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Expressing a Political Agenda Through Social Media: A Content Analysis of
Representative Pete Aguilar's #DearPete Social Media Campaign

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Division of Online and Professional Studies

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Expressing a Political Agenda Through Social Media: A Content Analysis of
Representative Pete Aguilar's #DearPete Social Media Campaign

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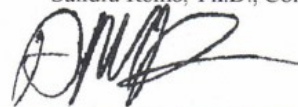
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ABSTRACT

Since the invention of social media, politicians have had more opportunities to engage with their constituents through various platforms. Over time, the sophistication of social media tools allowed politicians to increase engagement to design and share targeted messages to their audiences. Most often, this comes in the form of a digital campaign, which is most popular during campaign seasons or when an initiative is deemed critical. This research examined the social media campaign #DearPete and the consistency between U.S. Representative Pete Aguilar's stated political agenda, which appears on his official website, Peteaguilar.com, and the content posted to his various social media accounts. This study used Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw's agenda setting theory as a foundation to understand Aguilar's selection of content posted to his social media platforms, specifically Facebook and Twitter. In this study, the researcher examined Representative Aguilar's political agenda and his social media postings during the timeframe of January 2017 – October 2018 to determine whether the representative used his social media account to spread his political agenda to a larger audience.

Keywords: Agenda setting, Facebook, framing, Representative Pete Aguilar, social media, Twitter

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

As technology has advanced over the past decades, social media has quickly become a top source of communication between individuals as well as a portal of information between politicians and their publics (Murray et al., 2016). Internet activist and author, Wael Ghonim, explained that when social media is used in the political arena, it is a great source of gathering volunteers and money but serves the main purpose of affirming political beliefs and strengthening a political base (Baumgarten, 2016). In this sense, social media is a powerful tool for politicians running campaigns to engage with their audiences, to set the tone of their campaigns, and to establish a following that will hopefully translate into votes during an election.

For much of the 20th century, the sources of political information were quite limited, in comparison to today, with political parties, newspapers, and a few television and radio stations broadcasting as the primary channels through which political communications reached a public (Converse 1962; Jensen, 2016; Prior 2007). The previous channels of communication during a political campaign allowed for controlled messaging and limited the public's ability to share information in ways outside of word-of-mouth or through opinion pieces in the newspaper. However, with the invention of social media, the ability to share and receive information has grown exponentially. According to the first-quarter 2018 Nielsen total audience report, nearly half an adult's day, an adult being defined as being over the age of 18, are dedicated to consuming content (Nielsen, 2018). The report also cited that American adults spend over 11 hours per day listening to, watching, reading, or generally interacting with media. Additionally,

according to Statista, in 2018 American adults spent an average of 144 minutes or 2.4 hours a day on social networking (Broadband Search, 2019). The large amount of time spent interacting with content on the internet provides endless opportunities to engage with political information, if desired.

This study examined the effectiveness of the social media campaign of U.S. Representative (Rep.) Pete Aguilar who on April 27, 2017, launched the #DearPete social media campaign to highlight his focus on accessibility and responsiveness to constituents of California's 31st Congressional District (U.S. Representative Pete Aguilar, 2017). In California, the 31st Congressional district represents the County of San Bernardino, which is located in the state's Inland Empire and, for the purposes of this research, is defined as a metropolitan area and region in Southern California. The Inland Empire refers to the cities of western Riverside County and southwestern San Bernardino County. In particular, this study examined Rep. Pete Aguilar's political agenda by using his website (<https://aguilar.house.gov/>) and speech transcripts to determine his campaign agenda during the 2018 midterm elections. The Facebook and Twitter posts were then compared to the transcripts to find trends and themes to determine whether his Twitter and Facebook posts indeed reflected his political agenda.

Rep. Aguilar stated that once a week, he would reply to constituent's letters, calls, or social media posts by posting a handwritten letter to his social media accounts, including Facebook and Twitter (U.S. Representative Pete Aguilar, 2017). Each post by Rep. Aguilar used a unique hashtag, which Dictionary.com (n.d.-a) described as "a word or phrase preceded by a hash mark (#), used within a message to identify a keyword or

topic of interest and facilitate a search for it.” The particular hashtag for this campaign was #DearPete.

Rep. Pete Aguilar commented in the 2017 press release posted to his website (<https://aguilar.house.gov/>):

I’ve heard overwhelmingly from residents in our community, particularly since January, about a number of concerns that we’re dealing with at the federal level but that have a huge impact on Inland Empire families. Whether we’re talking about creating good-paying jobs, protecting the environment, improving our current health care system, or fighting for women’s reproductive rights, San Bernardino County residents are making their voices heard loud and clear, and I’m grateful that they’re reaching out to me to push these priorities on behalf of our community. . . . I’m inspired by their letters, calls and social media posts, and really want to show them that I’m listening and fighting for them. I hope this encourages more residents to keep standing up for their families, friends and neighbors by contacting their elected officials. (U.S. Representative Pete Aguilar, 2017, para. 2)

The #DearPete campaign, which had more than 100 posts from 2017 until February of 2019, was used as a tool to set the tone for Rep. Pete Aguilar’s 2018 campaign.

This research examined the social media campaign #DearPete and the consistency between U.S. Rep. Pete Aguilar’s stated political agenda that appears on his official website (<https://aguilar.house.gov/>) and the content posted to his various social media accounts. The researcher studied how the content posted during the social media campaign (January 2017 to October 2018) used the agenda setting theory to interact with

the target audience in an attempt to influence the audience's perception of Rep. Aguilar's campaign.

Statement of Research Problem

A media-centered democracy has kept the public more informed about politics, allowing for a consistent feed of news and opinions to be accessed by millions (Vonderschmitt, 2012). The constant stream of information only increased with the integration of social media platforms into the news cycle. Consumers of the media are now able to access information about politics, entertainment, or current events on demand through social media efforts that are targeted to their beliefs and political point of view. According to Statista, in 2018 an estimated 77% of the U.S. population had a social networking profile (Clement, 2019). This means millions of people, nationwide and specifically in the state of California for this study have access to continuous information.

On social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, users have the ability to have conversations with other users from all over the world, making social media sites an effective way for politicians to reach their constituents (Vonderschmitt, 2012). One of the first politicians to use social media on a large scale to engage with constituents was Barack Obama in the 2008 U.S. presidential election. His campaign used social media as a fundraising tool to raise millions of dollars and to engage with the public. Leading up to the 2008 presidential elections, President Obama's campaign gained 5 million supporters across 15 different social media networks including Facebook and Myspace (Aaker & Chang, 2009). His campaign created the blueprint for other politicians to use social media as a way to garner attention to their campaigns and their political agendas and to raise money without the cost and uncertainty of traditional methods of

communication. President Obama's political campaign made it essential for political candidates to have a social media component in their campaigns. This trend has also become a mainstay at the local level with county and city officials establishing social media campaigns and profiles to engage with the public.

The role of social media's influence on internet users once again gained attention during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. After President Trump became the 45th president of the United States, the public and those in government suspected that Russian political operatives were using Facebook to influence voters and ultimately sway the election in President Trump's favor. Facebook later confirmed this suspicion in 2018. The social media giant learned that the same tools, which helped politicians connect with their constituents—and different communities' debate the issues they care about—were being misused to manipulate and deceive (Chakrabarti, 2018). The deception that Facebook acknowledged is the estimated 145 million Americans that were exposed to Russian-linked pages and ads in the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election (Alvarez, 2017). It is unknown whether the exposure to what is known as a "Russian Bot" through social media platforms had an impact on the outcome of the election (Guess et al., 2018). However, the possibility of the social media posts, which often aimed to plan rallies for different opponents or to dissuade minority voters from going to voter polling centers, showed that these platforms can be a tool to spread information and potentially influence an audience.

While the most current research and identifiable issues surrounding new media have been focused at the federal level, foundational research on social media campaigns and their ability to spread agendas at the local level is still developing. There is a

growing body of literature that aims to understand the potential impacts of using social media to express political ideals and agendas through targeted messaging. Understanding how these interactions may affect the perception of a politician may help with constructing beneficial social media campaigns. This research can also shed light on how impactful the spread of information in a social media environment can be during election season.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to examine Rep. Pete Aguilar's social media campaign #DearPete and the consistency between his stated political agenda that appears on his official website (<https://aguilar.house.gov>) and the content posted to his various social media platforms. The timeframe of the research was between January 2017 and October 2018 and focused specifically on his Facebook and Twitter social media platforms. The research focused only on the social media posts and comments that used the hashtag #DearPete and that were posted from the representative's official government Facebook and Twitter accounts. Posts that were made during this timeframe but did not use the hashtag were not considered for this study.

Understanding the role that social media may play in the political arena may change the way campaigns operate, how audiences are targeted, and the way local politicians engage with their constituents. This research will benefit politicians in their search to better connect with the public, help social media platforms understand their potential influence on local elections, and help the public or social media end users understand the messaging being presented to them.

The results may also change the way local governments, politicians, and campaign managers use social media to engage with the public. This research may help campaign officials in local elections start to understand their role as the gatekeeper of the truth when they choose social media campaign methods. Their role becomes much more critical to share information that is truthful and will not undermine the credibility of the election process, the trust of the people, or the institution of democracy.

Research Question

1. How did Rep. Pete Aguilar's social media campaign #DearPete reflect his political agenda during the 2018 midterm elections?

Significance of the Problem

Recent shifts in the media landscape have changed how the press interacts with candidates, campaigns, and the voting public (Brichacek, 2019). The rise of social media has expanded the space for democratic participation; it can also be used to manipulate and undermine it (Meyer-Resende, 2018). Although it has become an important tool for news sharing, networking, and campaigning, the impact of using the platforms is largely unknown. There is also very little research on how consistent politicians are with sharing their agendas across multiple platforms.

Currently, there are over 100 social media platforms in the United States alone. The average person has eight different social media accounts (Dean, 2020) and tends not to follow the same profiles across all platforms. It is important to know whether political candidates are consistent with their messaging across all platforms to ensure the public is receiving valid information about their stance. A Pew Research study found that 45% of Americans believe that social media will help people learn what political candidates are

really like (Duggan & Smith, 2016). In this respect, it is important to understand the tactics political candidates use for their social media campaigns to grasp an idea of how they use the tools to portray themselves.

Definitions

Agenda setting. A theoretical model in which mainstream media influences the public agenda by leading audience attention, and perceived importance, to certain issues (Feezell, 2017).

Attention frame. The rate at which comparable content is brought to the notice of individuals and groups (Lasswell, 1948) or periods of time during which public groups and policymakers pay attention to certain issues (Rogers & Dearing, 1988).

Democratic backsliding. State-led debilitation or elimination of the political institutions sustaining an existing democracy (Bermeo, 2016). This also includes the corrosion and nuanced weakening of the various “building blocks” of democracy, as opposed to a complete and unambiguous regime regression from democracy to authoritarianism (T. Y. Thompson, 2018).

Democracy. Democracy is a system of government made of four key elements: (a) a political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections; (b) the active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life; (c) protection of the human rights of all citizens; (d) a rule of law, in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens (Diamond, 2004).

Digital native. An individual who was born after the widespread adoption of digital technology (Techopedia, 2018).

Direct democracy. Direct democracy is the immediate and emphatic response of government to the public's will or at least to the public's willfulness (Will, 1992).

Facebook. Facebook is a popular free social networking site (SNS) that allows registered users to create profile pages about themselves, upload photos and videos, send messages, make new friends, and share information with friends, family, and colleagues (Brown-Peterson, 2017). According to the Facebook website, the company's mission is to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together (<https://www.facebook.com/>).

Facebook network. A Facebook network is a web of people who are "friends" on Facebook. The term expresses the inherent sense of connectivity users experience on the Facebook platform where a web of updates and information is delivered to users from all the people they are connected to (Cooper, 2018).

Hashtag. "A word or phrase preceded by a hash mark (#), used within a message to identify a keyword or topic of interest and facilitate a search for it" (Dictionary.com, n.d.-a).

Infowars. A website that seeks the truth and exposes the scientifically engineered lies of the globalists and their ultimate goal of enslaving humanity (Hanna, 2017).

Inland Empire. The Inland Empire is a metropolitan area and region in Southern California. The Inland Empire refers to the cities of western Riverside County and southwestern San Bernardino County.

Pizzagate. Pizzagate is the conspiracy theory that prominent members of the Democratic Party were involved in a global child-trafficking ring located in the pizza restaurant, Comet Ping Pong (Sebastian, 2016).

Public sphere. For the purposes of this research, the definition used was provided by Jurgen Habermas who defined it as a novel form of social interaction facilitated by a network of institutions comprised by physical locations and mediated discourses. These spaces are discursive spaces rooted in place-based communication as well as mediated exchanges (Chandler, 2017).

Social media. For the purposes of this study, social media is defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan, p. 197). These websites and applications are dedicated to forums, microblogging, social networking, social media bookmarking, social curating and wikis. Examples of social media include Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

Tweet. A tweet is a message sent on Twitter. Tweets can contain up to 140 characters of text as well as photos, videos, and other forms of media. They are public by default and will show up in Twitter timelines and search unless they are sent from protected accounts or as direct messages. Tweets can also be embedded in webpages (Cooper, 2018).

Twitter. A social network and media platform that enables users to post public 140-character messages along with photos, videos and other content. Twitter is famous for its real-time and emergent discussion on breaking news stories and trends (Cooper, 2018).

User-generated content (UGC). User-generated content is also be referred to as “UGC” and is defined as amateur or professional content published on an online platform by users (Van Dijck, 2013; Wyrwoll, 2014).

Weblog. Weblogs or blogs are frequently updated websites where content (text, pictures, sound files, etc.) is posted on a regular basis and displayed in reverse chronological order (Schmidt, 2007).

Wikileaks. Wikileaks is an information-sharing website established in 2006 by Julian Assange, created to obtain and disseminate classified documents and data sets from anonymous sources and leakers (Whittaker, 2018).

Organization of the Study

This dissertation consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 of the study introduced the topic of social media and its growing influence on political campaigns and engagement with the public. Chapter 1 also discussed the background of the problem, which is the lack of research being performed on the consistency between a politician's political agenda and the content of their social media accounts. Then, the chapter introduced the purpose of the study, which examines Rep. Pete Aguilar's social media campaign #DearPete and the consistency between his stated political agenda which appears on his official website (<https://aguilar.house.gov>) and the content posted to his various social media platforms. This information was explored through the research question, "How did Rep. Pete Aguilar's social media campaign #DearPete reflect his political agenda during the 2018 midterm elections?" Next, the significance of the study was discussed, followed by the definitions of terms used throughout the study.

The second chapter reviews the literature that explores significant scholarly work in the areas of agenda setting, the influence of the media on elections, and the influence of social media on elections.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology used in the study including the content analysis research design, the sampling procedure, and the instruments and their selection or development. The chapter also describes the procedures for data collection and a plan to analyze data.

Chapter 4 presents the results of the content analysis for Rep. Pete Aguilar's social media campaign #DearPete. This chapter revisits the critical areas of the research including the purpose statement and research questions. The researcher also provides additional details regarding data collection. Next, the data collected are presented with a table presentation and are analyzed.

Finally, Chapter 5 offers the researcher's major and unexpected findings, which were discovered throughout the course of the research. Chapter 5 also includes the researcher's conclusions, implication for actions, and further research. This chapter concludes with final remarks and a final overview of the completed study.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Over the past 20 years, scholars have taken an interest in understanding the purpose, function, and impact of the use of new media within the political sphere. The foundational aspects of new media research begin in the 1980s, with the invention of the internet and have expanded to the field of social media. As social media grows in its capabilities, politicians have learned to use the platforms as tools to engage with the public and target messages to specific audience.

This literature review focuses on the history of new media research, specifically on social media and its use in political campaigns. Additionally, the review includes a history of the theoretical framework, the agenda-setting theory, and examples of how the agenda setting theory has framed the way the public receives information through the traditional media and new media platforms. The information in this section also details how the agenda-setting theory and the advancement of mass media allows politicians to use social media channels to share their messages directly with the public.

The databases and indexes used in this search include databases provided by the Annie Gabriel Library at California Baptist University. Those databases are Communication and Mass Media Complete, Dissertations and Theses, JSTOR, One Search, and World Politics Review. This research also includes information from articles, newspapers, and scholarly journals found through Google Scholar.

The key search terms used for this research include agenda-setting theory, Facebook, influence of social media on local elections, local elections, media, social media, social media and politics, and Twitter.

History of Agenda Setting and Social Media

Agenda Setting Theory

The agenda-setting theory is a mass communication theory first developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw. The theory is explained as the “the phenomenon of the mass media selecting certain issues and portraying them frequently and prominently, which leads people to perceive those issues as more important than others” (D. H. Wu & Coleman, 2009, p. 776). The publication of the agenda-setting theory in a 1972 paper was called “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media” (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). McCombs (2008) developed a reputation for being one of the forefathers of agenda setting and has continued to expand on the agenda-setting theory by writing the book, *Setting the Agenda*. This book was first published in 2004 and continues to explore the agenda-setting theory and the media’s influence on determining which topics or issues are the centers of public conversation.

Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw’s Agenda Setting Theory

In 1972, McCombs and Shaw published their seminal article examining agenda setting, which they defined as the ability of the media to generate specific opinions (Graber, 2011). McCombs and Shaw (1972) hypothesized the media plays an important part in shaping the political reality by choosing and displaying which news receives coverage. To test their hypothesis, McCombs and Shaw conducted their Chapel Hill study, which surveyed North Carolina voters in the 1968 U.S. presidential election to find out which ideas people thought were the most important (Alvernia University, 2018). The researchers discovered a positive correlation between what people deemed to be important and what the mass media reported to be important.

1968 Chapel Hill Study

During the 1968 presidential election between Hubert Humphrey and Richard Nixon, McCombs and Shaw attempted to prove the “agenda issues found in the news media and among general public is what sets the media agenda” (Sanchez, 2002, para 7). In other words, they wanted to prove the agenda-setting theory by trying to correlate the issues the public said were key issues of the presidential campaign with actual content of the news media. McCombs and Shaw argued that before the mass media, politicians had to interact with the public face-to-face in the form of rallies or speeches (Sanchez, 2002). This only gave a small portion of the public access to hear the opinions and agendas of those vying to represent on their behalf. This made for a public who was not largely informed on the issues and relied on second or third-hand information to make their decisions.

As the mass media became a large influence in the political world, the usefulness of the various media channels including the newspaper, radio, and television provided a larger group of people with more information. The research states that it is not conclusive that the mass media changes the attitudes of the public toward a campaign, but it does provide information to the public to help them decide their stance on issues and candidates (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This idea led McCombs and Shaw to investigate the influence of the agenda-setting theory during the 1968 presidential campaign.

For the study, McCombs and Shaw (1972) randomly selected registered voters from five Chapel Hill precincts who represented the community economically, socially, and racially. Out of the population, those who were already committed to a political candidate were not considered for the study because the goal was to find individuals who

were open to learning new information throughout the study. The researchers then asked “each respondent to outline the key issues as he saw them, regardless of what the candidates might be saying at the moment. Interviewers recorded the answers as exactly as possible” (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 178).

McCombs and Shaw (1972) analyzed and compared to 15 key categories from a selection of major media channels including *Raleigh News and Observer*, *Time*, and *Durham Morning Herald*. The research found that the media does have an impact on voters’ judgments of what they consider to be major issues but not on what the voters think about those issues. The research found a strong correlation between the media coverage or emphasis on campus issues and the judgments of voters as to the importance of campaign topics.

The Chapel Hill study created a strong foundation for the relationship between the media’s messaging and the opinions of its audiences during a campaign. Those who interact with the media and are exposed to key stories tend to believe those are the key issues, and this trend has continued with the invention of social media and the recent adoption of it being a new media channel. This research used the Chapel Hill study and the agenda-setting theory to create a content analysis, which examines Congressman Pete Aguilar’s #DearPete social media. This research used the agenda-setting theory as a theoretical foundation to understand whether the key issues that Rep. Aguilar promotes on his website were communicated through his social media messaging. The main components of the agenda-setting theory rest on two assumptions, the first being the media filters that shape what we see rather than just reflecting stories to the audience (Alvernia University, 2018). Lang and Lang observed the following:

The mass media force attention to certain issues. They build up public images of political figures. They are constantly presenting objects suggesting what individuals in the mass should think about, know about, have feelings about.

(p. 177)

In this sense, Lang and Lang described the process of surveilling the environment, filtering stories, and determining which stories should be covered. Lasswell (1948) argued the media was responsible for surveilling the environment and setting the agenda by reporting important issues back to the public. The mass media's survey of the public environment may be politically significant because they affect who and what will become the focus for political discussion and action (Graber & Dunaway, 2015). By placing attention on a certain politician, the media may force a politician to share his or her views or respond to a situation that would have otherwise flown under the radar. As the gatekeepers of information to the public, the media does not simply report every story that is happening; the media filters through the stories and covers which ones they deem the most important. In turn, the public ingests the stories and assumes they are important because the story is receiving coverage.

This translates into the political field because the media tends to cover certain politicians or issues during an election and can nudge the public to believe one candidate is superior to the other. For example, in 2018, Democratic Councilwoman Sunny Youngsun Park was arrested on reports that she removed campaign signs from neighborhood lawns (San Román, 2018). The arrest came after Park was filmed by incumbent Mayor Virginia Vaughn's husband with the allegedly stolen signs, which read, "No Sunny Park. Carpetbagger" in the backseat of her car. The local media covered the

video of Park's arrest and the footage captured by Vaughn's husband. The Buena Park Police Department also posted the video on their Facebook page and received tens of thousands of views, but the department later deleted the post after Park's attorney accused it of being an improper and illegal expenditure after discovering the police department donated to Vaughn's campaign (San Román, 2018).

In this case, the media found it necessary to share the information of Park being arrested for stealing campaign signs with the public because she is a public figure and was running for office. The coverage of this incident also forced Park to acknowledge the incident by releasing a statement on her Facebook account denouncing the idea any crime took place:

Since day one our campaign signs have gone missing or stolen. Virginia Vaughn mass produced and placed negative signs with lies about me, and furthermore, these signs DID NOT disclose who paid for them. Shown here is Kenny Vaughn, Virginia's husband, who followed me in his car, swore at me and harassed me this morning as I collected a few of these signs as evidence of their dirty tricks. He admits on video that they paid for these negative signs.

The actions of Virginia, and the actions of those close to her, show you exactly what type of campaign they're running. This type of dirty politics has no place in our city and Mayor Vaughn should be ashamed of herself and the type of ugly campaign that she's running. (Park, 2018, p. 1)

Park was charged with petty theft for the removal of campaign signs, and she won the 2018 midterm election by a total of 16 votes against incumbent Virginia Vaughn (Graber & Dunaway, 2015). In this case, the media called attention to this matter

because it was an issue of public concern. According to Lasswell (1948), surveillance by the media may also include cues to the public about the importance of the issue. The Buena Park police department's posting of the footage to their Facebook page had the potential to send a cue to the public that this was a serious crime because it is abnormal for this police department to post civilian footage to their social media accounts. Although the outcome of the social media post and the media coverage did not prevent Park from winning the election, it did tarnish her reputation. The majority of the headlines in the media and on social media now reference her arrest or her pending legal issues rather than her historic win in Buena Park.

