

The Rancor of Republicans, The Diatribe of Democrats
A Social Network Analysis of Partisan Interconnectivity on Facebook

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*Dedicated to the memory of: Allen Langille & Arthur Rose, two great Americans who bravely
fought for my right to continue to speak my mind*

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Abstract

The Internet has played a more active role in shaping modern American political communication. With the increased popularity of social networking through websites like Facebook, more are taking to the Internet to engage in civic dialogue. This study will explore how the exchange of socially networked images, texts, and audio between Democrats and Republicans affect beliefs, behaviors and perceptions. Utilizing qualitative methodologies, the researcher interviewed ten (10) registered democrats and ten (10) registered republicans. The participants were asked ten questions and ten follow up questions. The study applied a social network analysis to evaluate how socially networked dialogue between Republicans and Democrats on Facebook influence beliefs, behaviors and perceptions. Results indicated a reinforcing effect of Facebook on already held beliefs. Furthermore, this study seeks to develop a greater understanding of the role of Facebook in the modern American political process.

Key Terms: Social Networking, Facebook, Republican, Democrat, Partisan, Civic Dialogue, Political Communication

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Chapter 1: Introduction

First launched in 2004, the popular social networking website Facebook has and continues to play a pivotal role in global affairs (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). The prowess of Facebook was demonstrated in the 2008 Presidential election garnering Barack Obama nearly \$500 million in private donations (Liebert, 2010). When protestors brought down the governments of Tunisia and Egypt, many observers and organizers looked to Facebook as being a key tool for the revolution (Eldon, 2011).

Americans are no strangers to protest and dissent. These were values that began with the American Revolution and have been interwoven in the individualistic fiber of this nation. The right to free speech is one of the most staunchly defended and revered of all constitutionally granted American liberties. From newspaper editorials, talk radio, and now the Internet, Americans rarely lack vehicles to express their opinions.

The popularity of social networking has had a marked impact on the American political process. It has become a vehicle for citizens to become educated about a particular candidate and for candidates and campaigns to better engage the electorate. Candidates have seen the value of utilizing Facebook to raise millions of dollars in campaign contributions (Liebert, 2010). Increasingly, Americans are using Facebook to engage in civic dialogue. The interplay of socially networked relationships of Democrats and Republicans on Facebook provides a unique lens through which to examine the impact of such interaction on individual beliefs and practices.

Previous Studies

A great deal of research has been conducted concerning how the behaviors and attitudes of groups or individuals influence others. Barne's (1954) social network analysis and theory demonstrated how social structures of a relationship around a person; group or organization affect behaviors and beliefs. Garton, Haythornwaite, & Wellman (2006) applied this model to computer mediated communication. They noted that current CMC models are only dyadic in nature. Thus, a social network analysis provides a more comprehensive framework through which to view how the members of an online social network all influence each other.

Online social networking is a relatively new phenomenon that has just come to receive scholarly treatment. Boyd and Ellison (2007) examined the history and scholarship of social networking sites and found most studies have dealt with current trends and mainly uses and gratifications of online social network use. In lights of recent events, very few studies have been published that consider the influence of one's own social network on their behavior. This study aims to provide insight into online behaviors that can be valuable for interpreting and understanding current and political unrest that in many ways has been shaped by social networking use.

Purpose Statement

The central research question for this study is: How does the interplay of civic dialogue among Democrats and Republicans facilitated through Facebook effect beliefs, perceptions and behaviors? The purpose of this study is to discover how Facebook shapes ideologies and practices of Republicans and Democrats and how online socially networked relationships between these two groups may influence beliefs and behaviors. Thus, this research will address the following two research questions:

R1: How does Facebook use shape one's political ideologies, perceptions and behaviors?

R2: How are one's political views reinforced, challenged, or adjusted through socially networked relationships facilitated through Facebook?

Overview of Thesis:

This thesis will be divided into five chapters. The first chapter will introduce global impact of Facebook and the role it is playing in political communication, as well as providing a purpose statement. Chapter two provides a thorough review of the literature. The third chapter details methodologies employed including strategy of inquiry, interview procedures, analysis of interviews, along with procedures for validating the studies reliability. Chapter four will present the results of the interviews that are to be conducted. This will also include a discussion of the results and the influence of culture upon Facebook use. Chapter Five will underscore the strengths of the proposed study, recommendations for future research, limitations, and a final conclusion.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

The essence of human interaction and expression has been and continues to be central to the communication discipline. Much scholarly treatment has been given to how social structures and relationships around an individual influence their beliefs and behaviors. Barnes (1954) pioneered this notion over fifty years ago. This has led to more attention given to the relationships between individuals rather than their characteristics. In the modern age of the Internet Barnes' Networking Theory and Analysis has provided a necessary foundation to study the most recent trends and phenomena in communication.

