain Journal Co. (1990). These cases upheld 1st Amendment protections on opinions and made it more difficult for public officials to sue the press for libel, requiring proof of malintent by the publisher (Cornell University Law School, ud. a) (Cornell University Law School, ud. b). The Supreme Court case rulings and the 1st Amendment establish a form of safety for journalists in the U.S. The press, therefore, is able to maintain news coverage without interference. In order to provide government transparency, these rights should not be altered.

While it has become generally acceptable to assume that it is journalists' responsibility to provide unbiased news, this has not always been a common belief. In the late 1800s, almost 90 percent of newspapers in the U.S. had publicly stated their affiliations to a political party (Gentzkow et al. 2006, 188). By 1920, after World War One, 62 percent claimed to be independent of any political biases and moved away from partisan based coverage (Gentzkow

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et al. 2006, 188). The Watergate scandal in 1972 created a skepticism of the political establishment in Washington D.C. and justified the belief that investigative journalism was necessary for holding democratic values in check (Thompson 2000, 110). To do this, news providers took on an attitude of trying to uncover the truth for the viewer by searching for scandalous stories rather than supporting a political groups' agenda. The emphasis on scandal based stories took hold of reporting strategies through the 1980s, ultimately creating shows like Nightline and Burden of Proof that established regular coverage of timely news stories (Balkin 1999, 406-407).

Through the efforts of producing transparency, journalists have been able to help citizens participate in political interests, hold government positions accountable, and help citizens understand government operations (Balkin 1999, 394). That said, traditional news media, claiming the ability to create transparency have left their credibility at risk. Politicians and government entities recognize that proliferation of information and the responsibility that journalists feel to uncover secrets, often leaves news media overwhelmed (Balkin 1999, 394). For example, at a campaign rally in Iowa in 2016 Trump stated, "I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot people and I wouldn't lose voters" (Newsday.com staff, 2016). This was likely pointing out his ability to say what he pleased and still maintain media interest in his campaign. This provided weeks of coverage which only seemed to make the intention of his statement more credible.

On June 16th of 2015, Trump declared his run for the presidency with a 45-minute television news conference (Diamond, 2015). Already having a well-known television presence and global business connections, Trump used these qualities to gather attention during his campaign. Six months later the nightly news coverage for Trump was greater than all coverage of Democratic candidates combined by NBC, CBS, and ABC (Olshansky and Stelter, 2015). From January of 2015 to November of 2015, Trump averaged 234 minutes of coverage while fellow Republic candidate Ted Cruz only received seven (Olshansky and Stelter, 2015). During the same time period, Clinton averaged around 117 minutes of coverage (Olshansky and Stelter, 2015). Largely this is believed to be based on Trump's impressive ability to generate continually controversial comments in the public and on social media (Newsday.com staff, 2016).

According to Dr. Dona-Gene Mitchell, the timing at which scandal is uncovered can make a large difference as to how each candidate is viewed by voters (Mitchell 2014, 697). There are a number of general trends that are associated with this. A candidate would most likely prefer to have a controversial story broken early in the campaign, allowing an ample amount of time for the story to break down and no longer exists in the voters' minds (Mitchell 2014, 697-698). That said, continuous coverage of scandalous activity can cause "scandal fatigue", in which voters become numb to the constant media questioning of a candidates' values or actions (Thompson 2000, 117). More research is needed to quantify scandalous coverage between Clinton and Trump since the results of the election. The amount of exposure Trump received from traditional news media can be based on his continuous controversial actions (Olshansky and Stelter 2015). Trump likely benefitted from scandal fatigue by creating an unapologetic persona in the media that left him appearing to be unflinching in the face of criticism.

Journalists and news sources feel bound by the entertainment value that generates interest. When a story breaks for one news source, generally, the same story is forced to be covered by another source in order to maintain views (Balkin 1999, 402). Many stories break without proper research from all networks which creates errors in the standards of coverage (Balkin 1999, 402). In this way, the story provides material for constant coverage because all news sources begin to talk about the same story while also trying to establish their own perspectives that make them different from one another. With increasing amounts of social media as forms of information in themselves, this has created a larger risk for journalism in the long-term. News media, feeling that they are bound by the expectation of unbiased news coverage, are in danger of becoming overwhelmed by the interests of social media.