The second assumption is that the more attention the media gives to an issue, the more likely the public will consider that issue to be important (Alvernia University, 2018; Rogers & Dearing, 1988). Sanchez (2002) quoted McCombs and Shaw's theory:

This impact of the mass media—the ability to effect cognitive change among individuals, to structure their thinking—has been labeled the agenda-setting function of mass communication. Here may lie the most important effect of mass communication, its ability to mentally order and organize our world for us. In short, the mass media may not be successful in telling us what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about. (para. 4)

Based on this second assumption, people tend to place important on an idea based on the amount of information that is provided by the media and its position in the broadcast. For instance, the traditional television news broadcast does not report the news in chronological order; the stories that are deemed the most important are always placed at

the top of the broadcast. Likewise, in the newspaper, the front-page stories are deemed the most important.

Although not a scandal, responding to a comment or a post on social media is a source of Rep. Aguilar creating his own story and being responsible to answer for it. If he responded to enough letters about climate change or immigration reform, he would set the tone for what his constituents think about when they think about him. Although he is not in the mainstream media daily, those who follow him closely enough to follow him on social media would see the stories and agendas he set for his campaign. In a 2017 Reuters survey, people stated the two most common reasons for following a politician on social media were “I prefer to hear directly of a politician/political party than have their views filtered by others” (48%) and “I like a particular politician/political party” (46%; Kalogeropoulous, 2017). Additionally, 68% of the public chooses to follow politicians on social media because they have an overall distrust of the media to honestly inform them about politicians.

Components of Agenda Setting

Dearing and Rogers explained the main components of agenda setting in their 1996 book, *Agenda-Setting*. The first component of the agenda-setting process is the influence and gatekeeping of the media; this is the part of the process when the issues that will be discussed and the importance of those issues are decided. Those stories are then filtered through the media to support the media’s agenda. Next, the stories that fit the media’s agenda are sent to the public to help them decide on what to think about. For example, during an election, issues such as tax reform, immigration, or school funding

may receive the most coverage, leading the public to consider these issues as important. Based on the information the public deems important, the policy agenda is set.

Additionally, each agenda involves different dependent variables, which are

1. The public agenda, where the public's agenda is the dependent variable
2. Media's agenda, where the media's agenda is the dependent variable
3. Policy agenda, where the policy makers' agenda is the dependent variable

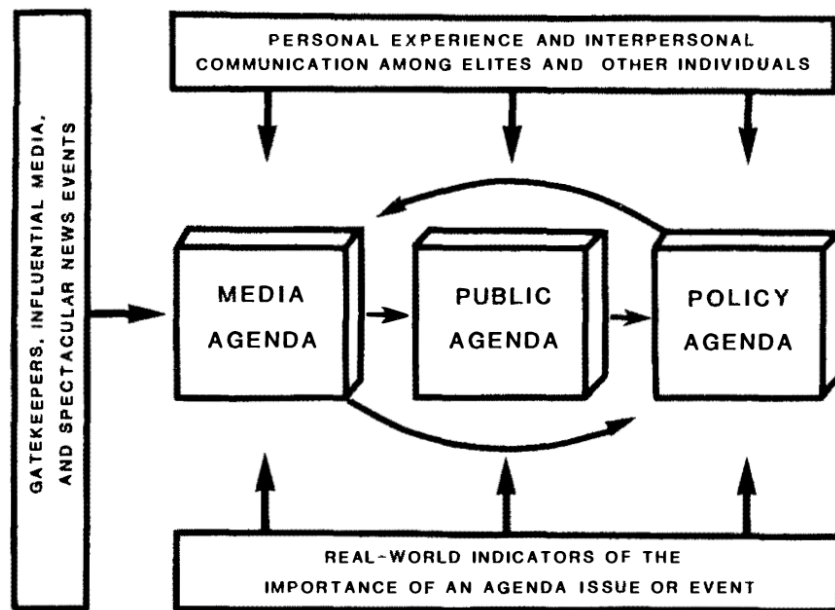
The start of the agenda-setting process takes place when an event happens and captures the attention of the media. The coverage of the event by the media is also known as the media's agenda. The public is then exposed to the story through one or many media channels, which signals the level of importance of the issue. This is the component of the media telling the public what to think but the external factors such as real-world indicators, and individual experiences are often the bigger influence on what the public thinks about the issues presented to them. After this processing takes places, people develop a "frame" on the issue they view in the media. According to Griffin (2012, as cited in Adams et al., 2014), framing is known as "the selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion on the media agenda when a particular object or issue is discussed" (Adams et al., 2014, p. 4). Next, the public determines through voting and voicing opinions to their representatives what the policy agenda will be.

Figure 1, the agenda-setting model by Dearing and Rogers (1996), shows the process is also affected by external factors such as personal experience, interpersonal communication, and real-world indicators of the importance of an agenda issue or event. Personal experience and interpersonal communication have an impact on the process because each individual views information through the scope of his or her own

experience, and that may shape or influence which ideas he or she believes are important. For example, an individual with school-aged children may find a story about a change in school curriculum more important than tax reform. Just as a local business owner may find issues about tax reform more critical than headline stories about a change in school curriculum.

Figure 1

The Three Main Components of Agenda Setting Process: The Media Agenda, Public Agenda, and Policy Agenda



Note. From *Agenda-Setting*, by James W. Dearing and Everett M. Rogers, p. 5, 1996, Sage Publications. Copyright 1996 by Sage Publications.

Real-world indicators of the importance of an agenda issue or event also have an influence on the process because real-world indicators can signal importance over the stories that are pushed by the media. These indicators are issues happening around

individuals that may prove to be important to the public. In the Inland Empire, a real-world indicator may be the issue of rent control or the affordability of homes in the area. The media may continue to push stories about immigration or voter fraud, but real-world indicators may be the influx of luxury apartments in a neighborhood that lead the public to make rent control an important issue.

Criticism of Agenda-Setting Theory

Personal experience and interpersonal communication along with real-world indicators are also the biggest criticism of the agenda-setting theory. Communication theorists often cite the number of external variables that are unable to be measured as the main issue with the theory because it is difficult to determine how much influence these variables have on the outcome of the theory. For this reason, the public will not necessarily deem salient any issue considered salient by the mass media and put in the public domain. The audience is ultimately in control over which ideas they find the most important, and that often stems from which issues or stories address their needs (Aboagye, 2010). Although the theory does account for external factors, how much they influence an individual's interest in a topic is difficult to account for in a study.

The researcher used the agenda-setting theory as a backdrop to examine Congressman Pete Aguilar's #DearPete campaign to determine whether his main campaign issues or political agenda such as job creation, supporting students, immigration system reform, and the protection of vital programs for seniors and veterans were reflected in his social media campaign. The agenda-setting theory and the various examples used will help to determine whether the use of social media and setting frameworks can help influence what the audience believes are key issues.

The Structure and Function of Communication in Society

In the 1940s and 1950s, the topic of the functions of the mass media became a popular research topic with political scientist and media studies scholar, Lasswell (1948).

He argued that there are three categories of communication specialists:

1. The group who surveys the political environment of the state as a whole and are often comprised of diplomats and foreign respondents.
2. Editors, journalists, and speakers who correlate the response of the whole state to the environment or coordinate the internal response.
3. Educators in families and schools who relay or transmit the social inheritance to the public.

Lasswell (1948) described each level as an attention frame, which for this research is described as the rate at which comparable content is brought to the notice of individuals and groups or periods during which public groups and policymakers pay attention to certain issues (Rogers & Dearing, 1988).

Lasswell (1948) also argued the mass media performs three major societal functions:

- Surveillance of the environment: For the purposes of this research, surveillance of the environment means using communication to disclose threats and opportunities affecting the value position of the community and of the component parts within it. This idea correlates to the idea of the mass media being the watchdogs of society because an important function of the media is to keep up a surveillance of all the happenings in the world and provide information to the society (Communication Theory, 2016). The mass media is responsible for being a

service to society by providing unbiased news coverage on a variety of issues to ensure the public is informed.

- Correlation of societal elements: Interpretation refers to how the media presents information and how the public receives that information. This step may be the most important in the communication cycle because, as prior research has shown, the media in all platforms tend to be biased. This can have a major impact in how news or stories are shared and how the public reacts and shares the news to others. In the example of Sunny Youngsun Park, stories that paint her as a politician who steals signs are often interpreted by viewer as a politician who cannot be trusted or who may be a criminal.
- Transmission of social heritage: The media in all forms is responsible for influencing societal norms. In the past, the newspaper and television were able to relay the societal expectations through stories. However, with social media, the transmission of norms is faster than ever in history. Social media users are now constantly being exposed to ever-changing ideas on what is happening around them.

Social media has now stepped into the communication sphere and offers people views and information to which they would not normally have access. For this reason, it is important for those sharing information to be diligent with the truth because information is often interpreted through the lens of the individual and his or her culture, which could have negative repercussions.

Followers of the Agenda Setting Theory

Walter Lippmann was an early adopter of the agenda-setting theory when he first theorized that the media influences how people see the world (Nieman Foundation, 2019). In his 1922 book, *Public Opinion*, Lippmann stated the mass media is the principal connection between events in the world and the images in the minds of the public. Lippmann (1922) posited that the political world is often out of limits for the average person or “out of reach, out of sight, out of mind” (p. 29). This unnamed idea was the precursor to the agenda-setting theory as it explains individuals’ ability to create an image or ideal in their minds based on the opinions of others around them. In this research, the author showed how the ability to present news through another form of mass media, specifically social media sites including Facebook and Twitter, can construct an image or ideal in the minds of the public.

The base of agenda setting is to use the media, which now includes social media, as a tool to filter and shape what the public sees rather than just sharing information with an audience (Alvernia University, 2018). As Lippmann (1922) stated, at one point the political world and important information to help the public decide on candidates was only available to those with access to attend in-person rallies or those in the inner circles with politicians. However, with social media, anyone in the world with access to the internet and a computer, cell phone, or mobile device has the ability to learn about what is happening in the world. Because of the large amount of information that is now available, another struggle is to remain relevant and present information that aligns with the goals of the politician or campaign. Rep. Pete Aguilar used the social media campaign #DearPete to become and remain an important political figure during a very

crowded election time by creating channels to link the major issues at the time, such as immigration reform and education, to his political agenda. The politician used each letter sent to him to share his personal opinions or policy agenda to match the public's agenda.

Although Lippmann (1922) did not formally call his idea agenda setting, his idea and the actions of Aguilar paint the picture of what it looks like when the media is used as a tool for constructing a specific viewpoint with the public. Bernard Cohen (1963) backed up this theory when he also observed that “the world will look different to different people depending on the map that is drawn for them by writers, editors and publishers of the paper they read” (p. 13). He believed journalists, editors, and publishers were often successful in telling the public what they should think about by determining which stories received coverage. They maintain control over what the public is exposed to therefore deciding what they think about most often. However, Cohen did not believe the media had control over telling the public what to believe about the stories they were exposed to. He stated, “The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (B. Cohen, 1963). The importance of the issue is often directed by the media and its coverage of an issue whether the issue is at the national level or at the local level.

In many instances, the public only knows the narrative that is painted by the media. Those stories that receive the most amount of time in the media are naturally considered the most important to those interacting with the news. This theory is why during the political season, politicians at the federal and local level try their hardest to create positive stories about themselves and their campaigns. These stories become the narrative the public has to base their ideas on. For example, Rep. Pete Aguilar's

campaign is fairly unique because there are not many political candidates who devote their time to responding directly to constituents with questions. Most importantly, many candidates do not have the time to handwrite direct letters to the public to address their concerns. The personal aspect of a handwritten letter personalized to the person with the question ultimately places Aguilar in a league of his own with his public because they feel as though he is building a personal connection with them while sharing his specific political agenda with individuals and the public through social media. This tactic does not tell the public what they should think about a specific issue, but it opens a door to the way the representative thinks about an issue and will pursue those concerns once the politician is in office. This also prompts his social media followers to consider where they stand on the issues presented by Aguilar's handwritten letters. Although his policy agenda may align with some, those who do not agree will also be informed and may move on to find a candidate who is more aligned with their thoughts.

Additionally, Rep. Aguilar has a history of responding to those inquiries that are in line with his policy agenda. This creates a platform for him to share his thoughts and bring attention to the ideas he finds important and wants the public to find important as well. For example, his website stated one of the issues he is fighting for is protecting the environment. On September 26, 2019, the Congressman, who did not post the original question from the public, posted a handwritten letter that read,

Maureen,

The president's politically motivated decision to weaken California's emission standards is an attack on the heart of families in our region. Growing up in the Inland Empire, I remember not being able to play outside because of smog alerts.

We can go back. I will continue to stand against this dangerous policy and will urge automakers to continue meeting these standards to fight climate change and protect California's air.

Thank you,

Pete. (Rep. Pete Aguilar, 2019)

This letter is an example of public agenda setting in which Aguilar's audience is the dictator of important ideas and issues. In a democracy, it is the role of politicians to listen to their constituents and act on their behalf and to be concerned about the issues that impact them. In this case, the issue of climate change, which heavily impacts California, specifically Southern California is the issue the public would like to be addressed. Examples such as these letters demonstrate how Congressman Aguilar used social media to reflect his political agenda during the elections while using social media as a two-way communication tool.

History of Media Influence

Since the 17th century, the media has seen rapid changes because of the advancements in technology. From the invention of the telegraph to cell phones and iPads, the media has always had to evolve to remain engaged with the public. It is through the reach of these inventions that the media is able to gain and maintain the ability to influence its audience. The mass media is a significant influence in modern culture and creates what theorists call a mediated culture in which the media reflects and creates the culture, usually through agenda setting ("The Role and Influence of Mass Media," 2019). Michael Real explained mass media's influence on culture or a mass-mediated culture as "the expressions of culture as they are received from contemporary

media, whether they arise from elite, folk, popular or mass origins” (Traber, 2017, p. 159).

Within a democracy, the media is responsible for

- informing and educating the public with complete information and
- to investigate claims made by the government (Kenterelidou, 2005).

A popular opinion among politicians and scholars is that to have a free and fair democracy, the press must focus on its role as a watchdog (ACE Project, n.d.). Carlyle, (1841, as cited in Gentzkow et al., 2006, p. 187) in his book *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History* referred to the press as the Fourth Estate by explaining,

Whoever can speak, speaking now to the whole nation, becomes a power, a branch of government, with inalienable weight in law-making, in all acts of authority. It matters not what rank he has, what revenues or garnitures: the requisite thing is that he have a tongue which others will listen to; this and nothing more is requisite. (p. 187).

Much like the U.S. government, the press serves the public and has a great amount of power because of their ability to shape the government and politics by influencing the political opinions of voters and by determining the behavior of candidates and officials. By this account, the media serves as the eyes and ears for the public (Tran, 2020).

For example, the press has been responsible for investigating the Watergate break-in and exposing the Richard Nixon scandal, which led to indictments of forty administration officials and the resignation of President Nixon (Tran, 2020). The media’s role is to observe the democratic process and distinguish the difference between fact and

fiction, only reporting unbiased facts to the public with the intent to keep the public informed.

Print Media

The purpose of the print media is to share information as a written interface to a strictly targeted audience for whom the particular set of information or data has been meant for genuinely (Gautam, 2014). The printing press is one of the earliest examples of how news was distributed to local populations. In the 1700s, several colonies had developed local newspapers, but Boston is credited for having the first continuous newspaper, which was established in 1704. These newspapers mostly shared information from Britain and carried information about local events and activities (Lumen, 2018).

The beginning of the traditional media has been one of the most influential aspects of shaping the American government. Often referred to as the Fourth Estate, the media is used as a platform to disseminate unbiased and fact-based information to the masses. It is the role of the free press to observe the political landscape and report back to the public to allow them to make their own informed decisions. Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black stated, “The government’s power to censor the press was abolished so that the press would remain forever free to censure the Government” (Oswald, 2009, p. 389). In 1804, American President Thomas Jefferson wrote a letter to Judge John Tyler expressing the role that the press plays in sharing information with the public. The letter stated,

The firmness with which the people have withstood the late abuses of the press, the discernment they have manifested between truth and falsehood show that the

public may safely be trusted to hear everything true and false, and to form a correct judgment between them. (Li, 2013, p. 12)

***The New York Sun* and the Great Moon Hoax**

Since as early as 1835, it has been seen in the media that entertainment or sensationalism is prioritized over reporting the facts. In 1833, a former printer's assistant named Benjamin Day started his own printing business named *The New York Sun*. Day's motivation to start the newspaper was to push his own printing business, but his endeavor ultimately changed the landscape for newspapers and advertising (T. Wu, 2017). The paper was revolutionary because, unlike the other newspapers available at the time, *The Sun* was sold for a penny and focused on reselling the attention of his audience (T. Wu, 2017). Day's paper focused on selling salacious stories about suicide, the slave trade, and lover's quarrels, which made *The Sun* the leading newspaper at the time. Despite being a "penny press," other newspapers sold more copies than *The Sun* with a daily circulation of 8,000 and without the financial support of advertising like competitor papers (Vida, 2012).

In 1835, Day and his employee, Richard Adams Locke, decided they needed a story to peak readers' curiosity (Vida, 2012). Locke proposed that *The Sun* publish a six-installment, 17,000-word narrative of the observations and claims of life on the moon of by the astronomer Sir John Herschel (Vida, 2012). The story was printed over 6 days and became known as "The Great Moon Hoax." To make the articles appear more credible, the articles detailed the moon's geography and animals that inhabited the moon. To make the stories more credible, they were also alleged to be reprinted from the *Edinburgh Journal of Science* and contained a byline from Dr. Andrew Grant, the colleague of a

famous astronomer (History.com Editors, 2020b). The wild tales that were included in the *New York Sun* captured readers' attention, and sales for the newspaper skyrocketed.

Although the intent of The Great Moon Hoax was to entertain readers and increase readership, this is also an early example of agenda setting and the influence of the newspapers on the public. At the time, the subject of science was a main topic in the media, and information about new discoveries were easily accessible, which made Day and Locke's story about findings on the moon easy to believe.

Radio

In the present day, the radio is one of the most commonly used sources of technology. Invented in the late 1800s, the rightful inventor is up for debate. In 1892, William Crookes explained the potential influence of radio technology: "Here is unfolded to us a new and astonishing world, one which is hard to conceive should contain no possibilities of transmitting and receiving intelligence" (McQuown, 2004, para. 1). In 1893, inventor Nikolai Tesla demonstrated a wireless radio in St. Louis, Missouri (Wood, 2014). However, in 1896, Guglielmo Marconi was given the first wireless telegraphy patent in England, leading to him being credited as the inventor of the radio.

During the early years of radio communication, the devices were primarily used to contact ships that were out at sea (Wood, 2014). However, a major influence in the radio becoming a main media tool was the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932. Both he and the former first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, used the radio to speak to Americans about issues such as the Great Depression and fighting fascism (Heyne, 2014; Smith, 2014). Joseph Goebbels described radio as "the most influential and important

intermediary between a spiritual movement and the nation. Above all, it is necessary to clearly centralize all radio activities” (T. Wu, 2010, para. 10).

Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Radio

During Roosevelt’s presidency, the country experienced the Great Depression, which was the worst economic downturn in the history of the industrialized world, lasting from 1929 to 1939 (History.com Editors, 2020a). Roosevelt used the radio to connect with Americans in a way that made them feel as though they knew him personally. At the time of his election, 41% of U.S. cities had their own radio station, and 5 years into his presidency, nearly 90% of the U.S. population had access to the radio (Biser, 2016). For this reason, the president began to host Fireside Chats to communicate with the country on issues concerning the Great Depression and the Second World War.

During Roosevelt’s terms, he used the radio as direct communication because at times he was unhappy with the quality of information provided by the press. Roosevelt explained to the press, “It’s up to you fellows. If you fellows give the country an exceedingly correct picture, I won’t go on the radio” (Biser, 2016, para. 5).

The public began to perceive the fireside chats as the president’s personal conversations with them. After many of the chats when Roosevelt delivered calm yet calculated updates on the nation’s crises, the public would write letters to thank the president for his dedication for speaking to them. Roosevelt’s efforts helped to propel the radio into a mass media tool and a direct link to the voting public and the next generation of voters (Yu, 2005).

Franklin Roosevelt’s approach to sharing his point-of-view on relevant issues with the public allowed the president to set the agenda for the public on what issues

should be considered the most important. Roosevelt took the real-world indicators affecting the public and used his radio programming to educate the public and set the agenda for what should be deemed the most important.

The War of the Worlds and the Power of the Radio

A few years into Roosevelt's presidential term, the radio would be used once again to influence the nation. On October 30, 1938, actor and filmmaker, Orson Welles, narrated the prologue for the Halloween episode of his weekly hour-long radio drama series "The Mercury Theatre on the Air" (Jacobo, 2018). Welles and The Mercury Theatre performed a radio adaptation of H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* by converting the 40-year-old novel into fake news bulletins describing a Martian invasion of New Jersey (Schwartz, 2015). Indiana University Bloomington (2017) described the radio show as a 1-hour adaptation of literary works, which included readings of William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and an adaptation of *Around the World in Eighty Days* by Jules Verne.

At the start of the show, Welles began the prologue by announcing Martians had landed in New Jersey. Welles continued with the reading: "At 8:50 p.m., a huge flaming object, believed to be a meteorite, fell on a farm in the neighborhood of Grovers Mill, New Jersey" (Jacobo, 2018, para. 5). Throughout the broadcast, Welles continued to interrupt the show with updates on the fake attack to resemble a real radio news broadcast. Jacobo (2018) explained that during the story, the broadcast interruption reported aliens emerged from a cylinder and began to attack people with a heat ray. To back up the claims of the attacks, the program included the report of a panicked reporter on the scene being cut off in the middle of the broadcast. The program eventually ended

with the reporter confirming the end of the attack with the Martians being defeated by microbes (Schwartz, 2015).

The broadcast caused widespread panic throughout the eastern seaboard with some listeners mistaking the radio show for a real emergency. Some listeners contacted the police to notify them of the attack and others reportedly fled the location for fear they would be harmed. The media reported the switchboard at *The News* received 1,100 calls and churches reported large numbers of guests seeking protection (Dixon, 1938/2015). Those who did not believe the attack was an actual Martian attack thought it could be possible they were under attack by Russians dressed as Martians, which added another layer of chaos to the story. At the time, the radio and newspapers were the main sources of news information, which likely enhanced the response to the radio broadcast (Hayes et al., 2013).

After the broadcast, Welles learned of the impact his stunt had on the public, which was fear and panic. He later conceded and confirmed via radio that the story was fiction and there was never a Martian attack. The Federal Communications Commission investigated the program but found no laws were broken. However, the radio program proved to be a prime example used by media critics, journalists, and professors to prove the power of the media (Hayes et al., 2013; Socolow, 2008).

The fictional radio program is also an early example of the fact that media, in this case the radio, is a powerful tool to influence the public. Although a Martian attack in New Jersey may seem farfetched, if the only news source reports a major attack, listeners have no other way of confirming the validity of the report. Welles's program also shows the ability of the media to set an agenda for the public in what issues they think should be

important. For those listening to the radio broadcast, the media and their main source of news set the frame that they should be concerned about a Martian attack in their area.

Understanding the radio has many functions; Welles's took advantage of the radio's job to inform the public and caused widespread fear for the sake of entertainment.

Radio's Impact on Politics

Hollander (1995) noted that the radio, specifically talk radio, emerged as a major political force but there is little systematic evidence on how the radio affects its listeners.

Radio quickly became an instrument of social cohesion as it brought together members of different classes and backgrounds to experience the world as a nation (Lule, 2018).

Davis and Owen wrote in their book, *New Media and American Politics*, when it comes to the political arena, radio is seen as “the ultimate arena for free speech” (Lule, 2018, p. 8).

For years, politicians have used the radio during campaigns to reach large audiences in an attempt to gain votes during elections. Politicians often use these platforms to appear more personable, share their ideals, and set their policy agendas with the public. Anya Grundmann, National Public Radio's vice president for programming and audience development stated politicians visit broadcast radio to discuss “the issues, the facts, the ideas, the discussions with voters—all talked through with friends” (Fishel, 2019, para. 5). Much like the Fireside Chats hosted by Franklin D. Roosevelt, politicians still visit relevant radio stations to communicate with targeted audiences.

Television

American radio scholar, Michael C. Keith, stated the 1950s began with the “fear that radio was finished as a consequence of television” (Ruben, 2010, para. 12). Very

few inventions have had as big an influence on society as the invention of the television. The original electronic television was designed by Philo Taylor Farnsworth, a 21-year-old inventor who conceived the system, which captured moving images in a form that could be coded onto radio waves and then transformed back into a picture on a screen (Stephens, 2019).

Over time, television has become the most powerful channel of mass media because of its ability to disseminate information with both audio and visual (Nwagboso & Aririguzoh, 2018). Television serves the public in a similar way to radio, providing entertainment, news, sports, and opinions with audiences. This channel is also a platform for politicians to share their agendas with potential voters. Much like its predecessor, politicians who run for office use televisions as a tool to access target audiences with the goal of motivating individuals to vote for them.

Introduction of Cable News and Political Communications

Television's greatest political impact, compared with nonvisual media such as radio, springs from its ability to reach millions of people with the same changes (Graber & Dunaway, 2015). Bill Moyers and Bernard Weisberger argued that the public airwaves are a platform where free speech should be the top priority; it has become private enclosures where access must be bought (Nichols & McChesney, 2013). Cable news is an important player in the operation of the public sphere and democratic practice (Robinson, 2011). Goidel et al. (2017) argued that in a democracy, the media can serve as a watchdog over government performance, a mechanism for democratic accountability, and a tool to help engaged voters cast more informed ballots. However, since the launch of CNN in 1980, the first 24-hour cable news operation and various

networks that followed, the steady stream of information to the public has straddled the line of providing too much information. With a large portion of selected 24-hour news programming focused on approaching campaigns and elections, news coverage has the ability to influence the vote that an individual might cast based on the information that is provided (Robinson, 2011).

Eisenhower's 1952 presidential election became a turning point in political communications (Nichols & McChesney, 2013). This was one of the first times major market research was conducted to develop a campaign to reach the public during an election. Dwight Eisenhower and advertising executive Rosser Reeves worked together to develop the campaign slogan "Eisenhower, Man of Peace," which showed Eisenhower in various ads answering questions from voters (Nichols & McChesney, 2013).

Eisenhower's strategy became a new formula for integrating marketing into politics, but it was not welcome by previous presidents such as Harry S. Truman who asked that the advertising profession not to take over the profession of politics (Nichols & McChesney, 2013). Famed marketing and advertising executive, David Ogilvy, opposed the use of political advertising and called the practice "the most deceptive, misleading, unfair and untruthful of all advertising" (Nichols & McChesney, 2013, p. 105).

Political communications have always been controversial during the tense times of an election. Although political communications such as television commercials and radio advertisements are often used as a tool to spread the agenda of political candidates, they are also used to discredit opposing candidates. In 2012, Bridget McCormack, founder of the Michigan Innocence Clinic, which helped to reexamine cases against individuals who were wrongly convicted in cases with no DNA evidence (Nichols &

McChesney, 2013), was nominated for the Michigan Supreme Court. McCormack was a professor of law and associate dean at the University of Michigan; she also volunteers on a project by the Center for Constitutional Rights, which sought to obtain civil trials for subjects legally detained by the U.S. Government in Guantánamo Bay (Eggert, 2012; Nichols & McChesney, 2013).

During McCormack's time as a volunteer with the Center for Constitutional Rights, she represented Wahldof Abdul Mokit. Hananoki of Media Matters for America (2016) argued that McCormack's goal in representing Mokit was not to free a terrorist but to "ensure that American prisoners were entitled to the rights and representation provided under international and American Law" (p. 5). The true level of McCormack's involvement is left to debate because the *Michigan Daily* reported that McCormack never personally met with Mokit because of an extensive security clearance. Mokit was also released by the Bush Administration and sent back to Tajikistan where he was sentenced to 17 years in prison for joining fighters of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which fought alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan (Eggert, 2012).

During McCormack's bid for Supreme Court, a conservative legal advocacy group, the Judicial Crisis Network, ran a statewide television advertisement claiming McCormack volunteered to free terrorists. The ad that began to air 1 week before the election featured Teri Joseph whose son was killed in Afghanistan in 2010. According to Rice and Smith (2019), in the ad Teri Joseph stated,

My son Joe was taken from me, killed when his unit was attacked by terrorists in Afghanistan. My son selflessly gave his life for his country, so when I heard Bridget McCormack volunteered to represent and help free suspected terrorists, I

couldn't believe it. My son's a hero and fought to protect us. Bridget

McCormack volunteered to help free a terrorist, how could you? (p. 8)

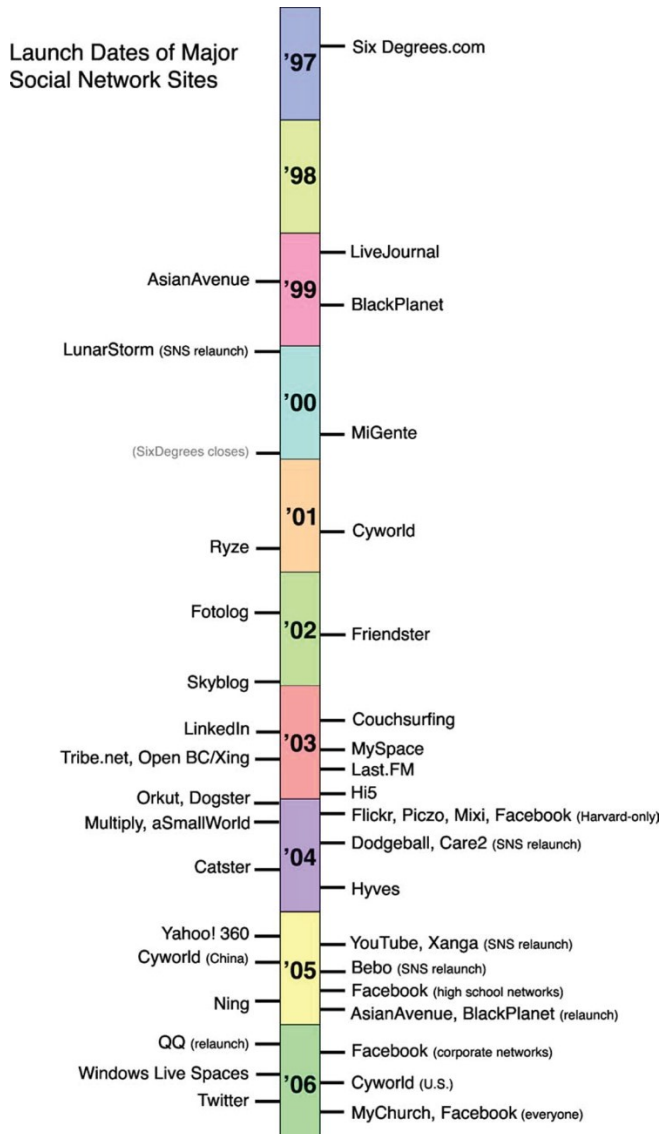
The advertisement gained the attention of local newspapers who found the messaging dangerous and an inappropriate spin on an important staple of democracy, which is provide legal representation to those facing trials in the United States. Even with newspapers flagging this ad as false information, television stations continued to run the ad and forced McCormick to have to run an alternative ad.

Social Media

Social media is a phenomenon that altered the way people communicate and interact with each other around the world (Edosomwan et al., 2011). Social media is defined in this research as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan, 2015, p. 197). These websites and applications are dedicated to forums, microblogging, social networking, social media bookmarking, social curating and wikis. Examples of social media include Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Figure 2 shows a timeline of launch dates for the most popular social media sites from 1998 until 2006. The concept of developing social media exploded after 2002 with the development and popularity of the site, Friendster. This led to the creation of over 10 additional sites with the most popular being Myspace and later Facebook.

Figure 2

Timeline of the Launch Dates of Many Major Social Media Networks and Dates When Community Sites Launched



Note. From “Social Network Sites: Definition, History and Scholarship,” by D. M. Boyd and N. B. Ellison, 2007, *Journal of Computer Mediated-Communication*, 13(1), p. 212 (<https://academic.oup.com/jcmc/article/13/1/210/4583062>).

Graber and Dunaway (2015) noted that political scientist W. Russel Neuman predicted the new age of personalized mass media in the 1990s by stating,

We now have the opportunity to design a new electronic and optical network that will blur the distinction between mass and interpersonal communications . . . a single high capacity digital network will combine computing, telephony, broadcasting, motion pictures and publishing. (p. 467)

Neuman predicted what social media has become in relation to the media. The various social media platforms use a combination of online videos and personal communications in the form of comments, likes, and citizen journalism.

Social media is more than a way for the public to stay connected to friends and family; it has revolutionized the way the traditional media and political candidates engage with the public. Social media is now considered an extension of the main stream media, which should be used as a platform to disseminate unbiased and fact-based information to the masses. It is the role of the free press to observe the political landscape and report back to the public to allow one to make one's own informed decisions. In today's world, it is undeniable that social media plays an important role in impacting our culture, our economy, and our overall view of the world (Amedie, 2015).

Blogging

Weblogs or blogs are frequently updated websites, with relatively short posts that are time-stamped, and organized in reverse chronology so the most recent post is always first (Mortensen & Rettberg, 2002). The introduction of blogging into the communication sphere provided the public with many different sources to obtain political information and gave them more opportunities to gain knowledge. In 2008, Farrell and

Drezner described blogs as “a staple of political commentary, legal analysis, celebrity gossip, and high school angst” (p. 1). The first blog was founded in 1998 by Bruce Ableson on a platform called Open Diary, which allowed users to post journal entries on a community forum. This platform gave way to many of the most popular blog forums including Live Journal, Xanga, Blogger, WordPress, and Tumblr.

Much like Open Diary, the various blogging platforms mentioned were first known as personal blogs but are now considered a staple in mainstream culture. Blogs have contributed to helping companies and politicians build brands, attract clients, and provide relevant pop culture news (Yates, 2000). Although blogs have become extremely popular, they still have far less reach than other new media outlets for political information and analysis such as talk radio, cable news channels, or other online political websites (Farrell & Drezner, 2008). However, blogs have played a critical role in influencing political activism, campaign tactics, and sharing news of important national events and have now become known as political blogging.

Political Blogging

According to political scientist Wallsten (2005), political blogging emerged after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Bloggers took to various blogging platforms to express their feelings about the attacks and to find information that was not available through the mainstream media. Social media consultant Matthew Yeomans described the influx of blogging after September 11, 2001 as

[A] collective tragedy [which] demanded a forum to be shared by people all around the world who wanted to talk about what happened with anyone because it was the only way of making any sense of it. Were it to happen again, blogs and

social networks would play an enormously cathartic role. (Wired Staff, 2006, para. 10)

In a sense, these blogs became major historical documentation as journalists, historians, and investigators attempted to gather detailed accounts of the events of the day.

Today, there are over 440 million blogs found on Tumblr, Squarespace, and WordPress (Neese, 2016), and they have become media platforms as well. Over the past decade, there have been many studies centered on the various blogging platforms and their uncertain relationship to journalism. Bourdieu performed a field theory that suggested the rise of the internet and blogs could generate a shift in the journalism field (Vos et al., 2011). Bourdieu (as cited in Vos et al., 2011) believed bloggers could be considered new agents in the field of journalism. He specifically pointed to political bloggers who occupied a unique space on the internet and in the political world. Political bloggers are responsible for sharing information about elections, candidates, policies, and other topics in the political arena but are often not affiliated with established and credible news outlets.

However, blogs and bloggers are not held to the same standard of accuracy and do not face the same consequences as traditional news sources. Journalists are required to follow certain policies and regulations to ensure their reporting remains ethical. If they intentionally fall outside of those parameters, they may be fined or fired. Bloggers are not held to the same standard as their posts are usually considered opinions rather than journalism.

Microblogging

With the blogging industry nearing oversaturation, microblogging sites began to appear. Microblogging can be described as a form of communication in “which users can describe their current status in short posts distributed by instant messages, mobile phones, email or the web” (Java et al., 2007, para. 1). The most popular microblogging site is Twitter, which has 330 million monthly active users worldwide in 2019 (Clement, 2019). The site was established in 2006 by Jack Dorsey and allows users to register for an account to post messages containing 280 characters or fewer to their feed.

The site has become a popular platform for public figures such as celebrities and politicians to share their ideas and connect with their audiences with short messages. Nguyen (2017) of the *Northwestern Business Review* argued, “Twitter has facilitated the formation of many of today’s major social and political movements, but has also provided a backdrop to massive scandals that show how a mere 140 characters can ruin a politician’s career” (Nguyen, 2017, para. 2).

American writer, Shirky (2009) argued that microblogging has become a major source of news for the public because of the nature of a feed of short posts that provide real-time updates in an information cascade. These cascades occur when people make decisions after watching another rather than all at the same time (Cornell University, 2017). Microblogging allows people to make decisions regarding politics like voting in an election: people are usually influenced by the other people’s decisions in their social networks and may influence the behavior of their readers (Cornell University, 2017; Shirky, 2009).

Social Networks

Similar to microblogging, social networks are websites that allow people with similar interests to come together and share information, photos, and videos (Rouse, 2019). Boyd and Ellison (2007) defined a social networking site (SNS) as a

[Set of] web-based services that allows individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (p. 211)

The most popular SNS to date is Facebook, which boasts 2.38 billion active users worldwide with around 69% or seven in 10 adult users being users in America (Gramlich, 2019). The large population of users on SNSs makes them a viable breeding ground for businesses, influencers, and politicians to communicate with their intended audiences. The open and public nature of social networking has started to change the way campaigns are developed and how the public is reached.

In the case of politics, social networking is no longer a system of one-way communication in these open forums; both the public and the politician are easily accessible. Dr. Phillippa Collin of University of Western Sydney argued social networking creates a “participatory media environment [which] enables young people to [create and sustain] . . . connections with others” (Collin et al., 2011, p. 9). In this research, the subject Pete Aguilar, used social networking as a method to receive feedback from his constituent’s by way of comments on Facebook and Twitter. He was also able to respond to those comments through the same methods and by curating his responses to the reactions of his constituents. Naturally, this open connection creates a

relationship between the politician and the public in hopes their messages are received and turned into political action or voter turnout.

Influence of Social Media in the Political Arena

Pizzagate

On October 28, 2016, former Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director James Comey announced through a letter to the U.S. Congress that the FBI reopened an investigation against the 2016 Democratic Party's nominee for the president of the United States, Hillary Clinton. The case investigated Clinton's use of a private family email server to send official and classified emails while she served as the secretary of state (Fisher et al., 2016; Gerstein, 2018; Silver, 2017). These communications were discovered during a separate investigation on electronics that belonged to former New York Congressman Anthony Weiner who was accused of texting lewd messages to a 15-year-old girl. The private server included over 2,000 emails sent and received by Clinton that were retroactively marked as confidential and over 100 emails that contained classified information. James Comey wrote,

Dear Messrs Chairmen:

In previous congressional testimony, I referred to the fact that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) had completed its investigation of former Secretary Clinton's personal email server. Due to recent developments, I am writing to supplement my previous testimony.

In connection with an unrelated case, the FBI has learned of the existence of emails that appear to be pertinent to the investigation. I am writing to inform you that the investigative team briefed me on this yesterday, and I agreed that the FBI

should take appropriate investigative steps designed to allow investigators to review these emails to determine whether they contain classified information, as well as to assess their importance to our investigation.

Although the FBI cannot yet assess whether or not this material may be significant, and I cannot predict how long it will take us to complete this additional work, I believe it is important to update your Committees about our efforts in light of my previous testimony. (“The Full Text of FBI Letter,” 2016, para. 1)

On October 29, 2016, a day after Comey’s letter was released to the public, the global hoax, Pizzagate, began. The Pizzagate theory is a conspiracy theory in which prominent members of the Democratic Party were involved in a global child-trafficking ring located in the pizza restaurant, Comet Ping Pong (Sebastian, 2016). The Pizzagate theory began to spread over the internet through conspiracy theory websites and social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. The earliest record of Pizzagate stems from a Facebook user named Carmen Katz who posted to Facebook. The Tweet captured in Figure 3 stated,

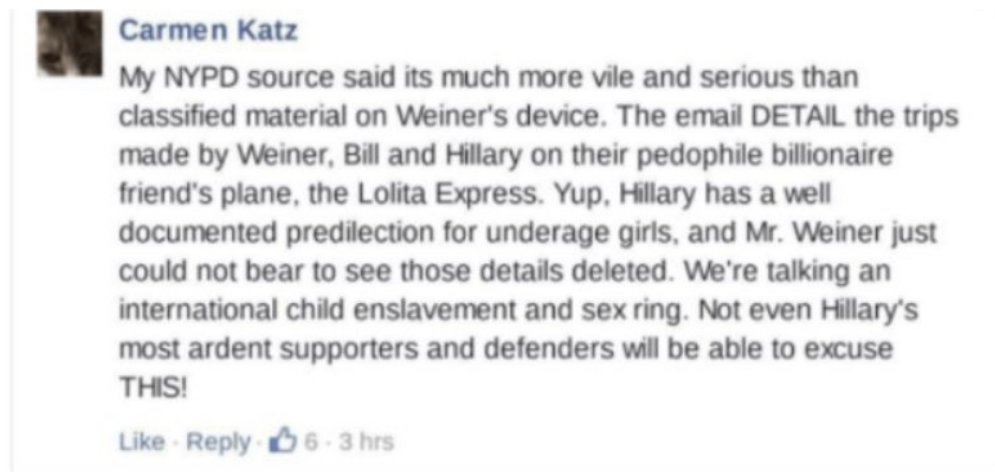
My NYPD source said it’s much more vile and serious than classified material on Anthony Weiner’s device. The email detail[s] the trips made by Weiner, Bill and Hillary Clinton on their pedophile billionaire friend’s plane, the Lolita Express. Yup, Hillary has a well documented predilection for underage girls. . . . We’re talking an international child enslavement and sex ring. (Robb, 2017, para. 3)

The next day, a Twitter user claiming to be a lawyer from New York shared Carmen Katz’s Facebook message on Twitter using the handle @DavidGoldbergNY.

Craig Silverman of BuzzFeed (2016, p. 3) noted the Twitter account also claimed to have classified information on the investigation, and Goldberg tweeted, “Rumors stirring in the NYPD that Huma’s [Anthony Weiner’s wife] emails point to a pedophilia ring and @HillaryClinton is at the center. #GoHillary #PodestaEmails23” (p. 3). Goldberg’s tweet was retweeted 6,369 and liked 5,263 times before Twitter suspended the account.

Figure 3

Tweet Posted From Twitter User, Carmen Katz’s Account Providing False Information About the Hillary Clinton Investigation



Note. From “3/ Amanda and @starecheski’s journey started with this Facebook post. It’s one of the earliest references they found to the conspiracy theory” [Tweet], by Reveal [@reveal], November 2017, Twitter (<https://twitter.com/reveal/status/935257784895004672>).

As the story continued to travel across social media channels, Alex Jones, the owner of the website, Infowars, which is described as a website that seeks the truth and exposes the scientifically engineered lies of the globalists and their ultimate goal of enslaving humanity (Hanna, 2017), suggested that Hillary Clinton was also involved in

satanic rituals and murdered children. Alex Jones, who used his website, which became popular for spreading conspiracy theories regarding voter fraud and doubting the validity of the Sandy Hook Massacre, stated, “When I think about all the children Hillary Clinton has personally murdered and chopped up and raped, I have zero fear standing up against her” (Fisher et al., 2016, para. 10). Jones’s statements were also shared on YouTube and contributed to the spread of the rumor.

Because of the speed that information can spread over the internet, those sharing the pizza gate rumor began to make false connections between the Hillary Clinton email investigation and a separate ongoing case investigation into the leaking of the emails of John Podesta who served as Hillary Clinton’s campaign chairman. In March 2016, John Podesta’s personal Gmail account was hacked because of a data breach and resulted in many of his personal and work-related emails being leaked to the whistleblowing website, WikiLeaks. Established in 2006 by Julian Assange, WikiLeaks was created to obtain and disseminate classified documents and data sets from anonymous sources and leakers (Whittaker, 2018). John Podesta’s emails that were leaked to WikiLeaks revealed that Podesta occasionally dined at the pizza restaurant, Comet Ping Pong. #Pizzagate began to trend on Twitter because of the sharing of the pedophilia rumors made by fake accounts from countries such as the Czech Republic, Cyprus, and Vietnam (Fisher et al., 2016; McHugh, 2018). The owner of Comet Ping Pong, James Alefantis, began to receive tweets referring to him as a pedophile and started to receive death threats. The threats escalated from social media messages to phone calls and protestors showing up to the restaurant.

On December 4, 2016, Edgar Maddison Welch, of Salisbury, North Carolina, walked into Comet Ping Pong and pointed an assault rifle in the direction of an employee with the intentions of ending the pedophile ring (Sebastian, 2016). Welch read about #Pizzagate through various social media channels and was armed with misinformation that he felt the government ignored. Welch showed up to Comet Ping Pong with a Colt AR-15 assault rifle, a .38 caliber Colt AR-15, and a folding knife looking for secret vaults used for hiding abused children. He shot inside of the restaurant three times and swung his rifle at employees. Upon his arrest, Welch stated that he read online that the restaurant was harboring child sex slaves, and he wanted to end the crimes on his own because of the negligence of the government.

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Demian S. Ahn and Sonali D. Patel explained that Welch attempted to recruit friends for a one-way mission to raid a pedophile ring, which would possibly “sacrifice the lives of a few for the lives of many” (Hsu, 2017, para. 14). During Welch’s trial, text messages were also discovered that he intended to “stand up against a corrupt system that kidnaps, tortures, and rapes babies and children in our own backyard” (Hsu, 2017, para. 14). Although no one was harmed, Welch ignored the opportunity to contact local law enforcement for help because he felt the evidence showed they were also in on covering up the pedophile ring. Welch pled guilty to federal and local weapons charges and is currently serving 4 years in prison (Williams, 2017).

The story of #Pizzagate is an example of how social media provides users an unregulated platform to share and receive information. The traditional media, which is defined in this research as any form of mass communication available such as television, radio, newspapers, books and magazines before the advent of digital media (IGI Global,

n.d.), have stricter sanctions on publishing and sharing information. For example, when a newspaper publishes an article or letter from the public, the newspaper often requires the name and address of the writer prior to publishing (Aslund & Fried, 2017; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) can punish journalists and television broadcasters for sharing false information, exhibiting bias in how they cover or opt not to cover events, and the conduct of journalists in the gathering and reporting of news (FCC, 2018). Having regulations on traditional media does not prevent the spread of false news; it only holds the individual or corporation responsible for the dissemination of the information accountable.