While the use of social media platforms in political dialogue have been used since the1990s, there was a large shift in communication abilities by the 2008 U.S. presidential election against Barrack Obama and John McCain (Burroughs 2013, 259). Campaigning generally occurred through social networking services (SNS) such as Facebook or YouTube. That said, communication was largely one-sided due to the lack of ability for discussion allowed on these sites at the time (Burrough 2013, 259). By 2012, Twitter as a new social networking site, allowed for fast paced sharing of information and dialogue amongst users (Enli 2017, 52). Facebook increased its number of users and

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communication abilities during the same time period. The 2012 U.S. presidential election campaign can be recognized as the "first real social media campaign" (Burroughs 2013, 259). By this time, both Republicans and Democrats realized the campaigning potential that could be found online. Mitt Romney's campaign used five different platforms to connect with voters while Obama's campaign used nine (Enli 2017, 52). The importance of the shift in political strategy from 2008 to 2012 was the recognition of the changing social networking technology that allowed candidates to reach out to the public.

In terms of the media changes that had occurred since 2012, SNS like Facebook, Twitter, and photo-distributing platform Instagram, developed video and image sharing capabilities that allowed for real-time broadcasting of information (Enli 2017, 52-53). Using SNS as sources for the distribution of news stories and medium-based discussion, side-stepped traditional news media. The 2012 election campaign set a new pattern for political discussion through social media, while the 2016 campaign further enhanced political culture on the Internet. This was done by creating new campaign strategies for constantly advancing SNS. Dr. Gunn Enli, Professor in the Department of Media and Communications at the University of Oslo, refers to Clinton's 2016 campaign announcement as a turning point in political dialogue in social media. Clinton announced her run for office by tweeting "I'm running for president. Everyday Americans need a champion, and want to be a champion. – H" (Clinton, 2015) (Enli 2017, 53). According to Enli, this tweet represents a shift in former campaign policies (Enli 2017, 53). Historically, a candidate may reach out to the press or to a television source to broadcast their candidacy announcement while giving a general speech. Through the use of SNS, this was not the case for the Clinton 2016 presidential campaign. This ultimately set a new precedent for political outreach and campaign strategies going forward.

There are a number of SNS developments that traditional news media did not consider when covering the 2016 election campaign. These developments were based on the ways in which Internet users had shaped SNS since previous elections. The inclusion of increased media platforms, bots, and image sharing all contributed to the shortfalls of news coverage during the election campaign. As SNS continue as platforms for ideas and expressions, news coverage must adapt to these changes. Traditional news media had failed to do so during the campaign coverage, which resulted in a loss of credibility from those who receive news from editorial and television sources, as well as SNS.

The influence the presidential candidates and traditional news media held on SNS like Twitter and Facebook created issues in interpreting the views of users. Candidates and news media placed too much attention on inaccurate online influences without careful consideration of the sources of information. For example, the effects that bots had on social media discussions disrupted traditional media coverage. Bots are driven by algorithms and maintain artificial identities that copy the behavior of humans on social media sites (Bessi and Ferrera 2016, 1). Bots post or share information that can be positive or negative about a particular candidate. The content shared by these bots outlines the agenda that many bot creators set. The information that they generate can be false and unrepresentative of the true sentiments of the population. Researchers Alessandro Bessi and Emilio Ferrara conducted a study on Twitter conversations during the presidential debates held between the 16th of September and the 21st of October of 2016. They found that over 400,000 accounts used for political discourse were likely bots (Bessi and Ferrara 2016, 2). Of a study group of over 20 million tweets, this equated to almost 15 percent of the population which were responsible for 19 percent of the total conversations (Bessi and Ferrara 2016, 2).

The influence of bots can have far-reaching consequences for dialogue occurring on SNS. Heavily positive content directed toward a candidate gives the perception that a candidate has a large number of supporters than reality suggests. False information can be directed at journalists and news sources looking for material which then can create interest in untrue information (Metaxas and Mustafaraj 2012, 473). After claims that Russia interfered in the 2016 election, President Obama directed the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee to assess Russia's possible involvement in the election outcome (intelligence.senate.gov, 2017). Since the Intelligence Committee claims that Russia employed over 1,000 people to create fake accounts to spread anti-Clinton rhetoric during the election (Roberts, 2017). Journalists, influenced by these types of bots, were likely swayed by the online discourse which in turn, led to writings and discussions over untrue stories. Therefore, this undermined news media credibility while simultaneously spreading false information to the public.