An example of the spread of false news on traditional media is the 2015 incident when former NBC Nightly News anchor and managing editor, Brian Williams, was suspended from hosting his television show and later demoted after “misrepresenting events which occurred while he was covering the Iraq War in 2003” (Welch, 2015, para. 2). Williams came under fire after it became clear he told a “shifting story about the day he flew aboard a U.S. Army helicopter during the 2003 invasion of Iraq” (Shafer, 2015, para. 2). *Politico* magazine also noted that over time, Williams’s story continued to escalate, eventually leading him to create a different version of events in which his helicopter had been shot down by enemy fire (Shafer, 2015). Williams’s story came to a head after he ended one of his standard television broadcasts by thanking a soldier who helped him after his helicopter was shot down under a rocket attack. The thank you message was also posted to Facebook, bringing the message to the attention of Chris Simeone, the helicopter pilot, who was involved in the incident. Simeone wrote a message pointing out Williams’s version of events was not true stating, “Such a liar! . . .

He was on my aircraft and we were NOT shot down. That was a sister ship and a friend of mine. Brian Williams has been knowingly lying since that mission to boost his credentials” (Golgowski, 2015, para. 3-4). At the time of the incident, Brian Williams was listed as the 23rd most trusted person in America, and after his fabrication, he was listed as the 835th most trusted person (Spurlock, 2016). Once the backlash caught the attention of NBC network executives, Williams gave an apology on air and on social media and was quickly suspended from the network.

Brian Williams’s continued fabrication of a story is an example of how there can be swift repercussions in the traditional media for misleading the public. In this case, Williams’s actions not only reflected poorly on him, but they also had the potential to negatively affect the credibility of the entire network. The media and journalists who share the news with views are responsible for sharing news that is accurate and unbiased because their role is to inform the public. Williams’s lying to the public violated the relationship established with the public and with the television network. On a larger scale, the traditional media must adhere to laws and guidelines or face consequences like a demotion, fines in various amounts, or in the worst-case scenario, the journalist will be terminated.

In digital media, FCC laws have yet to be passed to hold social media users accountable for spreading false news that could impact the perception of reality. In the case of Pizzagate, Edgar Maddison Welch is the only person held responsible for his actions because he committed a crime that physically endangered the public. Robb (2017), a reporter for *Rolling Stone* magazine, led an investigation into the Facebook profile for Carmen Katz and discovered the profile was a fake profile created by a Joplin,

Missouri attorney named Cynthia Campbell. Although Campbell admitted to creating the account, she also claimed at the time of the Pizzagate postings, her account was hacked with no knowledge of the culprit. Campbell's participation in the spread of the Pizzagate scandal will go unpunished largely because of the anonymity of the internet and the inability to determine the true impact of her role in the hoax.

Alex Jones, the owner of the website, Infowars, faced no repercussions for his assistance with spreading the unsubstantiated claims surrounding Clinton and the Comet Ping Pong restaurant. Jones issued a rare apology to the public after he discovered Welch was a Facebook fan and listened to his radio show. In a 6-minute video posted on his website, Jones stated,

I made comments about Mr. Alefantis that in hindsight I regret, and for which I apologize to him. We relied on third-party accounts of alleged activities and conduct at the restaurant. We also relied on accounts of two reporters who are no longer with us.

To my knowledge today, neither Mr. Alefantis, nor his restaurant Comet Ping Pong, were involved in any human trafficking as was part of the theories about Pizzagate that were being written about in many media outlets and which we commented upon. (Schladebeck, 2017, p. 3)

I want our viewers and listeners to know that we regret any negative impact our commentaries may have had on Mr. Alefantis, Comet Ping Pong, or its employees. We apologize to the extent our commentaries could be construed as negative statements about Mr. Alefantis or Comet Ping Pong, and we hope that

anyone else involved in commenting on Pizzagate will do the same thing.

(Doubek, 2017, para. 3)

Unlike the incident with Brian Williams, Jones was not obligated to apologize or issue a correction; his apology to Mr. Alefantis was used as a tool to avoid a lawsuit by Mr. Alefantis for sharing false information. In a letter issued to Jones, Alefantis laid claim that Jones used defaming language, which resulted in Welch shooting up his restaurant. A *Washington Post* article by Farhi (2017) detailed that Jones's apology was issued on the final date before exposing InfoWars to punitive damages in a libel suit. As of today, Alefantis has not pursued legal action against Jones, and the InfoWars website was not punished for sharing the false information.

The Pizzagate conspiracy theory is an example that there are little to no regulations on spreading false information unless it violates the first amendment laws while making new media the perfect avenue to spread unverified information. The repercussions of spreading misinformation goes beyond the concept of spreading lies to the public; it has the potential to damage the reputation of political leaders and tarnish the legitimacy of the media and the government. Sinan Aral of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology posited,

Falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information, and the effects were more pronounced for false political news than for false news about terrorism, natural disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information. (Fox, 2018, para. 4)

Digital media is interactive, incorporates two-way communication, and involves some form of computing such as the internet and social media (Neese, 2018). The users of the

new media are active producers of content and information, whether sending an email or using internet collaboration tools such as social media and blogging sites (Neese, 2018). According to Aral, false information such as Pizzagate has the potential to spread almost six times faster than a true story possibly because false information sounds more entertaining than the truth (Fox, 2018).

The Pizzagate conspiracy theory had a real-world impact because of the owner having to shut down the pizza restaurant for two days and hire two guards to protect his business from potential threats. The impact of this story also reached Washington after protestors accused the news media of covering up child trafficking demanding and investigation in Hillary Clinton, James Alefantis, and John Podesta (Rosenberg, 2017). What seemed to be the innocuous sharing of news through social media channels caused members of the public to assume the government participated in an illegal activity. The lack of regulation on social media and the absence of consequences for disseminating false information have the potential to dupe the public into believing the government is not working on their behalf. This may affect democracy through the potential erosion of public trust.

Social Media and Democracy

For the purposes of this study, social media is defined as “A group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan, 2015, p. 197). These websites and applications are dedicated to forums, microblogging, social networking, social media bookmarking, social curating and wikis. Examples of social media include Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

The Power of Social Media

Social media is more than a way for the public to stay connected to friends and family; it has revolutionized the way the traditional media and political candidates engage with the public. Social media is now considered an extension of the mainstream media, which should be used as a platform to disseminate unbiased and fact-based information to the masses.

Twitter was created in March 2006 by software developers, Jack Dorsey, Noah Glass, Biz Stone, and Evan Williams (“58 Incredible and Interesting Twitter Stats and Statistics,” 2019) with the intention to be a platform to discuss “what is happening in the world and what people are talking about right now” (Twitter, n.d.-a, para. 1). The site aimed to allow citizens from around the world to connect with one another and share their experiences in short statements in response to the question, “What’s happening?”

In 2018, Twitter was one of the most used social media platforms with over 326 million monthly active users with 500 million tweets sent per day (Aslam, 2019). The average Twitter user has 126 followers and has sent out fewer than 300 tweets across the life of his or her account with about 30 to 40% of Twitter accounts being inactive and never having posed a single tweet (Comm & Taylor, 2015). A study by Pew Research found that 71% of all Twitter users read the news there, accounting for 12% of Americans who use the platform as an app for news (Cooper, 2019). Major factors that led to Twitter becoming a news source is the feature of Live Tweeting events in which users send tweets with their opinions in real time in order to comment on a live event (Serneels, 2013).

In addition to live tweeting events, many users on the app have attempted to become “Twitter famous” or to go viral. There are currently no scholarly definitions of what it means to “go viral,” so for the purposes of this research, it is defined as internet content that becomes popular by rapidly circulating on the internet by being shared by a large number of viewers. To date, Yusaku Maezawa, founder of the online fashion retailer has the most popular tweet in history with more than 4.1 million retweets (Lieu, 2019). The entrepreneur offered to give away almost \$1 million dollars or 100 million yen to 100 people if they followed his personal social media account and retweeted the post. As expected, the tweet spread across the internet as users began to follow the instructions and retweet the message with hopes they would be the lucky winner. Because Twitter has a global audience, the tweet spread far beyond Japan, and users in different countries participated in the contest as well; however, all of the users were located in Japan.

Twitter not only has the ability to connect people when money is being given away; the social media app has also been responsible for changes in the stock market. In 2016, the company Lockheed Martin experienced a decline in the price of their shares because of a tweet by President Trump. The tweet compared the pricing of an F-18 fighter jet from Lockheed Martin with the price of that same jet from Boeing. The impact of the tweet was an immediate \$2 drop in shares for Lockheed Martin and an increase in the price of shares for Boeing. This example demonstrates the influence a social media post can have not only on followers; it may also have real-life consequences such as manipulating the stock market value of a company (Wang, 2016).

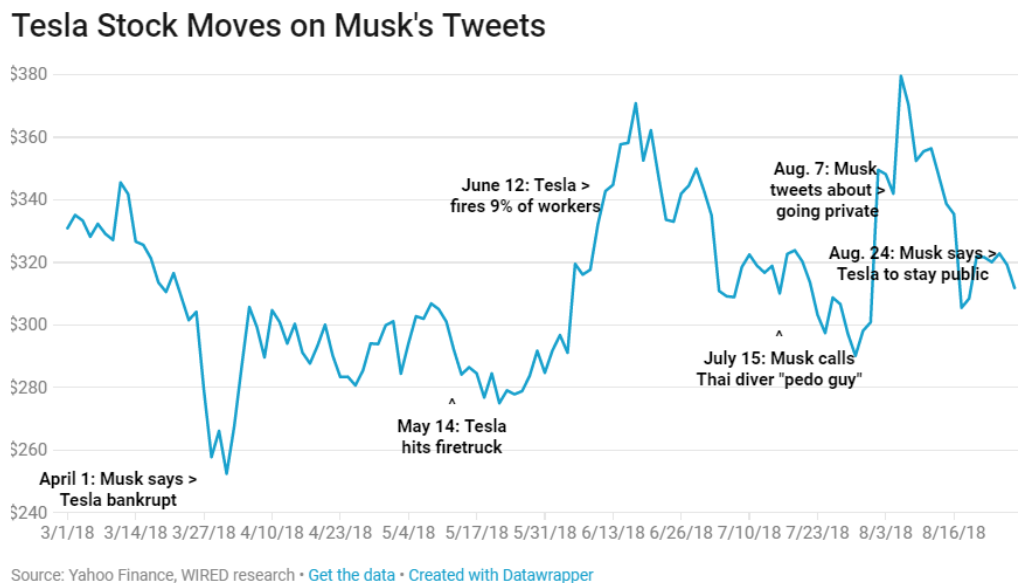
It may seem obvious the president's tweets would influence a nation, but company leadership has a similar impact on the price of the stock market and the perception of the public as well. Elon Musk is public figure and businessman who founded the automotive and engineering company Tesla. As the face of the company, Musk has used Twitter on many occasions to share updates about the company and often joke about the status of the company. In many instances, his approach to social media can make him relatable, but when tweeting about topics that may influence the financial aspects of the business, his tweets are often met with the value of his company fluctuating with his investors. Davies (2018) of *Wired* magazine documented the impact of Musk's tweets on the stock market.

Figure 4 is a graph showing the impact that Elon Musk's tweets had on the stock market value of the company. The chart shows the relationship between tweets posted by Musk and the immediate change in value on the stock market. For example, Musk tweeted Tesla was unable to meet their deadlines and were going to file for bankruptcy. This information sent the company's value into a tailspin. Similarly, on May 14, a Tesla Vehicle hit a firetruck while in autopilot and the stocks dropped as well. This tweet caused a \$7 drop in the company's stock. Davies (2018) noted that once Musk tweeted about the event and defended the model, stocks dropped. However, the relationship between tweeting and immediate change in the value of a company can also impact companies for the better. On June 12, a tweet announced Tesla would fire 9% or 4,100 of their workforce to work at flattening the organization. The original information was shared to his workforce via email; however, the information was leaked to the press. In an effort to clear up misinformation, Musk also shared the email via Twitter with a

message calling the downsizing “difficult but necessary” (Seth, 2018, para. 1). It would seem the tweet would cause the market value of the company to drop, but the explanation from Musk about the restructuring of the company provided context to the story that explained the company was not in trouble but was in fact looking for a way to make a profit that would benefit those invested in the company.

Figure 4

Data Map of the Impact Elon Musk’s Tweets Had on the Stock Market



Note. From “A Brief History of Elon Musk’s Market-Moving Tweets,” by A. Davies, 2018, p. 2 (<https://www.wired.com/story/elon-musk-twitter-stock-tweets-libel-suit/>).

Although Elon Musk is not a politician, his social media use is an example of the power with which Twitter, in particular can have an impact on the everyday life and perception of an event. In this instance, Twitter was being used as a substitute for word of mouth (WOM), which is a popular communication tool that is the most influential force behind consumer behavior (Cronin, 2018). Cronin also argued that 92% of

consumers in a WommaPedia survey “trust friends’ and family’s recommendations more than any form of advertising,” and social media is the current and fastest form of word of mouth” (Cronin, 2018, para. 3). As a news source, Twitter has been responsible for breaking major popular news stories that would otherwise be shared by traditional news outlets. One of the earliest examples in Twitter as a news source was in November 2010; Prince William and Kate Middleton used Twitter to announce their royal engagement. Clarence House tweeted, “The prince of Wales is delighted to announce the engagement of Prince William to Miss Catherine Middleton” (Castellanos, 2010, para. 2). In addition to Prince William announcing the major event via Twitter, the Queen of England also used the social media site to share the announcement and her well wishes. The tweets were sent prior to the normal protocol of announcing information on the royal website. The Clarence House Twitter account averages 50 retweets per post whereas this announcement received almost a thousand retweets.

Although announcing an engagement on Twitter has become the status quo, this was the first time the normally private family shared their information in such an informal manner (New Statesman, 2010). The announcement on social media became a sign that the royal family was up-to-date with current technology and trends as the new generation of royalty began to take power. Additionally, at the time of the announcement, the royal family also signed up for Facebook as an attempt to be more relatable than they had been in previous years. Sensis (2017) also argued the announcement and their general use of social media provide the family with a “new range of opportunities, and new ways to utilize their position for wider benefit” (para. 1). The site also argued that the power of the royals using social media allows them to stay

connected and relevant with the public. At the time of the tweet, the royals were considered to be a symbol of the old world and were increasingly growing out of favor with the public. However, this platform allowed them to show their personality while still controlling their narrative. To date, each royal family Twitter account has millions of followers: @royalfamily has over 4 million followers, and @kensingtonroyal has 1.8 million followers (Mogg, 2019).

A large part of the benefit of an influential family using social media in this fashion is they are in control over their narrative and are able to participate in agenda setting. For many decades, Queen Elizabeth and her family have been the subject of nonstop media coverage about their relationships, speculated political affiliations, and much more. The paparazzi have also been largely blamed for the death of Princess Diana in the early 1990s to which their response was to become highly private and share little to no information with the press. However, as the new generation of royals emerges, they have taken control over their story and their initiatives. Their social media accounts are now being used to share information about their special projects and charity work instead of allowing the press to shape their story around personal family stories. The act of sharing information on social media does not change the perception of the family or their initiatives; it merely positions the information in such a way that it becomes a part of their story simply by being available and accessible information.

Although the royal family tweeting an engagement may seem trivial, the influence of using the tool to share information lends itself to the power of Twitter and social media in general. Instances such as this set the stage for the public to turn to social media for other news from the royal family or other influential figures. Throughout the years, many

public figures began to use Twitter to make announcements about weddings, divorces, product launches, and various other important information because of the speed in which the information spreads and the global reach of the platform.

As the social media tool became a more powerful outlet for celebrity and political news, Twitter began to reposition itself as a news sharing platform rather than a social media application. Brackett (2018) noted that in 2016, the application changed its App store category from “social networking” to “news” and began airing live newscasts and highlighting tweets from journalists and media organizations in the “explore tab”. As the platform continued to grow and change over the years, journalists, news organizations, and even Twitter learned about the power of the tool to reach beyond traditional media sources such as local television and newspapers.

Political Tweeting

Much like the royal family, President Donald Trump also began to use Twitter as a tool for agenda setting and sharing direct thoughts with the public by using the tool to make official announcements. According to Newburger (2019), since his election in 2016, Trump has averaged more than 10 tweets a day to his nearly 64 million followers—roughly 14,000 total over that period associated with his personal account, of which more than 10,000 occurred after the 2017 inauguration. The 45th president often uses both his personal and presidential account to make major announcements regarding federal policies and his stance on issues such as immigration, emergency aid, and his personal opinions regarding pop culture news.

Most recently, President Trump used Twitter to make four important announcements about staffing changes, which in the past have been made via email or

through Official White House press conferences (Estepa, 2018). However, President Trump's approach to announcing the resignation or appointment of his staff often leans toward social media entertainment.

One of the first major announcements from President Trump was in relation to federal policy where he announced his decision to ban transgender individuals to serve in the U.S. military. In a series of three tweets the president set his policy agenda with the public by announcing,

After consultation with my Generals and military experts, please be advised that the United States Government will not accept or allow Transgender individuals to serve in any capacity in the U.S. Military. Our military must be focused on decisive and overwhelming victory and cannot be burdened with the tremendous medical costs and disruption that transgender in the military would entail. Thank you. (Estepa, 2018, The Transgender Ban section)

Once the tweets were released, they immediately became known as the "tweetban." Combined, all three tweets received over 357,000 likes and caused a large amount of confusion with people in the military.

Once the tweets were sent, those impacted by the ban were unsure about their status in the military. In previous years, the Obama Administration did targeted research on the impact of having transgendered individuals in the military and found the risk was limited and the concern was unfounded. At that time, they were granted the rights to serve in the military out in the open. However, with President Trump tweeting a reversal in policy, the military was forced to find answers for the status of those identifying as transgendered. Matt Thompson (2019) of *The Atlantic* pointed out the tweets caused

major confusion because it was unclear whether the tweets held the power to actually change policy. The day following the tweets, the White House “Joint Chiefs of Staff declared that ‘no modifications’ would be made to the existing military policy until the White House issued formal guidance on the meaning of the announcement” (p. 3).

On July 28, 2017, an announcement was made that Chief of Staff Reince Priebus would be replaced with General Secretary John F. Kelly. This announcement came after a fallout of his communications director, Anthony Scaramucci accusing Priebus of being responsible for the many leaks to the press. In the events leading up to this famous tweet, the Trump Administration had experienced many stories being shared with the press without consent from the president. This led to the president announcing he would find the person responsible for the press leaks. Once the information was provided by the communications director, the president swiftly announced the replacement of Priebus with Secretary John F. Kelly.

Not long after announcing the resignation of Reince Priebus in March 2018, the president announced the appointment of then director of the CIA, as the new secretary of state. In the same tweet he announced the resignation of Rex Tillerson from the secretary of state position and congratulated Gina Haspel as the new director of the CIA. The tweet read,

Mike Pompeo, Director of the CIA, will become our new Secretary of State. He will do a fantastic job! Thank you to Rex Tillerson for his service! Gina Haspel will become the new Director of the CIA, and the first woman so chosen.

Congratulations to all. (Epatko, 2018, para. 2)

In a similar fashion, on September 10, 2019, the president tweeted the firing of the national security adviser John Bolton. The tweet simply read, “I thank John very much for his service. I will be naming a new National Security Advisor next week” (Z. Cohen et al., 2019, para. 2). As with the many other tweets, President Trump controlled the story by announcing the firing himself. He was also able to somewhat control the story in the media because each media story referenced the decision being made by the president to fire Bolton. Within minutes of the tweet, #Bolton became the number one trending topic on Twitter and remained trending for the entire day. The story was also picked up by the mainstream media.

As a way to tell his own side of the story, John Bolton tweeted a rebuttal, “I offered to resign last night and President Trump said, “Let’s talk about it tomorrow.” In a sense, the information being shared on social media and then picked up by the media forced Bolton to also respond on Twitter to prove he had not been fired. This reinforced the idea that President Donald Trump uses the app to control stories and to present them in the best light.

Much like the royal family, politicians began to see the benefits of using social media to share their own stories with the public. One of the major draws of using social media is the ability to publish content and immediately share it with millions of people (Murse, 2019). Murse also argued that using such platforms allows candidates to carefully manage their images by controlling the information being shared and using real time analytics to receive feedback on the content they publish. McCombs and Shaw (1972) argued, “Readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much

importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position” (p. 176).

Facebook

Prior to the launch of Twitter, the world’s most popular social media site Facebook launched in 2004. The site was founded by Harvard College students, Mark Zuckerberg, Eduardo Saverin, Andrew McCollum, Dustin Moskovitz, and Chris Hughes. The intentions of the site are to “help you connect and share with the people in your life” (Facebook, 2019, para. 1). Within the first year, the SNS had over 1 million users and targeted college students and select colleges (Sraders, 2018). The following years, Facebook was available to over 800 colleges and eventually became an open application for anyone with a valid email. The expansion of availability to anyone with an email allowed for the site to rise to the position as the biggest and most popular social media site in the world.

To date, Facebook has 2.41 billion monthly active users and 2.2 billion mobile active users (Aslam, 2019). In 2018, the company was listed at the fourth most valuable brand in the world with a value of \$94.8 billion (“58 Incredible and Interesting Twitter Stats and Statistics,” 2019). In comparison to the world’s population of 5.5 billion people, 28% of the world’s population uses Facebook on a monthly basis, not including those with accounts that are not active. Additionally, Aslam cited many facts showing the massive Facebook usage including 88% of online users of age 18-29 are on Facebook, 84% of online users of age 30-49 are on Facebook, 72% of those between the ages of 50-64 use the site, and 62% of those aged 65 and over are on Facebook.

In the United States alone, over 169.5 million people use Facebook, and that number has slightly increased from 169.5 million in 2018 (Kats, 2018). This accounts for about 10% of Facebook's users and the second-biggest population on Facebook after India at 270 million users (Cooper, 2018). Clement (2019) stated that 25 to 34-year-olds make up the biggest demographic group in the United States with 58.3 million users. Figure 5 shows that as of May 2019, 6.8 million Facebook users were between the ages of 13-17 and 39.4 million users were in the 18-24 age group. The largest group of Facebook users was between the ages of 25-34 and accounted for 58.3 million users in the United States. The user groups start to decline as the ages increase with 33.5 million users in the 45-54 group, 26.5 million in the age group of 55-64, and 21.1 million in the 65 and over age group.

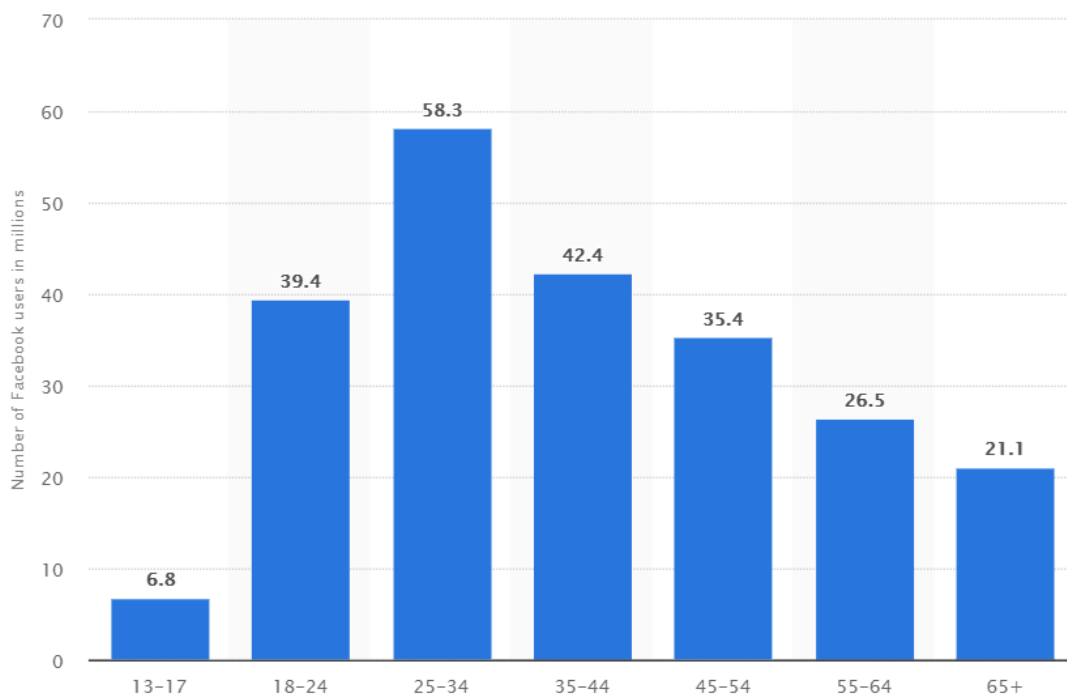
Based on the sheer number of users on Facebook both globally and in the United States, it is clear the social media site has changed the world. Since its inception, the site has transformed the way people communicate within their personal and professional networks by making it easier to share special announcements and reconnect with family and friends. In fact, the social media application has been blamed for almost eliminating the need for high school and college reunions because everyone can easily be updated on the whereabouts of their classmates without the difficulties of traveling.

Additionally, Facebook has changed the way people look at the notion of being friends with their peers. Previous definitions merely referenced a person someone has bonded with; however, with the invention of social media, this definition has expanded to include someone added to a list of contacts associated with a SNS (Dictionary.com, n.d.-a). The word "friend," now used as a verb, explains a more distance connection with

users on different social media sites rather than a close interpersonal relationship built over time. This change shows just how influential Facebook has become on people's everyday lives.

Figure 5

Number of Facebook Users in the United States as of January 2018 by Age Group (in Millions)



Note. From “Number of Facebook Users in the United States as of January 2018, by Age Group (in Millions), by J. Clement, 2019, p. 2, Statista (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/398136/us-facebook-user-age-groups/>).

Much like Twitter, Facebook has also become a tool for news consumption. Almost 68% or over two thirds of Americans report they receive their news via Facebook (Shearer & Matsa, 2018; Zantal-Wiener, 2018). This places social media ahead of

newspapers in the way people receive their news (Haselton, 2018). However, a Pew Research poll found that users engaging with news content via social media spend less time reading news than when reading on other news sources (Wallace, 2019). Wallace's research also showed,

Readers who visit news stories directly through a provider's website spend an average of 4 minutes and 36 seconds on each page. In comparison, those who arrive through a link on Facebook spend just 1 minute 41 seconds reading the page. (para. 8)

This phenomenon means that although users are interacting with the news, they may not receive the depth of information from reading the newspaper or going to an official news website.

Additionally, a downside of gathering news on Facebook is that updates are often not shared in chronological order. Posts are ranked by an algorithm and depending on the amount of engagement of each post, all updates may not make it into the user's newsfeed. For example, during Hurricane Dorian, each update made by a news organization did not receive the same coverage because they all did not receive the same level of interactions from users. This creates spotty news coverage as users are only exposed to the most popular information on the social media app. For this reason, Facebook and its engineers developed a model to support the news life cycle and help users gather information in a more useful way. This model includes the following steps: (a) deliver important news, (b) indicate that it's important, (c) indicate that it's part of a bigger story, (d) help people understand the bigger picture and context, and (e) give people updates about the news (Facebook, 2019).

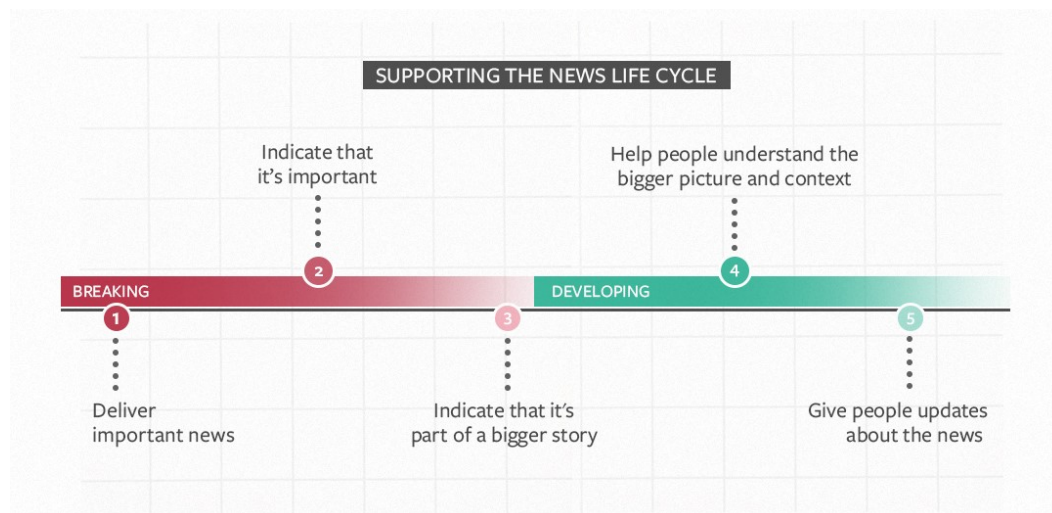
Facebook's algorithm of showing users content that is most relevant to them based on previous interactions model is a step in creating an online version of agenda setting. Based on the model in Figure 6, Step 1 involves delivering news that is deemed important. In the sense of social media, important news is dictated by news outlets using social media as a platform. The media delivers the important stories to the Facebook platform, and Facebook then works to express the stories' importance by making it a top story in a large number of news feeds. This is classic agenda setting in which the media tells the public what to think about and be interested in. An example of Facebook using this model happening in 2018 when a group of boys, aged 11-16, became trapped after exploring the Tham Luang Nang Non cave system in Thailand. The boys spent 15 days trapped in a cave without food and water and were in danger of running out of oxygen and drowning in an impending flood. The ordeal immediately became international top news as teams from around the world began to work together to aid a plan to extract the boys from the cave. This story was shared on Facebook from many different outlets making it a trending topic instantly. Facebook and many other social media apps were credited with helping the story gain traction as it was shared throughout the various channels. Users were then nudged to believe that this story was important because it was considered "breaking news" and many users and their followers were talking about the story. In this way, by constantly sharing updates about the stories and keeping users engaged, this story became the most important story over anything else happening at that time.

According to Facebook's model, the story was indicated as being important because it was shared as breaking news and many updates were being shared with the

public over other stories happening at the time. At the height of the ordeal, it was reported that a Google search on Tuesday for the words “Thai cave rescue” had 359,000,000 results (Gumuchian et al., 2018). In addition to news outlets sharing information that is noted as being important, members of the rescue team also shared information that Facebook deemed to be important such as the announcement confirming all 13 boys had been rescued. The post received more than 200,000 likes and around 56,000 shares within an hour (Gumuchian et al., 2018). The Facebook algorithm and the user’s engagement of the posts made this story breaking news, and it was conveyed to other users that this story was important as well.

Figure 6

Facebook’s Model in Supporting the News Life Cycle



Note. From “Can Breaking News Break Through on Facebook, by A. Hardiman, 2018, (<https://about.fb.com/news/2018/08/inside-feed-can-breaking-news-break-through-on-facebook/>).

One of the main reasons for this new phenomenon is that social media is intended to foster communication, making it a natural progression of sharing the news and current information with those connected within a network. Social media users are interested in sharing their personal thoughts and beliefs with their friends and families, making the social media platform the perfect place to share and read the news. Facebook also used their model to show each update was a part of a bigger story by noting that updates would be provided as they were made available or they were linked out to news articles on major news outlets. The prompt to stand by for updates is a signal to users that they should pay attention to that story in particular and any story that follows.

Social Media's Impact on Elections

There is extensive research on the impact the media campaigns and coverage have on elections. However, with the unpredicted rise of social media as a main influence on campaigns and elections, a large amount of research is not yet available. The many examples in the literature review about the influence of the media on politics and the impact of social media on society are all examples of how Congressman Aguilar used social media to frame his campaign agenda to influence his social media followers, also known as “the public.” The main benefit of using social media as a campaign tool is to bypass broadcast and print media to reach potential voters (Halbrooks, 2019).

Social Media Norms

Norms are important because they are standards of behavior that are based on widely shared beliefs of how individual group members ought to behave in a given situation (Arias, 2019). For social media, this trend is no different. When running a political social media campaign, it is critical to follow established norms to assist with

helping the campaign become successful. All social media platforms have community guidelines that should be followed to avoid messages from being removed from the platform or having the politician's profiles suspended.

Facebook, which also owns the Instagram platform, has developed standards specifically for posts and ads about social issues, elections, or politics. These newly developed standards are in an attempt to create social media norms for political postings on their platforms after receiving criticism for not regulating political information during past elections. Facebook states that if a post is aimed at undermining the legitimacy of an election or delegitimizing the outcome of an election, they will attach an informational label or a link to verified information (Chappell, 2020). The platform will also prohibit any political ads the final week of the campaign. Ads or posts that have been uploaded prior to the final week will still be allowed to run, but new ads will not be authorized.

The researcher also searched public social media guidelines to determine additional social media norms that should be followed by the Aguilar campaign. Many political campaigns do not have public information on the guidelines they follow; however, many public government agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control (n.d.) have their social media guidelines published. Typically, the norms a social media campaign will adhere to include

- Managing all social media accounts and campaign posts with the official voice of Rep. Pete Aguilar. All posts should sound as though they are in the voice of Rep. Pete Aguilar to maintain consistency across the brand.

- The campaign should have a communications clearance channel, and those channels are used when posting new messages or replying to comments from users.
- Social media posts should be consistent in timing. Rep. Aguilar's press release stated his post would be weekly, which is a self-established norm for the #DearPete campaign.
- Honest and transparent campaign messaging.

Social media is a constantly moving vehicle with information that is always changing. For this reason, social media campaigns should have their own set of guidelines and norms that are followed to ensure the campaign follows the rules of the internet and the specific platforms being used. These norms will change or should be adjusted based on the needs and trajectory of the campaign, as mentioned earlier.

Social Media User Norms by Age Groups

Those who use social media, use the platforms in many different ways. Some use social media as a source for information; others use it as a way to connect with family and friends, or promote businesses. For this reason, campaigns need to consider how and why users of different demographics use their social media to interact with their campaign.

According to Statista (2020), male and female users between the ages of 25 to 34 represent the largest group on Facebook users. Around 74% of this group uses social media on a daily basis, 17% on a weekly basis, and 9% use social media less frequently. Based on this information, it can be assumed that the norms for Facebook users in the largest user group use Facebook on a daily basis. Mohsin (2020) noted that people spend

an average of 3 hours per day on social networks and messaging. A campaign should have a full grasp of the amount of time and use of social media by their target audience to know when and how much they should post.

Valentine (2018) stated that there are 10 reasons for social media usage, which is critical knowledge when building a campaign. These reasons are

- To stay in touch with friends
- To stay up-to-date with news and current events
- To fill up spare time
- To find funny or entertaining content
- General networking with other people
- To share photos or videos with others
- Because a lot of my friends are on them
- To share my opinion
- To research/find products to buy
- To meet new people. (p. 2)

This survey questioned internet users ages 16-64 years old and had a survey sample of 77,814 people. Additionally, it has been found through a 2017 survey that four in 10 people use social media to get news updates or receive information about political candidates. This means that just less than half of the people surveyed use social media to receive information from news sources or political candidates. Although these numbers can be encouraging to a campaign, it is important to note that not all social media users searching for news on politicians are in every campaign's target market. This means Rep. Aguilar's campaign will still have to clearly define his target market within the

group of people who use social media often and are interested in the social issues of the #DearPete campaign.

#DearPete Campaign Audience

One of the main campaign strategies for running a social media campaign is to narrow down and research the target market. After researching Rep. Aguilar's website, the only target audience noted was his constituents. The Official Pete Aguilar press release (U.S. Representative Pete Aguilar, 2017) stated,

Today, Rep. Pete Aguilar announced a new social media campaign, #DearPete, to highlight his focus on accessibility and responsiveness to constituents of California's 31st Congressional District. Each week, Rep. Aguilar will share a letter he receives from a constituent, as well as his handwritten response. (para. 1)

Based on this information, the only discernable target audience would be constituents of the 31st Congressional District or members of San Bernardino County. This would not make an ideal target market because as of 2019, San Bernardino County was made up of 2.18 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

Additionally, San Bernardino County (n.d.) is one of the largest counties in the United States and has 24 incorporated cities and towns in the county. All cities are not created equal, so it would be difficult for Rep. Aguilar to reach all of these people throughout the course of this campaign. Rep. Aguilar's website does mention one additional hint as to who his target audience is: some middle-class San Bernardino County residents. Pew Research considers middle class to be between \$59,702 and \$179,105 per year. The *New York Times* defined Inland Empire middle income between \$60,336 and \$211, 177 (Cowan, 2019). So it could be assumed, Rep. Aguilar made an

extremely general target audience. However, the researcher does acknowledge that the campaign may have a strategy that is not available to the public, making the true target audience unknown.

Different communication literature has noted the importance of prioritizing the target audience to make a campaign successful and effective. Although they are often not publicized, the information is normally included in a press release to help the media share with the intended audience. For this reason, the researcher will assume the target audience was not prioritized for this campaign.

Based on the information stated on Aguilar's website, he is the voice for middle class San Bernardino residents; however, many of his political agenda items are aimed at low income or disenfranchised groups of people. Also, Aguilar noted in his press release that he would post weekly responses from his constituents, meaning he was targeting social media users who are at least weekly users. Based on the social media norms established earlier, the randomness of Aguilar's posts are targeted toward people who use social media often. His posts were irregular and not often posted on a specific day such as "Tuesday of each week," so it can be assumed that his posts were aimed at people who are daily social media users who use social media as a tool to learn more about politicians.

Social Information Processing Theory

The social information processing (SIP) theory explains how people get to know one another online without nonverbal cues and how they develop and manage relationships in the computer-mediated environment (Braithwaite & Schrodt, 2014; Walther, 1992). The theory developed by Walther in 1992 argued that relationships built

online may take longer than those developed in person or face-to-face (FTF) but can have the same qualities and dimensions as in-person relationships. Additionally, SIP explores the ideas that online relationships can start between people who otherwise would not know each other. The theory is rooted in the idea that relationships grow as people develop impressions of one another based on social information.

For example, people who become “Facebook friends” but may never have met face-to-face. Overtime, individuals may engage in sharing personal information with each other and develop a relationship based on that information. A close personal relationship can develop with the absence of verbal cues and other social indicators that are normally present during conversations or just being in a person’s presence.

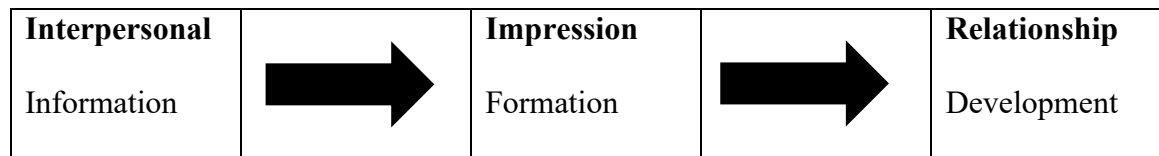
When speaking of developing online relationships, this also includes the process of encouraging online engagement. Over time, followers of certain accounts establish expectations from a brand or politician or build a relationship with them online. This may come in the form of leaving comments on someone’s page or having two-way communications via comments or direct messaging. Figure 7 demonstrates how the theory involves information helping people online form impressions about others, which can lead to the development of a relationship.

This theory relates to the #DearPete campaign because Rep. Aguilar started the #DearPete campaign with the intent to encourage engagement. Each post was aimed to create an avenue for more effective online communication and show his audience through his social media posts, where he stands on issues important to his constituents. Aguilar noted in his press release that communicating with local politicians is not easy unless there is a direct connection to the person. This campaign allowed for those otherwise

shut out from communicating with their representatives to write letters and to see his response through various social media accounts. Over time, it appears the goal is for his social media followers to adopt trust and confidence in his campaign. SIP theory starts to work when his users begin to build a relationship with the Aguilar campaign through his posts.

Figure 7

Components of the Social Information Processing Theory



Note. From “Walther’s Social Information Processing Theory” [PowerPoint slides], by J. R. Porter, 2013, Slideshare, Slide 17 (<https://www.slideshare.net/jemaimaraeporter/walthers-social-information-processing-theory>).

Summary

The development of social media has a long history, which began with traditional sources such as the newspaper, radio, and television. As information sharing became more efficient, the spread of information also became more frequent. This caused a need for information to be prioritized to make sure the most important topics received top coverage. The agenda-setting theory by McCombs and Shaw (1972) helped to understand the media’s role in shaping what the public sees. This theory has grown overtime and has started to include social media reporting as well. However, agenda setting in social media terms only deals with the framing of ideas for the public, not how people respond to it. For this reason, the researcher also used the SIP theory to discuss

the aspect of engagement and building online relationships. These two theories were used to explore Rep. Pete Aguilar's social media campaign #DearPete and how he used Facebook and Twitter to share his messaging with constituents.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative content analysis to evaluate the influence of political candidate-generated Facebook and Twitter posts of Pete Aguilar's campaign #DearPete. The study measured the number, prominence, and subject of each post while comparing each post to Rep. Pete Aguilar's speeches and website content. In particular, this study examined Rep. Pete Aguilar's political agenda by using his website and speech transcripts to determine his campaign agenda during the 2018 midterm elections. The Facebook and Twitter posts were then compared to the transcripts to find themes and determine whether his Twitter and Facebook posts reflected his political agenda. The purpose was to understand whether political social media campaigns have an impact on the public's perception of the candidate's values during an election.

This study utilized a content analysis method, which is any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages (Holsti, 1969; Lai & To, 2015). The purpose of using content analysis is to "reduce the complexity of qualitative, textual data so that it can be more easily and reliably understood" (Dooley, 2016, p. 244). Content analysis is described as "the systematic reading of a body of texts, images, and symbolic matter, not necessarily from an author's or user's perspective" (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 21). Additionally, Berelson (1952, as cited in Krippendorff, 2004) explained content analysis as "a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (p. 19).

Wimmer and Dominick (2011) considered content analysis to be beneficial because it can identify trends over long periods of time. In this research, the content

examined was the Facebook and Twitter posts by Rep. Pete Aguilar between January 2017 and November 2018 as well as the comments on each post left by the public.

Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health (2019) cited the following reasons as advantages of content analysis including (a) provides valuable historical and cultural insights over time, (b) provides insights into complex models of human thought and language use; (c) directly examines communication using text; and (d) useful for analyzing historical material, especially for documenting trends over time. This research used content analysis in coordination with many of the ideas listed to document how Rep. Pete Aguilar used his social media channels as a communication tool with his followers to express his political agenda. Also, this method helped determine whether his communication tactics followed any specific trends during his campaign such as using certain phraseology in his posts or only responding to comments with topics related to his campaign initiatives.

Additionally, Colorado State University stated conducting a content analysis enables a more objective evaluation than comparing content based on the impressions of a listener (List, 2007). Colorado State University (2019) listed the following advantages to conducting a content analysis: (a) looks directly at communication via texts or transcripts and gets at the central aspect of social interaction; (b) is an unobtrusive means of analyzing interactions; and (c) provides insight into complex models of human thought and language use. This research benefited from content analysis by exploring social media posts and reactions to better understand the potential connection between a candidate's use of social media and its influence on the public.

The disadvantages of using content analysis are the method was considered time consuming and impractical in the past. Additionally, content analysis allows for higher rates of human error because the method calls for a researcher to code and classify all of the information, leaving a lot of information open to interpretation. Colorado State University (2019) cited other disadvantages of using content analysis as a research method as it

- is often being devoid of theoretical base, or attempts too liberally to draw meaningful inferences about the relationships and impacts implied in a study
- tends too often to simply consist of word counts
- often disregards the context that produced the text as well as the state of things after the text is produced
- can be difficult to automate or computerize. (para. 1)

When collecting a large amount of data, using a content analysis method may be an issue when it comes to sorting and extracting meaningful information from the raw data. It was important in this research to eliminate as many opportunities for human error as possible to maintain the integrity of the data and attempt to ensure that if the experiment were performed a second time, the results would remain the same.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to examine Rep. Pete Aguilar's social media campaign #DearPete and the consistency between his stated political agenda that appears on his official website (<https://aguilar.house.gov>) and the content posted to his various social media platforms. The timeframe of the research was between January 2017 and October 2018 and focused specifically on his Facebook and Twitter social media

platforms. The research focused only on the social media posts and comments that used the hashtag #DearPete and that were posted from the representative's official government Facebook and Twitter accounts. Posts that were made during this timeframe but did not use the hashtag were not considered for this study.

Understanding the role that social media may play in the political arena may change the way campaigns are run, how audiences are targeted, and could potentially change the way local politicians engage with their constituents. This research will benefit politicians in their search to better connect with the public, help social media platforms understand their potential influence on local elections, and help the public or social media end users understand the messaging being presented to them. Finally, the research will contribute to the small but growing body of literature on social media's potential influence on elections.

The results may also change the way local governments, politicians, and campaign managers use social media to engage with the public. This research may help campaign officials in local elections start to understand their role as the gatekeeper of the truth when they choose social media campaign methods. Their role becomes much more critical to share information that is truthful and will not undermine the credibility of the election process. Local elections tend to have a much smaller media presence and less reach than presidential campaigns; this research intends to help campaign managers and local candidates understand the possible repercussions of an election may not be ethical.

Research Question

1. How did Rep. Pete Aguilar's social media campaign #DearPete reflect his political agenda during the 2018 midterm elections?

Research Design

This research utilized a content analysis research design to examine U.S. Rep. for District 36 Pete Aguilar's social media campaign during the 2018 elections. The two types of content examined in this study are manifest and latent content. According to Edelman (2013), manifest content is the actual word, phrase, character, item, or space or time measure counted. In other words, manifest content is the surface content that can be seen and counted. For the purposes of this research, the manifest content was the Facebook and Twitter posts from Aguilar along with the responses from the public.

The second type of content is latent content, which is the implicit message that is often implied but is not present in text or images (Michaelson & Stacks, 2011; Shortell, n.d.) and must be interpreted by the researcher. For example, in a tweet, the latent content is the underlying message that the tweet is speaking about. Latent content was researched because understanding its role in social media political campaigns can help "gauge the level of reciprocity in social interactions and could shed light on the factors that motivate interactions (Brewer & Rickels, 2014). For example, in this study the researcher counted the frequency of the word "immigration" in both Rep. Pete's letters (see Appendix A) to constituents and in the comments under his #DearPete posts (see Appendix B) to determine whether his messages were being interpreted to those who engage with him on social media. This portion of the study tested the political agenda concerning the agenda setting model.

Latent content is valid because it is quantifiable, counting the number of times a word appears over a select period of time, which in this research helped to pinpoint the way Aguilar used social media as a method to set his political agenda. However, latent

content is also heavily based on the interpretation, which creates reliability issues because it may lead to different results if the data were coded for a second time or a different researcher performed the same study. For this reason, latent content can be considered to be unreliable because it is open to the interpretation of the researchers, and they may unintentionally place their own biases on the data.