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The traditional news media's focus on scandal based stories facilitated the creation of new online media news sources. These sources have become competitors in the media and have the ability to generate stories that must be covered by traditional news outlets. An example of the rising online media news sources is the right-wing news outlet, Breitbart News. Originally created in 2007, Breitbart News has acted as an anchor for other right-wing media outlets that use the Internet as their main information platforms (Benkler et al., 2017). Breitbart News established itself early on in the primary campaign as a supporter of many of Trump's policies, while often attacking other Republican and Democratic candidates with harsh rhetoric (Benkler et al., 2017). The reason Breitbart News is so influential in highlighting the importance of news on SNS is based on their ability to compete with other media sources while maintaining noticeable right-wing views.

Other right-wing news providers began to mobilize around Breitbart News stories creating over 1.25 million stories between April 1[st,] 2015 and the 2016 election day (Benkler et al., 2017). This large right-wing base is something that the more left-leaning candidates, like Clinton, did not have in a relatable form. Many of Clinton's followers used traditional news media like The Washington Post, CNN and The New York Times (Benkler et al., 2017). Even the most partisan sites for left-leaning supporters were still connected through common stories (Benkler et al., 2017). A study in The Columbia Journalism Review found that the clearly partisan right-wing sites exceeded in number to the partisan left-wing sites, which in turn, had the effect of creating increasing number of right-wing sites (Benkler et al., 2017). This increased number created a large presence of right-wing Internet news sources which have created their own base of followers. This development has likely created an information bubble in which many of the viewers of the right-wing news node do not consider using traditional news media that have always been available. That said, cross-referencing has been found to occur among readers but there is little information on how much time is spent addressing articles outside of an individual's news preferences (Benkler et al., 2017).

The increasing amount of news spreading on SNS has created a skepticism towards traditional news media. Users of SNS are seeking out the news they choose to read and view rather than having to focus on the storylines set by only a few traditional news providers. In doing so, this has made news value extremely vulnerable. The trend of "fake news" has taken hold in media discussions, particularly since the 2016 election. Fake news has been defined as the spreading of news stories that are either completely untrue or are only partially true (Carson, 2017). This can range anywhere from intentionally misleading stories to the unintended contestation of the truth (Carson, 2017). The premise of fake news has always existed in some form of media but has recently created a larger element of debate (Hempel, 2017). The 2016 election campaign created an environment that was prone to challenge traditional forms of news coverage. Trump himself, perpetuated much of the propaganda that appeared outside of traditional news media. He created a drama based on his anti-establishment persona that many news sources and SNS continually took interest in. Trump would often question the value and quality of traditional news sources throughout his campaign. He first tweeted the term "fake news" in the following December after the election; reinforcing a long-term debate over the issue (Trump, 2016) (Hempel, 2017). Trump has been a consistent user of the term when mentioning the quality of work by ABC, NBC, CNN, the New York Times, and news-based media as a whole (Hempel, 2017). The way in which Trump uses the term fake news appears to be more of a way of expressing disagreement with information that news sources produce, rather than the information being fake or false (Carson, 2017).

While the consideration of the fake news accusations is not limited to the 2016 election, the implications of its use are far reaching and will likely affect future political discussions. In December of 2016, Facebook announced that it would take necessary steps to limit the use of fake news (Solon and Wong, 2016). This includes tracking down bot sources and unchecked information sharers. While having mixed reviews so far, they are taking steps to filter false stories (Solon and Wong, 2016). For example, Facebook recently shut down over 30,000 accounts that were accused of spreading fake news in the upcoming 2017 French election campaign (Schlesinger, 2017). Google is also expanding their "Fact Check" tool in which their search engine will offer users multiple sources to confirm if a story is true (Kharpal, 2017). In reaction to the fake news debate, the U.S. state of California recently introduced a bill in its state legislature under AB-1104 The California Political Cyberfraud Abatement Act (California Legislature, 2017). The Act, if passed, will make posting false information on the Internet with the goal of affecting election results illegal in California. These examples of change, from both the public and private sectors, are acting in response to changing media perception of information on the Internet.

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While a free media is necessary for a true democracy, the quality of coverage has altered the purpose of traditional news sources. This was particularly clear in the 2016 election due to the changes in technology and availability of dialogue on SNS. The heavy use of scandal by the media set a precedent for news coverage across SNS, allowing users to alter the types of coverage that were offered by the traditional news media. The news media in the U.S. should maintain their same rights of free speech but be more aware of the consequences associated with their abilities. Rather than passing laws to limit dialogue, suggestions to form an authentic press are needed.

Traditional news media must be prepared to alter their policies on scandalous coverage. While it does generate viewers in a short amount of time, the quality ultimately fails the journalistic ideal of transparency for the people. On the 20th of August in 2016, the Daily Mail news source published an article which suggested Melania Trump, the wife of Donald Trump, had once worked as a female escort (Osborne, 2017). Mrs. Trump and her associates claimed that these allegations were baseless (Osborne, 2017). In April of 2017, the Daily Mail paid damages to Mrs. Trump up to three million dollars, stating that there was never any credible evidence to support their own published claim (Osborne, 2017). On November 16th of 2016, the New York Times released an article titled, 'To Our Readers, From the Publisher and Executive Editor' (Baquet and Sulzberger, 2016). The article's theme centered around the news source's coverage of the 2016 election in which they admitted their apparent underestimation of Trump's ability to win the election (Baquet and Sulzberger, 2016). Coverage strategies such as this, where creating scandalous claims become more important than facts cause traditional news sources to lose credibility.

News sources must be able to hold each publisher accountable. Like the Daily Mail article and the New York Times apology, some news sources are taking advantage of the interests of the public. As previously stated, the rights of the media must stay intact. A suggestion as to how traditional news media should adapt to continually changing social media trends is acknowledging SNS as their own form of media. Approaching journalism on SNS from the perspective of a paper or physical article that is created for the use of scandal only perpetuates the divide of online partisan newsgroups such as Breitbart News. The public now has the ability to search for their own news, in an almost limitless capacity. In some respects, Facebook and Google should still not maintain the right to alter free speech, whether false or generally lacking crucial information. The ability to understand the difference between real stories and fake stories must start with a better education system on what factual news looks like. According to Charlie Beckett, Director of Polis at the London School of Economics, improving media literacy and education is not the only way to solve the false information problem (Beckett, 2017). Rather, change will have to come from the networks and journalists themselves (Beckett, 2017). Journalists must provide better sources, add value to content, and show empathy, while networks must improve content through algorithms, assure the quality of content, and reward credible publishers (Beckett, 2017).

Since the 2016 election campaign, the free-range experience on the Internet is coming under increased scrutiny. Federal Communications Commission Chairman Ajit Pai recently challenged a net neutrality ruling from 2015 in hopes of allowing web management by groups like US Telecom (Hurley and Shepardson, 2017). On May 1st of 2017, a U.S. appeals court ruled that the 2015 law will remain upheld; barring corporations from exacting Internet administration laws (Hurley and Shepardson, 2017). That said, the issue of web ownership is likely to continue to be challenged and poses a risk to privacy on the Internet. A large amount of distrust of information is likely to blame, as well as an overall trend to increase security across the globe. President Trump has stated that he is willing to place greater securities on the web in order to maintain defense goals (Lawson, 2016). Under U.S. law, he can do this if the public is perceived to be "in peril" (Lawson, 2016). If this does occur there could be a backlash from those same social media users that used SNS to push Trump's campaign agenda.

The traditional news media's efforts to produce constant coverage of the events from the 2016 U.S. election campaign have left it exposed to growing social media trends. This has happened in a number of ways. The continual use of scandal based news in order to catch the attention of social media users has weakened credibility. The quality of traditional news media has been weakened further by relying too heavily on its history of conventional news sources in print and in television as a way to generate interest. By disregarding the agenda of emerging news sources, news media allowed an opportunity for a wide range of partisan coverage of the election and ultimately the development of competing online sources. That said, it is not completely the news media's fault for these adversities. Social media sites create a fast-paced information environment that allows all opinions to be shared; for the most part

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without censorship. Having to appeal to social, political, and even individual interests have left traditional news media standards lacking and unprepared for quality information sharing in the future. The 2016 U.S. general election, while only lasting for a short time, represents a turning point in social media coverage of elections and the rights associated with the future of media as a whole.

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