Population

Social media is a dynamic tool, and the constant uploading, sharing, or reposting (retweeting) of information required the need for strict parameters when selecting a timeframe to be included in this study. This study analyzed the manifest and latent content to examine the Facebook and Twitter posts of 2018 election candidate Pete Aguilar specifically, a sample of his individual Facebook posts and Twitter posts between the months of January 2017 and October 2018. The candidate was chosen based on his activity on social media leading up to the election, his participation in the 2018 election cycle, his location in the Inland Empire, and his use of both Facebook and Twitter social media platforms.

The responses of the social media posts were also examined as a comparison to the post by Aguilar. The only social media comments that were included in this study were those left on the original (not reposted) tweets or Facebook Messages of social media posts about the #DearPete campaign. This parameter was put in place to monitor whether the public is using the same terms as Pete when responding to his campaign in an attempt to establish a relationship between his #DearPete letters and the way his Facebook and Twitter followers interpret his messages. The followers included were not filtered based on age, gender, location, or political affiliation as that information was not

critical to understanding whether a social media campaign is helpful in setting a political agenda.

The first step in selecting the sample was to choose the subject of the study, which is why Rep. Pete Aguilar's social media campaign became the most reasonable choice for this study because he is not a candidate who receives a large amount of national or local media coverage. This was an important factor for the researcher because this helped to narrow down the agenda-setting influences on the campaign. For example, if Aguilar received a large amount of media coverage, it would be difficult to gauge whether the responses on the social media posts were generated from the actual post or from outside influences. Pete's relatively low profile helped with the idea that the responses to the #DearPete posts were a direct result of interacting with specific social media posts.

The second step involved choosing the timeframe for the study. Because the goal was to determine the influence of social media posts during an election campaign, the timeframe was specifically chosen in the parameters between January 2017 and October 2018. During an election is a critical time when most candidates are campaigning and gathering information about their rivals and their intended audiences. This timeframe also offered the highest number of tweets and posts as Rep. Pete Aguilar had a total of 389 Facebook posts between January 2017 and October 2018. During this timeframe, Aguilar also posted 700 tweets to his twitter account @RepPeteAguilar. The timeframe encompasses 638 days or 1 year and 9 months of the campaign.

The researcher used this specific timeframe because the social media campaign began in January 2017 and was still a feature of his time in office; however, this research ended in October 2018 as it marked the month before the 2018 local election. The

research only focused on the time period that the campaign was announced in January and the end of the election period in October before Rep. Pete Aguilar was reelected to his seat in congress. It is also important to note, this time period includes the most influential time of an election, which occurs in September near Labor Day through November. According to Masket (2019) of the *Pacific Standard Magazine*, this time period is the most influential time in an election because candidates spend a bulk of their time traveling, spending, and advertising to gain those voters who remain undecided.

It was important to capture this timeframe because it may also shed light on the period of time that election campaigning has the most impact on social media followers. Deciding the type of posts to be included in the study was the next step. On both social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter, Pete Aguilar used the hashtag #DearPete, and those were the posts included in this study. The only criteria for the posts to be included was the use of the hashtag #DearPete. Additionally, the only comments by Aguilar's followers that were included were those with the #DearPete hashtag or comments responding to a #DearPete post.

Social Media Platforms

Facebook

Facebook is a popular free social networking site (SNS) that allows registered users to create profile pages about themselves, upload photos and videos, send messages, make new friends, and share information with friends, family, and colleagues (Brown-Peterson, 2017). The site has quickly become one of the top ten largest websites in the world and has 2.7 billion users globally. According to the Facebook website, the company's mission is to give people the power to build community and bring the world

closer together (Chakrabarti, 2018). Most recently, after the 2016 presidential election, Facebook made it a company goal to create a place “to give people a simple way to learn about what’s happening at all levels of their government” (Wagner, 2017, para. 3). Users on Facebook develop a Facebook network, which is a web of people who are “friends” on Facebook. The term expresses the inherent sense of connectivity users experience on the Facebook platform where a web of updates and information are delivered to users from all the people they are connected to (Cooper, 2018).

Based on the agenda setting model, sharing a policy agenda on a platform where almost 55% of people within a voting age occasionally engage with the new creates a major opportunity for a politician’s message to be sent directly to the targeted population. Facebook eliminates the need for a middle media filtering through the news to provide their idea of the most important news story. Facebook is also used as a key social media platform because as the trend in misinformation on social media continues, receiving policy news or the opinions of a politician directly from a verified source is beneficial for both the candidate and the follower.

Twitter

Twitter is a social network and media platform that enables users to publish 140-character messages along with photos, videos, and other content. Twitter is famous for its real-time and emergent discussion on breaking news stories and trends (Cooper, 2018). Users share thoughts or news stories through “tweets” which are messages sent on Twitter. Tweets can contain up to 140-characters of text as well as photos, videos, and other forms of media. They are public by default and will show up

in Twitter timelines and search unless they are sent from protected accounts or as direct messages. Tweets can also be embedded in webpages (Cooper, 2018).

Pew researchers Wojcik and Hughes (2019) described Twitter as a modern public square. A public square is a reference to an “American colonial village square which published the [early versions of] pamphlets and newspapers that advocated the birth of a new nation” (Pell Center for International Relations and Public Policy, n.d., para. 3). Many people use Twitter as a source to gather news and current information while sharing or interacting with their own followers. As of 2019, Twitter boasted an estimated 330 million users with 500 million tweets sent per day (Aslam, 2019). This is a large number of users who provide a massive platform for politicians to spread their personal messages. Much like Facebook, Twitter allows Rep. Pete Aguilar to share direct messages with his followers instead of sharing his message with the media in hopes of his followers seeing the message in the traditional media.

For this research, Twitter was used because it is another platform on which Aguilar shared his #DearPete campaign. Although Twitter began as a platform that started as a means for friends to interact with each other, it has evolved into a platform that encourages global interactions. Eighty-five percent of trending topics on Twitter are headline news or persistent news in nature (Kwak et al., 2010). During the timeframe of this research, January 2017 and October 2018, tweets shared by Rep. Pete Aguilar were considered persistent news because he regularly shared his policy information through his #DearPete letters. Either those interested in the news he shares will search for his page to find the information, or it may populate on their page if they have followed his page. Another way someone may find his message is if Aguilar’s tweet is shared to someone

who is not following him, exposing him or her to his message. This process removes the need for a middle channel to share the message with the public.

Another reason Twitter was included is that the demographic of users for Twitter are different from those on Facebook. Although this research does not focus on the age of those engaging with Rep. Pete Aguilar, it is important to note that a large number of Twitter users are younger than those on Facebook and Twitter has a higher number of male users. Facebook is mostly popular among people from 25 to 34 who account for 58.3 million users or 84% (Walton, 2019). On the other hand, Twitter has the largest number of users between the ages of 18 and 24 years old who account for 44% of its users. This difference may provide different results as people in different age groups may engage on Twitter with politicians online differently than those on Facebook.

The younger demographic of social media users is also more likely to use social media as a source of news over an older audience who are more likely to view traditional news sources, such as the television or radio, as their main news source. Much like those on Facebook who follow Rep. Aguilar for news content, the issue of the media agenda setting has been bypassed, and Twitter users receive direct news content from Aguilar.

Sample

Rep. Pete Aguilar's post on this platform was examined because Facebook serves as one of the largest social media platforms and one of the main ways Aguilar communicates with the public. Since Facebook began, the social media site has transformed from a site made for friends to communication and reconnect to an avenue made for businesses and politicians to connect with customers and voters without spending much money or time trying to contact them. Politicians are also able to target

specific demographics to share different messages with. For this study, it was important that the messages were shared with local voters who live within the Inland Empire because they are the most important market for a local politician. Facebook allows for messages to be shared with certain demographics and geographic locations to share the best message to connect with that group.

Instrumentation

A coding scheme and sheet was developed to analyze both the Facebook and Twitter comments of Pete Aguilar and his social media following. The coding scheme was based on Dearing and Rogers's (1996) agenda-setting process.

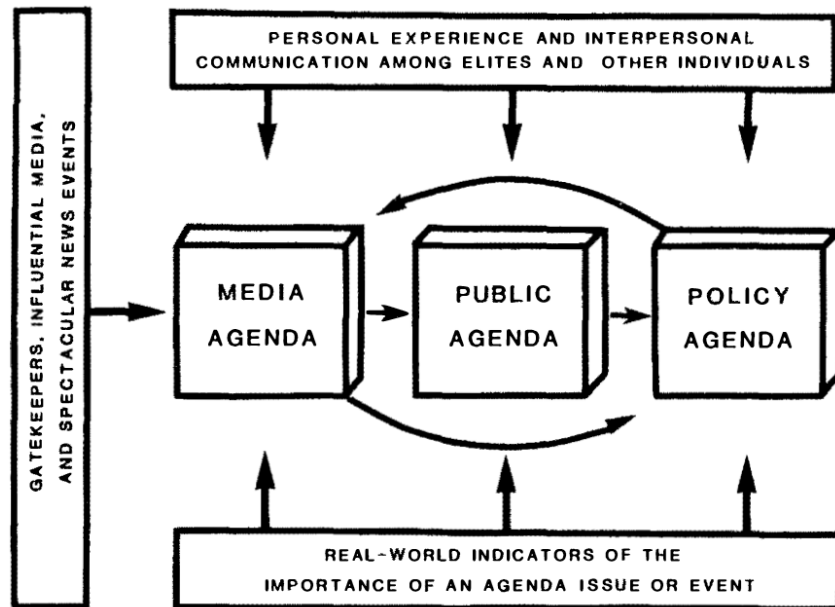
Figure 1 (reproduced here for convenience) shows the first step in the agenda-setting process is for an event to occur. Brewer and deLeon (1983) also called this phase the recognition of the problem and went on to describe,

Without the perception of a problem, threat or opportunity there is no incentive for the organization to disturb the status quo, or, in our terms, to expend organizational energy initiating the policy process. Recognition is a function of both information received and one's ability to interpret it. The linkage between the individual and organizational recognition is crucial. Thus, we examine recognition of the problem as both an individual and an organizational phenomenon. (p. 33)

The process includes an event being deemed important by gatekeepers and influential media, the media agenda, the public agenda, and the policy agenda. The process also includes external factors such as personal experience, interpersonal communication, and real-work indicators of the importance of an agenda issue or event.

Figure 1

The Three Main Components of Agenda-Setting Process: The Media Agenda, Public Agenda, and Policy Agenda



Note. From *Agenda-Setting*, by James W. Dearing and Everett M. Rogers, p. 5, 1996, Sage Publications. Copyright 1996 by Sage Publications.

The codebook in this study was separated into two parts. Part 1 examined the Twitter and Facebook posts posted by both candidates. Part 2 analyzed the individual posts from the public. Both stages were coded based on the agenda-setting process defined by Dearing and Rogers in 1996. Many elements of the coding sheet were adjusted from the Media and The Public Interest Initiative from Rutgers University coding sheets. A portion of the coding sheet covers two elements of the agenda-setting process. This coding sheet was created to gather information on the topic addressed and the total number of comments, shares, and likes (on Facebook) or Favorites (on Twitter).

Data Collection

The data collection began after written permission had been received from California Baptist University's Institutional Review Board. Utilizing the search engine on both the Facebook and Twitter platforms, the researcher conducted an investigation of the content on two of the most popular social media sources. The search was targeted at the phrase "Dear Pete Aguilar," which is the name of the social media campaign ran by Rep. Aguilar. There were an estimated 400 individual Facebook posts and 700 tweets that were selected for analysis.

The data on Facebook and Twitter were selected based primarily on being posted to either social media platform between the date ranges of January 2017 to October 2018. This date range includes the announcement of the social media campaign to the culmination of the campaign resulting in voter turnout. Additionally, the post must have been from Rep. Aguilar's accounts with the hashtag "DearPete." External user posting fitting the same criteria were not considered part of this data set.

Pete Aguilar's Website

For this research, information was collected from Rep. Pete Aguilar's official website (<https://aguilar.house.gov/>). The website was used to collect key phrases and keywords about his political agenda. These phrases were then compared to Rep. Aguilar's #DearPete posts to determine whether he used those same key words and phrases to share his political agenda with his social media followers. The information collected from the website were from the following pages:

- Biography – Information about Rep. Pete Aguilar including his personal background and his

- Committees and caucuses – A brief history of the committees and caucuses that Rep. Aguilar has served on during his time in government.
- On the Issues – A listing of the main issues that Pete Aguilar has prioritized during his 2018 political campaign.

The phrases that were collected from these pages were related to Pete Aguilar's campaign agenda such as supporting veterans, Inland Empire economy, women's rights, affordable higher education, and climate change.

Facebook and Twitter Data Collection

To retrieve Facebook posts, the researcher used the search function on Facebook to search for the terms "Pete Aguilar" and "Dear Pete" to find original posts for the #DearPete campaign. These posts must also have originated from Rep. Pete Aguilar's official Facebook Account. The details that were collected from Pete Aguilar's Facebook posts and the comments associated with each post were collected and compiled in a Microsoft Excel sheet to develop a database.

To retrieve tweets for this study, the researcher manually pulled data from Facebook and Twitter using the advanced search filters on both sites. Because the data on social media move so quickly, performing multiple searches using different criteria helped to find official data related to Pete Aguilar and the #DearPete hashtag.

Methods of Ethics and Confidentiality

To obtain informed consent, the researcher noted the intent of the research and any risks involved. The first step in performing an ethical study was to submit an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application and receive proper approval (Thoene, 2012). Although the research did not include confidential data, the researcher provided

detailed information about procedures, benefits, and risks of participating in the research and contact information of the researcher. The data were collected in an unbiased manner, and access to research data was based on a “need-to-know” and a “minimum necessary” standard (University of California Irvine, 2019).

Data Analysis

Shah and Jha (2018) stated that content analysis is seen as a popular method for analyzing tools for communication because it focuses on the “characteristics of the language in the communication with attention to the content or context of the meaning of the text” (Fuduric & Mandelli, 2014, para. 4). This research used interpretive analysis techniques to search for meaning and context of the text of the #Dear social media campaign.

Once all data had been collected, the researcher compiled each post into a Microsoft Excel Sheet and assigned each post a unique ID. The data were then coded according to the codebook using buzzwords and categories to sort the data (see Appendix C).

- Coding categories. The data that were extracted from the social media posts were specific points that showed an attempt to share Rep. Aguilar’s political agenda through his campaign. The first set of data points were Level 1 information, which just provided data about each post information including the following:
 - Social media. This variable will need to be coded according to the social media platforms relevant to this study: (a) Facebook or (b) Twitter

- Date. The date is the date the post or tweet was published. For this research, the following format is used: DD-month abbreviation-year (e.g., 05-May-2017)
- Word. Enter the word length of the post or tweet.
- Type. Choose a code for the type of post being analyzed.
 1. Facebook post
 2. Facebook post via share
 3. Facebook comment
 4. Tweet
 5. Retweet
 6. Twitter comment
- Author. Record the original author of the Facebook post or the tweet.
- Image included. Identify whether an image was included with the post.
 1. Yes – Facebook
 2. No image – Facebook
 3. Yes – Twitter
 4. No image – Twitter

The first level of coding was intended to provide basic background information about each post to ensure the data being collected fit the criteria for the study. This also helped to sift through the data to “gain the insight necessary to answer your research question based on the data” (Hahn, 2008, p. 86). Because the #DearPete campaign continued past the timeframe of this research, these posts ensured the data collected fit into the parameters of the requirements of the study.

The second level of coding examined further the content of each post including the category that related back to the agenda setting theory. The categories included media agenda, public agenda, and policy agenda. Next, the buzzword or indicator was documented. The buzzwords were directly related to the policy agendas that Aguilar stated on his website including veterans, Inland Empire economy, women's rights, immigration, affordable higher education, seniors, environment and climate change, or other. Each social media post with the hashtag #DearPete was examined to see whether it related to one of these topics the congressman stated are a part of his political agenda. Additionally, Level 2 coding included a copy of the actual social media post as a reference.

The final analysis was then be run through the qualitative analysis software, NVivo, which is used for qualitative research methods and is recommended for the analysis of social media data (Evasys, 2019).

Limitations

The disadvantages of using content analysis are that the method was considered time consuming and impractical in the past. Additionally, content analysis allows for higher rates of human error because the method calls for a researcher to code and classify all of the information, leaving a lot of information open to interpretation.

Summary

The methodology section uses a qualitative content analysis to evaluate the influence of political candidate-generated Facebook and Twitter posts of Pete Aguilar's campaign #DearPete. The study examined the number, prominence, and subject of each post while comparing each post to Rep. Pete Aguilar's speeches and website content. In

particular, this study examined Rep. Pete Aguilar's political agenda by using his website and speech transcripts to determine his campaign agenda during the 2018 midterm elections. The Facebook and Twitter posts were then compared to the transcripts to find themes and determine whether his Twitter and Facebook posts reflected his political agenda. The purpose was to understand whether political social media campaigns have an impact on the public's perception of the candidate's values during an election.

Rep. Pete Aguilar's posts on this platform were examined because Facebook serves as one of the largest social media platforms and one of the main ways Aguilar communicates with the public. Once all data had been collected, the researcher compiled each post into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and assigned each post a unique ID. The data were then coded according to the codebook using buzzwords and categories to sort the data.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter presents the results of the content analysis for Pete Aguilar's social media campaign #DearPete. The researcher used Facebook and Twitter to search for relevant social media posts within this campaign to understand whether the representative was using his campaign as a tool for agenda setting. This research used a content analysis method to conduct the research and tables to present the data.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to examine Rep. Pete Aguilar's social media campaign #DearPete and the consistency between his stated political agenda that appears on his official website (<https://aguilar.house.gov>) and the content posted to his various social media platforms. The timeframe of the research was between January 2017 and October 2018 and focused specifically on his Facebook and Twitter social media platforms. The research focused only on the social media posts and comments that used the hashtag #DearPete and that were posted from the representative's official government Facebook and Twitter accounts. Posts that were made during this timeframe but did not use the hashtag were not considered for this study.

The research focused only on the original social media posts by Rep. Aguilar and comments that are direct responses to Aguilar's post. The study did not examine the validity of the social media posts and did not focus on whether the candidate won or lost the election. Understanding the role that social media may play in the political arena may change the way campaigns are run, how audiences are targeted, and could potentially change the way local politicians engage with their constituents. The results may also

change the way local governments, politicians, and campaign managers use social media to engage with the public. This research will benefit politicians in their search to better connect with the public, help social media platforms understand their potential influence on local elections, and help the public or social media end users understand the messaging being presented to them. Finally, the research will contribute to the small but growing body of literature on social media's potential influence on elections.

Research Question

1. How did Rep. Pete Aguilar's social media campaign #DearPete reflect his political agenda during the 2018 midterm elections?

Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures

Data Collection

The first step in data collection was to determine Rep. Pete Aguilar's political agenda by pulling key terms posted on his website. Based on Aguilar's website page, "On the Issues," his political agenda focused on the following topics: (a) supporting our veterans, (b) growing the Inland Empire economy, (c) standing up for women's rights, (d) making higher education affordable, (e) helping seniors retire with dignity, and (f) protecting the environment and fighting climate change. These six terms were held as his political agenda, and the following research used these terms as the keywords to search for in his social media campaign #DearPete.

The researcher performed two sets of data collection to try to ensure the right amount of data was gathered for the period. Both Facebook and Twitter are constantly moving information sources that can be difficult to reproduce the same results multiple times. For this reason, the researcher first pulled data from both social media sites using

manual searches. The information was then stored in an Excel document on a private laptop and a separate external hard drive for backup with data that were only available to the researcher. The Excel sheet for manually gathered data was divided into the following sections:

1. Article_ID: This is the article identity code that was assigned to the social media post. The code follows the format, year/month/day/social media platform abbreviation/number of post (e.g., 20170102FB52).
2. Date of message (between 1/2017 – 10/2018): The date is the date the post or tweet was published. For this research, the following format was used: DD-month abbreviation-year (e.g., 05-May-2017).
3. Type of social media (Facebook or Twitter): This variable specifies whether the post was posted on either Facebook or Twitter.
4. Author: This is a record of the original author of the Facebook post or the tweet. This information was recorded to ensure the data included in the research had been posted by an official Rep. Pete Aguilar social media account.
5. Image included (Y/N): This criterion helped to give more information on the types of post that Rep. Aguilar posted during this timeframe and during the social media campaign.
6. Tweet or Facebook post: Specifying where the comment was posted helped during data analysis to see whether Rep. Aguilar communicated different messages to his followers on the different social media platforms. As Facebook and Twitter are used by different demographics, noting the site where the post

was made helped the researcher understand the intentions of each post during analysis.

7. Likes or comments: Likes and comments are another metric gathered for this research to determine whether the comments left under each post included statements reflecting Aguilar's political agenda.
8. Buzzwords or indicators: Each original post was analyzed to find the keywords listed on Rep. Pete Aguilar's website to determine whether he used those same keywords to communicate with the public.

Facebook Data Collection

To collect data, the researcher used Facebook.com to collect the first set of data. These data were gathered by using the Facebook.com search page to filter posts by Pete Aguilar and the hashtag "#DearPete." The first step was to enter specific search criteria on the search page to eliminate posts that were not related to the #DearPete social media campaign. The options on the search page were (a) Sort, which included the options to select top posts or most recent. This research sorted by both options to ensure all posts were captured during the research timeframe and (b) The researcher set a filter to only see posts from Rep. Pete Aguilar because his social media campaign only posts #DearPete posts from his official social media accounts.

Next, the post type was chosen. There are two options that were "All Posts," which show all posts that met the search criteria. This included any post by anyone on Facebook using the Hashtag #DearPete. This search option yielded fourteen results with three of the posts fitting into the criteria of this research. The other search option under

post type was “post you’ve seen,” which was the option to view posts the Facebook user has viewed in the past. For this search, there were no results.

Following post type, the next section featured filters for posts that may have been posted in a group. For this research, the default filter was used, which was titled “Any Group,” which was for all posts that may be included in a group. The second choice was “Your Groups,” which would yield results from Facebook groups the researcher is included in. This function was not used because the research does not cover posts that have been shared with certain groups or only with the researcher. This study only relied on posts that were for the public.

The next section with optional filters was “Tagged Location,” which allowed the user to view images that were posted to Facebook with specific locations. Facebook calls this feature “Location Services” and describes it as

A setting on the user’s phone or other mobile device. When on, location services helps Facebook provide the user with location features including allowing the user to post content that’s tagged with their location, get more relevant ads, find places and Wi-Fi nearby and use Nearby Friends. (Facebook, n.d., para. 1)

On the search page, tagged locations allowed the user to search for posts based on specific locations. The researcher had four top options, which included “anywhere,” “Los Angeles, California,” “Riverside, California,” and the option to choose a specific location.

For the purposes of this research, the researcher used the general filter of “anywhere” to gather the highest number of results and the most relevant choices for this research. As the topic of this study focused on how Rep. Pete Aguilar’s social media

campaign reflected his political agenda during the 2018 midterm elections, the location of his posts was not relevant, and the location of his followers who engage with him was not relevant to the topic of this study either.

The final filter option was “Date Posted,” which represented the date the post was uploaded to Facebook. This section allowed the user to sort by year (2020, 2019, 2018, etc.) or by the month and the year (January 2020, February 2019, March 2018, etc.). The researcher used different filters to ensure all posts for a specific year were captured for the research. This research included research from any date, 2017 and 2018. An advantage of using the filter system to include only specific years is that it gave a smaller number of search options that were easier to record.

To confirm that all posts were collected from the Facebook search, the researcher removed all filters from the search to receive all posts, even those unrelated to the social media campaign. The researcher then sorted through all posts with the hashtag #DearPete to collect any posts that may not have been included in the filtered data search. The unfiltered search yielded no extra results for the search term #DearPete during this timeframe.

In total, Rep. Pete Aguilar made three posts related to the social media campaign from January 2017 to October 2018 with the first post introducing the social media campaign on April 27, 2017. The last post during this social media campaign was on July 27, 2018. This made the duration of his #DearPete Facebook social media campaign 456 days.

Twitter Data Collection

Twitter is a microblogging site in which tweets show up in the order they happen. The social networking and media platform enables users to post public 140-character messages along with photos, videos, and other content. The site is famous for its real-time and emergent discussion on breaking news stories and trends (Cooper, 2018). To capture the right information for this research, the researcher used the platform's advanced search options, which allowed for narrowing of the topics from specific users during different times.

The information needed from Twitter included information similar to the information gathered from Facebook, including the date, time, platform, number of comments on each post, and the number of likes or retweets associated with the original tweet. The first step in data collection was to use the advanced search filter to find all related #DearPete posts by Rep. Pete Aguilar or his official government social media account.

The first #DearPete post on Twitter was posted on April 27, 2017, and the last post within this timeframe was July 27, 2018. During the first 3 months of the social media campaign, Rep. Aguilar posted a #DearPete post each week with a different topic; however, his regular posting of the campaign halted after July 13, 2017 and did not resume until a year later on July 27, 2018. Following the July 2018 post, the social media campaign appeared to stop again but resumed during a time that is not being accounted for during this research.

One limitation to the general (not advanced) Twitter search function is that the search results are not listed in chronological order as to when they are posted. For

example, a general search for #DearPete gives options listed by popularity (top), most recent (latest), the original poster (people), photos associated with the post or videos with the same hashtag. This provided an issue when the researcher was trying to collect data within the timeframe of 1 year because posts that were not as popular as others but fit within the search criteria may have been missed. For this reason, the advanced search filter was used as the primary search function through this platform.

Another limitation to the Twitter search function occurs when comments on certain posts are removed but still counted for. For some of the search results, comments were accounted for, but the comment was no longer listed under the post. According to Twitter, this is a built-in feature called hidden replies and occurs for two reasons: (a) The post is made from a protected account and is not available to those who do not follow the commenter; or (b) If a hidden reply is deleted by the author, it will no longer show up in that section (Twitter, n.d.-b).

Presentation and Analysis of Data

To analyze how Rep. Pete Aguilar's social media campaign reflected his political agenda, each of his posts with the hashtag #DearPete was documented in Microsoft Excel and saved to the researcher's personal computer and external hard drive. The information was then placed into a category based on one of the political agendas stated on his website (<https://peteaguilar.com>).

The data are presented by the Article ID, which is the unique number assigned to each one of Rep. Pete Aguilar's social media posts. The post topic represents the six foundational agendas that his political campaign is built on, including (a) supporting our veterans, (b) growing the Inland Empire economy, (c) standing up for women's rights,

(d) making higher education affordable, (e) helping seniors retire with dignity, and (f) protecting the environment and fighting climate change. The data collected including the posts and the comments were filtered and coded according to the topic of the post. The topic was decided based on the words used in the post and the overall content topic of the post.

With each post, the number of comments, likes, and shares or retweets were collected. The Article ID is the number assigned to each post. For example, Aguilar's first Facebook post is labeled as "Article_ID_1," and that is how it is referenced throughout this study. The post topic documents the assigned topic for each post. If the congressman uploaded a letter related to Planned Parenthood, the comment would be classified as "standing up for women's rights." These post topics are preset based on the agenda items listed by Aguilar on his website. However, throughout this study, it was noted that Aguilar posted on other topics during the timeframe of this research, and those were coded based on overall content themes decided by the researcher.

The number of comments (#of comments) documents the number of original comments left by Aguilar's followers. This did not include comments left on comments unless they were generated by Aguilar's official social media pages. This information was collected to gauge how Aguilar's social media posts were being received by his social media followers. The original comments are only presented because the comments from Aguilar's followers hold key information on how Aguilar's messages were being received. In addition to the number of comments, the researcher counted the number of comments per post that related to the original topic of the original post. The next area of

the table quantifies the data by showing a percentage of the comments that relate back to the original post.

Data Presentation

The data retrieved from the research are presented in table form based on the representative's stated political agenda. Each table includes the political agenda and data from both Facebook and Twitter social media accounts. The number of posts include how many total posts were made on the topic and how many related comments were received.

Supporting Our Veterans

The first political agenda is "supporting our veterans," which Aguilar described as (a) putting veterans back to work, (b) getting veterans access to quality health care, (c) ending veteran homelessness, and (d) connecting veterans with the federal resources they need and deserve (U.S. Representative Pete Aguilar, n.d.-e). This is in reference to the growing population of military veterans in the Inland Empire area, which according to the *San Bernardino Sun*, had over 100,000 veteran residents residing in the area during the years 2017-2018 (Emerson, 2019). Both social media accounts were searched for posts and tweets during the timeframe of this study.

Table 1 shows that during the duration of this research, Aguilar did not address this topic with a #DearPete post on either of his social media platforms (Facebook or Twitter). The phraseology used in his subagenda points related to supporting veterans was not used during this time either, for a value of $n = 0$.

Table 1*Supporting Our Veterans*

Platform	Number of posts	Related comments	Change
Facebook	0	0	0
Twitter	0	0	0
Total	0	0	0

Growing the Inland Empire Economy

Aguilar’s second political agenda is “growing the Inland Empire economy” and focuses on the representative’s advocacy “for middle-class families . . . by creating good-paying jobs for San Bernardino County residents” (para. 1). Additional terms that were searched related to this agenda were (a) the ADVANCE Act; (b) On-the-Job Training Tax Credit Act; (c) Recent Graduates in Start-Ups Act of 2018; (d) JOBS Act; (e) local Workforce Development Boards; (f) job fairs; (g) Inland Empire economy; and (h) Job for a Day (U.S. Representative Pete Aguilar, n.d.-a).

Table 2 shows that throughout this campaign, Rep. Aguilar also failed to mention Growing the Inland Empire Economy or any of the related search terms in any of his social media posts during the #DearPete campaign, bringing the total value to $n = 0$. Although he did reference his Inland Empire constituents often, he did not reference the economy while asking them to follow his social media accounts.

Table 2*Growing the Inland Empire Economy*

Platform	Number of posts	Related comments	Change
Facebook	0	0	0
Twitter	0	0	0
Total	0	0	0

Standing up for Women's Rights

The third topic, which is “standing up for women’s rights,” stands on the ideal that the fight for gender equality is a remaining fight, and women’s reproductive rights are under attack as well as pay equity. The subagendas that were included in this topic and subject research were (a) raising wages for working families, (b) quality education and affordable child care, (c) access to affordable reproductive health care, and (d) supporting women entrepreneurs.

The #DearPete campaign mentioned Standing Up for Women’s Rights a total of three times ($n = 3$) between both social media platforms. Table 3 shows Aguilar’s posts regarding women’s rights included supporting Planned Parenthood and the right for women to make their own decisions when it comes to their health. On Facebook, Aguilar made two posts about women’s rights during the timeframe of the study. The first post was Aguilar’s inaugural #DearPete post on Facebook on April 27, 2017 (see Appendix D):

I’m excited to kick off my #DearPete campaign! Be sure to check in as I post personal responses to constituents. I’m inspired by the letters, calls and social

media posts I've received. I hear you and I'm fighting for you. I hope residents will continue to stand up for their families, friends and neighbors by contacting their elected officials. My first post is for a San Bernardino resident who asked me about standing with #PlannedParenthood. Rest assured, #IStandWithPP.

(Rep. Pete Aguilar, 2017).

This post did not receive any social media responses that reacted directly to the subject of the post.

Table 3

Standing up for Women's Rights

Platform	Number of posts	Related comments	Change
Facebook	2	13	15%
Twitter	1	0	0%
Total	3	5	60%

Aguilar's second post on Facebook related to standing up for women's rights, received the most user engagement by receiving five ($n = 40\%$) of the relevant comments that directly related to the topic. Many of them were supportive comments, thanking Aguilar for his commitment to the issue or agreeing with his stance on the topic.

These posts are significant because on April 13, 2017, Donald Trump signed a bill that would allow states to block access to health care through Title X at health care facilities such as Planned Parenthood and other independent facilities (Planned Parenthood, 2017). This move was interpreted by the Planned Parenthood organization as a way to block women from receiving pertinent care related to birth control,

pregnancy, and other women-centric health issues. For perspective on this issue, Planned Parenthood issued a statement denouncing the government's decision by stating,

We should build on the tremendous progress made in this country with expanded access to birth control, instead of enacting policies that take us backward. Too many women still face barriers to health care, especially young women, women of color, those who live in rural areas, and women with low incomes. (para. 4)

For this set of posts, it seems Aguilar addressed these letters because the issue was one concerning many of his constituents.

Making Higher Education Affordable

The fourth political agenda item was the topic of making higher education affordable. The representative's website states that he is working to "increase opportunities for college-bound students and to help recent graduates find their financial footing as they enter the workforce" (U.S. Representative Pete Aguilar, n.d.-c, para. 1). Additional relatable search terms included (a) improving the student loan process, (b) accessing free community college, (c) protecting students from dangerous for-profit college practices, and (d) increasing access to Pell grants.

Table 4 outlines that throughout the timeframe for this study, there were no Facebook messages or tweets related to this topic. The major subject of making higher education affordable or the subsearch terms were not found throughout this period. One reason for the lack of mentions could be that no one submitted letters related to this topic, so there would not be any letters to post. Additionally, the topic could have been overshadowed by other current events and that is the reason for the lack of acknowledgement.

Table 4*Making Higher Education Affordable*

Platform	Number of Posts	Related Comments	Change
Facebook	0	0	0%
Twitter	0	0	0%
Total	0	0	0%

Helping Seniors Retire With Dignity

On the topic of helping seniors retire with dignity, there were a total of $n = 2$ posts between Facebook and Twitter. Table 5 lists accounts for both posts even though the posts were duplicates with the same message being posted on both social media platforms. The message, “Today I responded to Margaret’s letter to assure her that I’ll always fight to protect her hard-earned Social Security and Medicare. #DearPete” did not mention seniors retiring with dignity directly; however, Aguilar’s website described his take on the issue as “protecting essential programs that seniors depend on, including Social Security and Medicare” (U.S. Representative Pete Aguilar, n.d.-b, para. 1). Additionally, the other topics included in this search were (a) protecting and strengthening Medicare, (b) expanding Medicare benefits, (c) making Social Security work for seniors today and in the future, (d) protecting seniors from identity theft, and (e) serving seniors in our community.

In 2017, the topic of cutting Medicare and Social Security benefits to eligible citizens was on the table. A bill was passed to cut funding, which would impact customer service and had the potential to freeze operations entirely. This issue coincided with the

timing of these letters being written to Aguilar and to his choosing to respond to these issues via social media.

Table 5

Helping Seniors Retire With Dignity

Platform	Number of posts	Related comments	Change
Facebook	1	1	100%
Twitter	1	0	0%
Total	2	1	0%

On Facebook, the message received one relevant comment which questioned the politician on who challenged Medicare and Social Security. The message was not responded to by Aguilar. On Twitter, the message received less engagement than Facebook. The message did not receive any comments but did receive five retweets and 14 likes.

Protecting the Environment and Fighting Climate Change

The final political agenda stated by Rep. Aguilar is a commitment to protecting the environment and fighting climate change. He states that he is committed to “sustainability, to reduce pollution and has continuously opposed efforts to dismantle environmental protections” (U.S. Representative Pete Aguilar, n.d.-d, para. 1). To add to this larger idea of climate change and sustainability, the following ideas were also added to the keyword search: (a) strengthening environmental protections, (b) voting to save billions in energy costs, and (c) fighting for national parks.

Table 6 shows that the topic of climate change appeared once on Twitter with a response to a user with concerns about cleaning the environment: “This week’s #DearPete was to Kalaya, responding to her note about keeping our beaches clean and protecting the environment” (see Appendix E). The Twitter post received $n = 0$ comments, one retweet, and six likes. Although there were not many posts made about climate change, this message coincides with the signing of an Executive Order by President Donald Trump, which according to Merica (2017), aims “to curb the federal government’s enforcement of climate regulations by putting American jobs above addressing climate change” (para. 1).

Table 6

Protecting the Environment and Fighting Climate Change

Platform	Number of posts	Related comments	Change
Facebook	0	0	0%
Twitter	1	0	0%
Total	1	0	0%

Analysis of Data

The data show that Rep. Aguilar’s social media campaign did not keep the focus of his stated political agenda during his #DearPete campaign from January 2017 to October 2018. The significance of this is that the lack of focus on his agenda has the potential to show his constituents that he is less than committed to these core issues; therefore, he is not a candidate to vote for. In the political field, it is imperative for candidates to gain the trust of potential voters, which is often the reason they start

campaigns such as #DearPete. Lyfe Marketing (2019) firm stated that social media is “an essential way for companies to reach consumers, and . . . tell those consumers that their brand is active and focused on communication” (para. 9). With Aguilar’s lack of consistency and number of posts between his promoted political agenda and his social media presence, his followers may find that he is an active politician but does not follow up on issues that he deemed were important.

Additionally, for those who engage with Rep. Aguilar’s social media with the hopes of finding a worthy local political candidate, failing to discuss issues that are the foundation of a campaign may signal that he will not properly represent the people. In the American democratic system, the local government is often thought of as the most effective way to create change. Eisenstein (2019) of Diligent Insights agreed that representatives of the local or state government are expected to “work toward improving social, economic, and environmental viability and sustainability for the benefit of their district” (para. 5). Rep. Aguilar used his six political agendas as a base to improve the living conditions and growth potential of his constituents; however, his social media campaign often pointed toward focusing on current events, which often did not align with his political positions.

The researcher found that Rep. Pete Aguilar’s campaign did not meet the stated goals of his campaign. In the announcement of the social media campaign, the congressman stated, “Each week, Rep. Aguilar will share a letter he receives from a constituent, as well as his handwritten response” (U.S. Representative Pete Aguilar, 2017, para. 1). On Facebook activity, the posts for this specific campaign only showed a presence a total of three times on Facebook for the duration of a year.

The researcher finds that the social media campaign was used merely as a tool to spark conversation with constituents rather than to use the platforms as a way to further drive each individual aspect of his political agenda. This phenomenon is also backed up by research performed by Housley et al. (2018) in their research on interaction and transformation on social media. Their research concluded that within a social media campaign, the campaign itself may have many posts or tweets that do not engage with the campaign or are not relevant to the social media campaign. Additionally, conversations held throughout the threads of the social media campaigns may not be relevant to the actual post but are used to ignite conversation or “campaign communication.”

It is also appeared that rather than sticking to his political agenda for social media campaigns, he actively used the agenda setting theory in which if current events would happen, he would steer his campaign to address these issues. For example, a hot button issue in 2017 was the Russia investigation of President Trump; Rep. Aguilar devoted two #DearPete posts to discussing the issue and reassuring the writer of the letter that he would fight for a proper investigation into the actions (see Appendix F).

Campaign Execution

Rep. Aguilar’s social media account did not gather a large amount of relevant engagement on his social media posts related to the #DearPete. One assumption for this lack of interaction could be a miscalculation of his target audience. In Aguilar’s press release, the only mention of a target audience stated this campaign intended to reach his constituents. Given the size of San Bernardino County, the researcher concluded that this is one contributing factor as to why his messaging fell flat.

When developing a social media campaign, a thoroughly researched target market is critical because it shapes the ways in which to communicate. If Aguilar's campaign team found that his target audience should be social media users aged 25 to 40, his best use of social media should be Facebook rather than Instagram or other applications targeted toward younger users. Also, if the majority of the letters received for this campaign are from high-school-aged individuals, the best method to reach them may be through a platform such as Tik Tok or Instagram.

Additionally, another factor that leads to poor execution is the inconsistency of social media posts. To gain traction on a social media campaign, it is imperative to post in a consistent manner. The trends and frequency may change depending on the target audience, but social media users are looking for a constant stream of information rather than sporadic posts. The campaign promised to upload weekly posts, which would have added up to 52 posts, yet on Twitter, there were fewer than five posts in total. On Facebook, he posted less than 15, which would not have generated the type of engagement he hoped for. With a campaign based on interactions, people writing to Aguilar and waiting months for a response on social media would understandably become disengaged. The constant movement of social media would make the noteworthy aspects of this campaign fade, and the intended purpose of effective communication would be lost.

#DearPete and Agenda Setting

During the timeframe of this research, from January 2017 until October 2018, the researcher concludes that Rep. Aguilar used his political website (<https://aguilar.house.gov/>) as the main platform to set his political agendas. On this site,

he listed his political agendas to show those who visit his site where he stands on certain issues.

It is the researcher's belief that Rep. Aguilar did not use his website or social media as a tool for agenda setting in the traditional sense. Dr. Maxwell McCombs and Dr. Donald Shaw found that the theory was used by the mainstream media to influence the government and the way people view it (Orr & Harrington, 2020). In this sense, the media gives viewers the information in a way to shape their ideals on specific issues. Rep. Aguilar used his website and social media accounts to share his ideas as a way to show constituents how he feels about issues that may impact them. For example, his website is a tool to share where he stands on certain issues as opposed to sharing information on ideas and how the public should think about them. The content posted to the website was not placed there with the intention of swaying the public to believe in certain ideals but to better understand who he is as a politician.

In terms of his social media accounts and the #DearPete campaign, Aguilar also did not adhere to the steps in the agenda setting theory. In the theory it states that the media or in this case, Aguilar, would be the gatekeepers of the information. This means that Aguilar would decide which information is framed and shared with the public. However, the #DearPete campaign called for the public to decide which issues are important, and those are the issues where Aguilar gave his attention.

The only step that Aguilar followed in the agenda setting theory is taking into account real-world indicators of the importance of an agenda issue or event. During the course of the campaign, most of the posts that Aguilar responded to were dedicated to issues happening at the moment. On Twitter, where Aguilar posted the most, three out of

ten posts or 30% of his posts were related to fighting President Trump's agenda on issues such as immigration and the Russian investigation. These issues were not stated on his website, but they were the most pertinent issues at the time and real-world issues for his constituents.

The researcher concludes that Aguilar did not use the agenda setting on his website or social media to frame the way the public thinks about an issue but to display how he feels about the state's issues. On his social media platforms, he took a different approach and used them as tools to share his viewpoints on the issues of the day to open the floor for conversation. It appears that he attempted to stick to his political agenda on his website, but social media is an open forum, and he shared information that falls outside of his original political agenda.

Additional Social Media Activity

Throughout the course of the #DearPete campaign, Rep. Aguilar continued to promote his Instagram (@rep.peteaguilar) account, which has 286 posts with 2,459 followers. For comparison, Rep. Mark Takano of Riverside County in the Inland Empire has 516 posts and 5,159 followers. Aguilar also has a YouTube account, which has uploaded videos dedicated to his congressional speeches and did not mention the #DearPete campaign in the 85 videos uploaded.

Aguilar's Instagram account used a similar posting strategy as that on Facebook and Instagram, using the same images and captions from his other social media accounts. The first post to launch his Instagram account was the introduction of the #DearPete campaign, which was on February 6, 2017 and received 10 likes. During the course of this research, Aguilar posted nine photos or videos dedicated to the social media

campaign with a year between posts from July 2017 and July 2018. During the course of that gap, Aguilar posted on issues related to the work he performed throughout the community, holidays, and his fight against President Trump's agenda. The posts outside of the #DearPete campaign appear to be aligned with his stated campaign agenda and the work he is doing to enhance the wellbeing of his community members.

The comments that are left on Aguilar's Instagram posts are more positive and relevant to the original post, which leads the researcher to believe his Instagram account has followers who are more engaged. One reason for this Instagram is a visual social media platform, which requires people to show what they are doing rather than narrate. The function of Instagram relates back to the social information processing (SIP) theory because Aguilar is using Instagram to build trust and a positive reputation, which according to SIP may be easier to do through photos rather than words. Although Aguilar does not show many videos, the tone and image of the Instagram account is lighthearted yet informational and shows many photos of Aguilar interacting with people in a friendly way. From a viewer's perspective, Aguilar may seem to be trustworthy, approachable, and kind, which can increase social media engagement.

Summary

For this campaign, Twitter was used to share a larger number of messages with his social media followers and constituents. A total number of seven tweets were shared with the hashtag #DearPete. However, engagement on this platform was much less. The seven posts received 13 comments with eight being relevant to the original post.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine Rep. Pete Aguilar's social media campaign #DearPete and the consistency between his stated political agenda that appears on his official website (<https://aguilar.house.gov>) and the content posted to his various social media platforms. The research question for this study was "How did Rep. Pete Aguilar's social media campaign #DearPete reflect his political agenda during the 2018 midterm elections?"

The researcher retrieved Facebook posts, and the researcher used the search function on Facebook to search for the terms, "Pete Aguilar" and "Dear Pete" to find original posts for the #DearPete campaign. These posts must also have originated from Rep. Pete Aguilar's official Facebook account. The details that were collected from Pete Aguilar's Facebook posts and the comments associated with each post were collected and compiled in a Microsoft Excel sheet to develop a database.

To retrieve tweets for this study, the researcher manually pulled data from Facebook and Twitter using the advanced search filters on both sites. Because the data on social media move so quickly, performing multiple searches using different criteria helped to find official data related to Pete Aguilar and the #DearPete hashtag.

Major Findings

With the continued rise of social media and its impact on the political and campaign world, it is important to understand the purpose and usefulness of a consistent message. With this study, the focus was on the consistency between what Rep. Pete Aguilar communicates and the information shared on social media. Previous research has determined that social media during a campaign can be used to influence the public,

and this research takes a narrow look into one campaign to find how or whether the congressman strategically used Facebook and Twitter as tools to communicate his political agendas with the public.

The research set out to determine whether Aguilar was consistent with his political messaging across his communication platforms. It was found that the representative did share messages related to his social media campaign but often preferred to talk about other issues that might affect his constituents.

In this study, the researcher found that the #DearPete campaign was not solely used to share the representative's political agenda but rather as a tool to promote engagement with the public. This information became evident when Aguilar's main focus of the campaign shifted away from his six main agenda items to speaking about current events once he began to post frequently on Twitter. Aguilar chose the responses that best correlated with the events at the time. This was shown during the tweets about the Russia investigation into President Trump, immigration, and healthcare. These were not related to the representative's six political agendas; however, they were major societal issues at the time.

In the traditional sense, the representative did not execute agenda setting. He did not use this campaign to push his agendas or to make his constituents believe his ideas were the most important. He merely used the campaign as a vehicle to share information with his online community. In agenda setting, Aguilar would be the one to create the issues in an attempt to nudge people into thinking a certain way about that issue. The #DearPete campaign was not a tool to encourage others to believe in a certain issue or tell

them how to think; the campaign was a way to share information about Aguilar's stance on social issues and build relationships with his constituents.

In his limited posts, he was very clear about being in opposition to President Trump's political agenda and his commitment to fighting for women's rights. Each post appeared to be informational to make a stand on his beliefs about certain issues. For this reason, the researcher believes Aguilar's campaign followed the informational processing theory because the campaign was designed to create trust and for Aguilar to connect with his constituents rather than push a political agenda.

Responses

A major element of social media engagement is the two-way interaction between the user who made the original post and other users. It was also noted that the representative did not engage with social media users beyond posting the letter and message. Each post only encouraged conversations between those who were commenting on the original post, and the representative did not respond to any of the questions or comments under his post. This lack of follow-up shows to those who engage with him that he is not interested in their comments or participating in active conversations with followers. Hunckler (2017) stated that many marketing scholars and firms like social media expert, Jay Baer, argue, "A lack of response is [actually] a response. It's a response that says, 'We don't care about you very much'" (para. 8).

Unexpected Findings

The unexpected finding of this research was the lack of content provided for this social media campaign. In the press release announcing the campaign, it was noted the representative would respond weekly to letters written by his constituents; however, the

responses were sparse and did not go into detail about the contents of his reply. Each post merely showed a snapshot of his response but the full replies were not posted online. It seems the campaign intended to show Aguilar's few points on issues concerning his constituents; however, he was not truly transparent in his responses. It also appears that the representative was being vague in his responses and not wanting to truly share information about his thoughts.

2018 General Election Results

Although this research did not consider the results of the election when analyzing Aguilar's posts, the results of the election were considered when trying to better understand Aguilar's motivations for creating the campaign. This finding led the researcher to question whether the social media campaign was built from necessity or as a way to complete a task that seemed necessary. During an election, campaigns and slogans are popular because they give candidates a chance to express their thoughts and tell their own stories. However, depending on the target audience, having a social media campaign might not have been necessary. The researcher found that during the 2018 elections, Rep. Aguilar won the primary election with a 45.9% lead against candidates Sean Flynn and Kaisar Ahmed. Aguilar also won the general election for U.S. House California District 31 against Sean Flynn with 58.7% of the votes or by 32,791 votes (Ballotpedia, 2020). In a *Los Angeles Times* article, Panzar (2016) noted that Rep. Aguilar's seat was vulnerable and he could lose the election to a Republican or another democratic candidate.

It appears that Aguilar made his campaign out of a need to connect with an audience. These revelations lead the researcher to believe that Aguilar created the social

media campaign with the intent to give more insight into his take on current social issues and to connect with voters. By establishing a relationship with those in his community through social media where more than half of the population spends a large portion of their day, Aguilar had the potential to reach as many people as possible and win the election.

Target Audience

The #DearPete campaign did not have a stated target audience other than his constituents; however, his Instagram account has the most followers and the most relevant engagement. This could mean the #DearPete target audience is upper middle-class women between 18-24 years of age, which is Instagram's largest audience (Tran, 2020). This could be the reason Aguilar's posts related to standing up for women's rights are the most popular on all platforms. Tran stated Instagram's largest group of users are:

- U.S. adults ages 18-24 who make up 75% of users
- Women who make up 43% of American users
- Users who have a yearly income of \$75,000 and over
- Users who visit their social media accounts on a daily basis.

#DearPeteConclusions

The researcher concludes that the representative was inconsistent with the social media campaign as well as with his commitment to speaking about his political agenda items. These are drawn from the findings from the research question. If one is to use social media to better understand the representative's political agenda, it would appear he is an advocate for women's rights and is a strict opponent of the president's current agenda. His other stated political agenda were not mentioned at all throughout his social

media campaign, which may make his constituents believe he is unfocused with his true campaign intentions.

However, the use of social media with this campaign has been used as a mere tool for engagement, not so much between the representative and his social media followers but between social media users who follow his political accounts.

Implications for Action

The information found in this research is important because it provides perspective on how some political candidates use their social media accounts. With the new trend of misinformation spreading on social media, understanding where candidates pull their content is important information to know. Campaign literature and content is one of the most influential ways the public can learn about a candidate. With a study like this one, knowing Aguilar had a set of political agendas in one area and mainly spoke about different topics in other areas, may pose a problem to those who are engaging with his social media campaign to learn more about where he stands.

As mentioned earlier in the study, about 45% of Americans use social media to learn more about political candidates. This is done through engaging in conversation through the platforms, watching videos, or simply following their account. As Rep. Aguilar shares information that does align with his campaign, the public may not grasp a complete view on the ideas he actually stands for such as standing up for women's rights or growing the Inland Empire. Based on his Twitter account during the timeframe of this study, his followers would believe that his main agenda items were to defeat President Trump and ensure that his agenda does not progress. Although this may attract new attention from people with the same viewpoints, those who are interested in seeing the

progress he has made on his own political agenda may believe he has changed course and therefore lose interest in his campaign.

If this study is being used as the groundwork to better understand how consistent political candidates are when sharing their agendas on social media, the case study into Aguilar's campaign gives a small glimpse into a larger issue. By using the agenda setting model as a framework, knowing that a campaign may have to stray from defined agenda items to address important real-world issues is pertinent information. Moving forward, it would be wise for Aguilar or anyone following this model to tie unrelated issues back to their campaign, so they do not abandon those who are expecting a certain perspective as stated by his campaign.

Recommendations for Further Research

The researcher has two recommendations for expanding research. The first is to include all of Pete's social media platforms in a content analysis to understand whether he used other social media accounts like Instagram and YouTube to share his political agendas with his followers. These accounts may be more effective with spreading his agenda because the reach for these accounts is not limited to two-way friendships like Facebook. Also, Instagram is a visual social media platform, and the concept of sharing an image like a letter may generate more interactions than platforms that are more content driven.

The second recommendation is performing a comparative study on different local social media campaigns to determine whether Aguilar's use of social media is comparable to other politicians who run social media campaigns during an election. This study will help lay the foundation of research into city and state political social media

campaigns. As most of the research at the time of this study was focused on the social media campaigns of presidential candidates, it would be important to understand the practices and habits of those in elections that more closely affect constituents.

Finally, the researcher recommends developing a guide or a manual dedicated to running political social media campaigns. Currently, there are manuals on how to run an effective political campaign; however, there are no substantial guides for Social media campaigns. Upon further research, the National Democratic Institute has developed a campaign skills handbook to aid campaign strategists with tools and techniques for reaching audiences (O'Connell et al., 2013). The researcher suggests developing a handbook strictly for political campaigns to help practitioners create effective social media campaigns.

This handbook would include detailed steps on how to develop a political social media campaign to receive positive responses to a campaign. The first areas that would be covered would be the standard areas of campaign needs:

1. Determine the campaign's objectives. Social media campaigns often begin as a mandatory task to be completed. Social media has a reputation as a fast and inexpensive way to connect with an audience. However, the steps to creating meaningful messaging and interactions with the audience are often lacking. This can lead to a thoughtless campaign that does not achieve its intended outcomes. By determining the campaign's objectives, the campaign director would understand the purpose of reaching out to their audience and detail the necessary steps to creating an impactful campaign strategy. A few examples of campaign objectives are the following:

- To tell your story
- Share campaign resources
- Establish or solidify relationships with your audience
- Encourage engagement
- Convert social media followers into voters
- Increase social community size

The objectives of any campaign will be specific to the needs of the candidate and the interest of the audience. This handbook would also guide the campaign director on the best practices for developing campaign objectives and provide examples of successful objectives from operational campaigns.

2. Clearly define your audience. Tran (2020) defined an audience as a specific group of people the campaign wants to reach with social channels. The nature of social media may make it seem like a campaign's target audience is "everyone." This is a common mistake and can lead to the campaign failing to reach an audience at all. Defining the campaign's audience should start with a broad idea such as "first time voters" and start to narrow for the best results. Data points to consider when determining a target audience are as follows:

- Demographics (age, gender, income, and location)
- Preferred languages
- Behaviors or interests
- Political party
- Voting patterns
- Favorite website and social media platforms

- Political concerns

These data points would help the campaign manager find a group of people throughout social media where their messaging and efforts would be relevant. It is important for those designing the campaign to remember that it is their job to find an audience, not share messages to a broad crowd and have the audience find them.

This section will also show campaign managers the best methods for finding a campaign's target audience including researching the campaigns current audience if already established. If building a new campaign, the campaign manager would need to research other campaigns with similar needs or locations to try and narrow down the specific audience using data points such as those previously mentioned.

3. Identify the best social media platforms for your target audience. After the campaign's target audience has been identified, it is essential to know which social media platforms are most used by the target audience. This section could be considered the vehicle that drives the message. For example, the average age range for Facebook and Twitter users is 40.5 years old. However, for Instagram, the demographic is 33.5 years old. This knowledge is important because if a candidate needs a boost in voters in a certain age group, the messaging must be placed in a location where the information can be found. Most campaigns tend to use the major social media platforms, which are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat. However, there are over 50 different types of social media platforms to be used, which is why it is important to narrow down the platforms a target audience uses the most.

4. Determine the voice and tone of the messaging. In many communication theories, two of the major aspects to a campaign are the voice and tone. Although they are not the same, they go hand-in-hand. The voice of the campaign can be conversational, serious, emotional, humorous, and so forth. The tone of the campaign is a subset of the voice and range from being professional, honest, direct and so forth. In a political campaign, there is often a delicate balance to finding the right voice and tone to engage their target audience. For example, a tweet addressing unemployment should have a professional voice and a serious tone as it deals with the livelihood of the target audience. A Facebook post to an audience related to learning more about a candidate should be a balance of emotional, intimate, and humorous to be relatable. It is the job of the campaign manager to determine which balance of voice and tone will resonate with their audience based on market and audience research, the voice and tone and determining the sound and personality of the campaign.
5. Outreach schedule. Other important aspects to include in this handbook are determining which tools are most appropriate to use throughout this campaign. Examples of tools to schedule social media posts across multiple platforms are Hootsuite, Sendible, AgoraPulse, Buffer, and Sprout Social. These tools would help with preplanning posts while keeping analytics on all posts. It is key to know the impact certain posts are having within a social media community to understand whether the campaign is effective or whether there needs to be a redirect.

6. A/B Testing (split testing). A/B testing can be performed at various points throughout the campaign and is critical to understanding which messaging is being received best. A/B testing requires showing to variations of the same messaging to two different groups. The point is to decide which version of the messaging, page layout, or graphic is the most appealing to the group. Conducting split testing at the beginning and midpoint of the campaign would help ensure messaging is appropriate and engaging to the target audience. Social media is constantly moving, and people use the different platforms at different times of the day. Each app has its own peak times and days when use is highest, and those are key times to schedule messaging. According to Tien and Aynsley (2019, para. 6), the best time of the day to post on Facebook is between 9 a.m. and 12 a.m. on Monday, Tuesday, or Wednesday. This can be attributed to these being days and times when most people are at work. On Twitter, the best days to post are on Wednesday and Friday at 9 a.m. However, the worst day to post is on Saturday. A solid posting schedule is designed for the most engagement, and general peak times should be taken into consideration as well as peak times for the target audience. One of the final areas to cover in this handbook is how to handle unexpected outcomes or changes in an external environment. In keeping with the agenda setting theory, it is important to note that the target audience's external environment will have a major influence on their interactions and perceptions of the campaign messaging. An example the researcher would use in this handbook is not one of politics but of pop

culture to show how messaging might be poorly timed if unexpected news impacts an audience. August 28, 2018, it was announced that a popular actor by the name of Chadwick Boseman, who rose to fame by playing Marvel's first Black superhero, The Black Panther, had suddenly passed away from colon cancer.

The message, shown in Figure 8, immediately made its way across Twitter, and those who were fans of the actor were shocked and saddened, and his name quickly became the number one trending topic on Twitter. At the same time, singer and actress Jennifer Lopez posted a message on her social media accounts expressing disappointment that she and her fiancé lost the opportunity to be part owners in a baseball team. It is assumed that some of their target audiences overlap, and people began to label Lopez's message as tone deaf and inconsiderate. Figure 9 is an example of a Twitter user finding Jennifer Lopez's tweet inappropriate and at the time was a common sentiment across the Twitter platform.

Although her message would have been completely appropriate prior to the announcement of Boseman's passing, her audience experienced shocking news, which made her information insignificant to them. Lopez later deleted her tweet and posted a simple tribute to Boseman.

The poor timing of the message, even if preplanned, is an example of how external factors may affect the messaging and purpose of the campaign. During a political campaign, it is very easy to assume that the target audience is always dialed into the messaging of the campaign; however, individual experiences are not limited to social media, and target audiences often experience hardships. This can lead to an unforeseen

change in the reception of messaging and a plan should be put in place to pivot when needed.

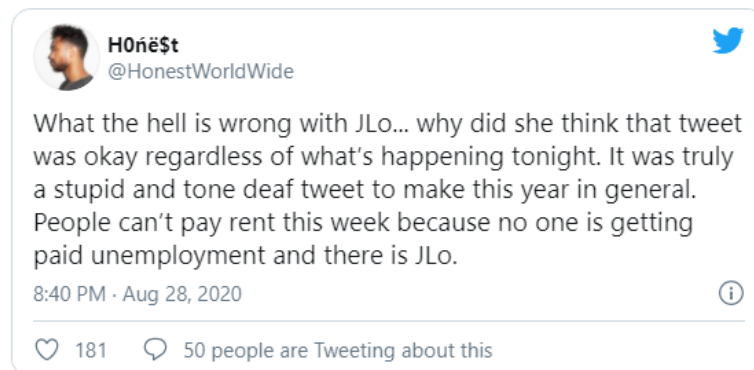
Figure 8

Twitter Announcement of Actor Chadwick Boseman's death



Figure 9

Twitter User Responding to Jennifer Lopez Tweet



Other areas to include in this handbook are additional examples of successful political campaigns both at the federal and local level. This handbook would also include personal accounts from campaign managers who have worked on both successful and unsuccessful campaigns to give practitioners a full view of how to run a campaign.

Concluding Remarks and Reflections

There have been many studies on social media campaigns, the internet activity of political candidates, and agenda-setting effects to see how messaging is conveyed. In this study, the purpose was to compare the stated political agenda of Rep. Aguilar to his messaging on his Facebook and Twitter social media accounts. The intent was to understand whether Aguilar used the social media accounts to share his intentions with those who follow him on the accounts. The research was not intended to build on any existing research but to add to a growing body of literature that explored a new world of media and its influence on the political world. With the introduction of social media campaigns as a way to reach the public, this research explored how social media is used to convey a message to the public, and there are still many platforms used to communicate that can be explored with future research.

In performing this research, the researcher found that an effective social media campaign is one that is active and lives up to its intended plan as stated by the person or people running the campaign. This campaign promised to post weekly messages on his social media accounts with handwritten responses to letters written by constituents. However, what was delivered was a total of three posts on Facebook and ten posts on Twitter with most of the content not corresponding with his campaign agendas.

Additionally, the comments left on the post were never responded to, which often stifled the opportunity to have a two-way conversation about the issues being presented.

Although this research only touches the surface of political research, it was designed to touch on the basic idea of understanding whether politicians are using their social media accounts to project their political agendas to their followers. Using Rep. Pete Aguilar's social media campaign as a case study, it is clear that in some cases, the social media campaigns are used to spark engagement and make the candidate appear approachable to the public. There are many more levels to explore in this topic, and this research is only the beginning.

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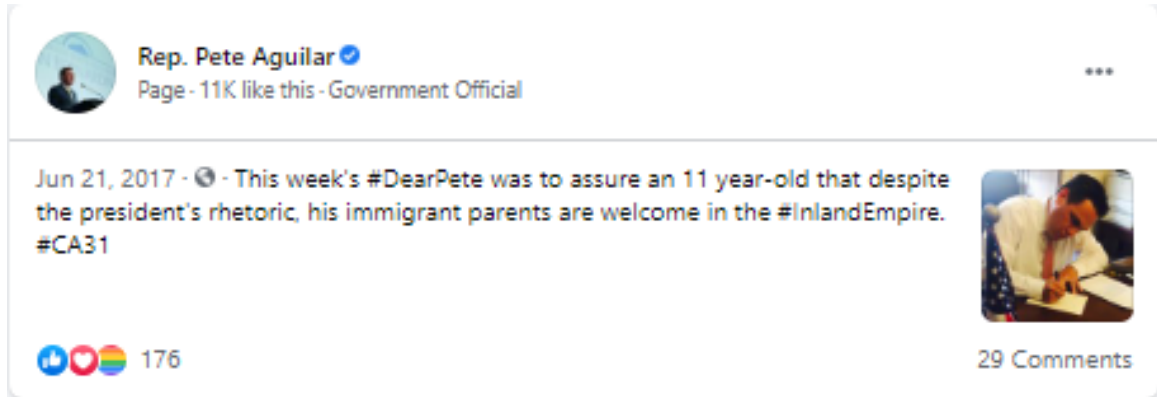
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Representative Pete Aguilar's June 21, 2017

Facebook Post Addressing Immigration



Representative Pete Aguilar's June 21, 2017 Facebook Comments

176 29 Comments 6 Shares

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Most Relevant ▼

[redacted]

You took an oath to support the Constitution. Again, Democrats rule by emotions

Like · Reply · 3y

[redacted]

Thank you Congressman Aguilar, no child should live in fear.... #nohumanbeingisillegal

Like · Reply · 3y · Edited

[redacted]

Did you happen to mention how much less money they ll have with your gas and car tax increases coming. Dont think the president had much to do with that

Like · Reply · 3y

[redacted]

And abetting Congressman

Like · Reply · 3y

[redacted]

Opposition against me buying refreshment satisfaction offensively took and ruined ARCO convenience store at Colton near Arrowhead Hospital claiming that destroyer of business is lord of what is trashed with bossiness, and I scream alarms to police emer... See More

Like · Reply · 2y

[redacted]

Not impressed...

Like · Reply · 3y

[redacted]

Did you write your letter in English or Spanish? Are his parents legally working?

Like · Reply · 3y

[redacted]

Thank you, Pete. God bless you.

Like · Reply · 3y

[redacted]

Thank you, Pete! Love, not hate, makes America great!

Like · Reply · 3y

[redacted]

-aiding

Like · Reply · 3y

[redacted]

Willfully conflating illegal immigrants and legal immigrants

Like · Reply · 3y

[redacted]

Dear Pete ... despite your rhetoric all

[redacted]

So caring

Like · Reply · 3y

[redacted]

You are supposed to be representing LEGAL IMMIGRANTS and CITIZENS!! THATS what you were voted in to do!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Like · Reply · 3y

[redacted]

Are they illegal immigrants? Because legal immigrants are welcome here - not illegal ones.

Like · Reply · 3y

[redacted]

Even if they broke the law congressman?

Like · Reply · 3y

[redacted]

What about the American families that lost there children forever because of illegal immigrants? Are there life's not important?

Like · Reply · 3y

[redacted]

sign this for the budget control problem in America...
<https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/budget-control-referendum-act>

Like · Reply · 3y

[redacted]

Then mitigate the problems effecting US Citizens from corrupt politicians and corporations using immigrants.

Like · Reply · 3y

[redacted]

Petition to accept the PR vote for statehood.
<https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/united-states-accept-votes-us-citizens-puerto-rico-june-11-2017-be-state>

Like · Reply · 3y

[redacted]

Dear Pete ... despite your rhetoric all

APPENDIX C

Codebook

This codebook is aimed at determining the amount of influence that Facebook and Twitter posts had on Representative Pete Aguilar's political campaign. All posts from both Facebook and Twitter between January 2017 and October 2018 will be subject to coding. Copies of the social media posts can be retrieved from Representative Aguilar's social media platforms. The following posts of the respective social media platforms will be analyzed.

Facebook: Posts from January 2017 – October 2018

Twitter: Tweets and Retweets from January 2017 – October 2018

Unit of analysis: Each post will count as one unit of analysis.

Procedures: The following steps should be taken in the content analysis coding described below:

Level 1 coding

The first set of variables are descriptive, enabling us to identify the article. However, data about the Facebook post or Tweet will give additional indications of the importance of the post.

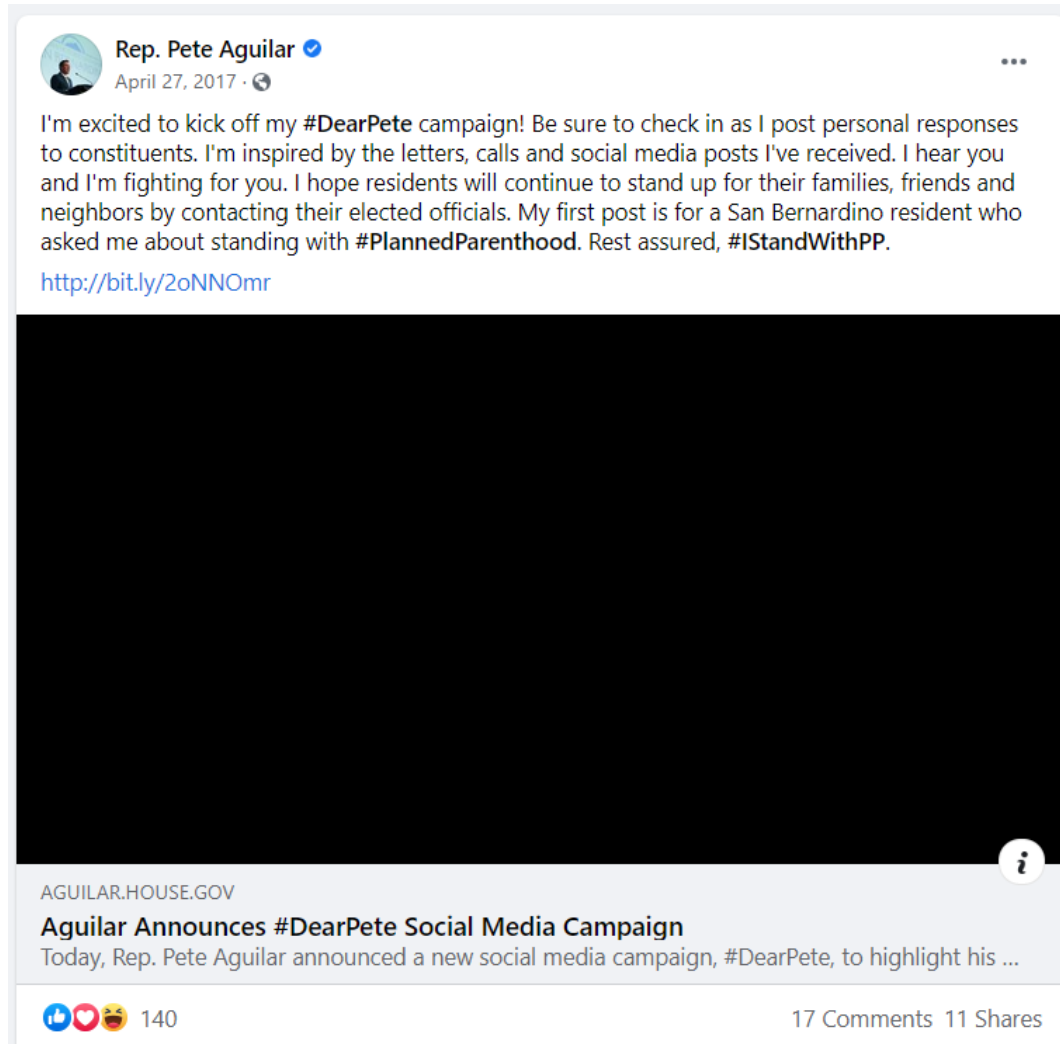
Coder_ID. This variable identifies who has coded each case. Due to the researcher being the sole person coding all post, the unique Coder_ID will be LV1 for Loretta Vandivier.

Code Name. This variable will correspond to the Coder_ID and is related to the full name of the coder.

APPENDIX D

Representative Pete Aguilar's April 27, 2017 Facebook Post

Introducing the #DearPete Campaign



APPENDIX E

Representative Pete Aguilar's May 25, 2017 Twitter Post & Comments



APPENDIX F

Representative Pete Aguilar's June 7, 2017 Twitter Post & Comments

Addressing an Independent Commission to Investigate President Trump