The previous decade has seen a tremendous growth in online technologies and new communication mediums. These new mediums have been categorized as social network sites (SNS). Boyd (2008) defines a social network site as web-based services that enable users to (1) construct a semi-public profile in the confines of a bonded 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. Throughout their development social network sites like Facebook have and continue to follow this model. Great attention has been devoted to considering websites like Facebook in terms of impression management and friendship, networks and network structure, online/offline connections, and privacy issues. It has only been in light of recent political developments in Iran, Egypt, and Libya that the role of social network sites in sparking and furthering dissidence has been considered. This literature review underscores prior scholarship concerning (1) social network sites and analysis (2) an overview of Facebook (3) impression management and friendship (4) current social networking trends (5) cultural

influences on social network users and (6) the Role the Internet and Facebook are having upon political communication.

Social Network Sites and Analysis

There exists limited scholarship in the arena of online social networks (Boyd, 2007; Ellison, Steinfeld & Lampe, 2007; Pallis, Zeinalapour-Yatti, & Diakiakos, 2011; Tong et al, 2008). Most treatments have been descriptive or quantitative in nature. The concept of communication in social networks has received a great deal of scholarly attention during the latter half of the past century. In his study *Class and Committees in a Norwegian Parish*, Barnes (1954) first considered the role of social structures, specifically socioeconomic classes in relational contexts. In this vein the focus was more upon the relationships between people rather than their characteristics. Barnes identified and systematized the patterns of ties that existed within the parish. Two domains were recognized of bounded groups, which encompass familial and tribal ties and that of gender and ethnicity or more social categories.

Barnes' theory enjoyed rapid interdisciplinary acceptance, with much attention principally from social sciences. The theory was first applied to communication sciences by Rogers and Kincaid (1981) in their ethnographic study of Korean women. Much attention was given to the cohesive bonds that were held and their matriarchal status. By applying social network theory and analysis they were able to better understand how these women improved their own general welfare and that of their families.

Rogers (1986) defined a communication network as “consisting of interconnected individuals who are linked by patterned communication flows.” Recent technological innovations have prompted further study of computer mediated communication (CMC) as

it relates to social networks. When a computer network is used to connect individuals or organizations, a social network exists. Garton, Haythornwaite, and Wellman (2006) have suggested the use of social network analysis over traditional CMC assumptions in analyzing relations as separate units. Social network analysis not only considers dyadic relationships but how relationships in a network reciprocally influence each other. They note that traditional CMC models do not sufficiently explain how the relationships between those in a social network impact each individual member of that network. Thus, a social network analysis best explains how the interconnectedness of relationships within a social network can influence behaviors.

An interrelated concept to social network theory and analysis is what Putnam (1995) theorized as social capital. Social capital is theory that recognizes social organizations such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Blanchard and Horan (1998) later applied Putnam's principles of social capital to online communities as it relates to civic engagement. Their research demonstrated that online communities have the potential to augment face-to-face (FtF) communities and networks in increasing social capital. The greatest demonstration of this being the use of Social media by political candidates to create, build and leverage social capital into electoral support.

Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) evaluated Facebook use in correlation with the formation and maintenance of social capital among college students. In this study, Facebook was found to be instrumental in playing an important role in helping students form and build social capital. Contrary to popular media reports, it was determined that social networking sites do not remove individuals from their offline worlds. Rather,

continued SNS use was shown to strongly support pre-existing relationships even as individuals move away from each other. This can often lead to a pay-off for SNS users as Ellison, Steinfeld and Lampe (2007) demonstrated how maintained social capital often translated into a higher level of job, internship and other opportunities.

The rapid growth of online SNS does present significant hurdles for healthy future market expansion. Pallis, Zeinalapour-Yatti, and Diakiakos (2011) evaluated the structure, design, and utility of several popular SNS. Their analysis found that online social network sites provide popular infrastructures for information sharing, communication and interaction on the Internet. Popular social network sites like Facebook have enjoyed a remarkable amount of success in recent years but several challenges exist in providing a better user end experience. This research outlined content distribution, scalability, and privacy issues as the most imminent threats SNS must overcome in the near future.

Boyd (2008) observed that the increase of social networking sites have contributed to a shift in the organization of online communities. The marked shift is that more and more SNS are being organized around people rather than interests. Earlier online forums were often built around common interests or topical hierarchies. The recent shift has been to what Boyd labeled an “egocentric” or more personal network. This is more emblematic of unmediated social structures where “the world is composed of networks, not groups” (Wellman, 1998, p. 37).

Overview of Facebook

Facebook first launched in 2004. In 2007, the site boasted over 21 million users with over 1.6 billion page views in a given day (Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe, 2007). Use of Facebook is often highly integrated into the media routine of its users. Cassidy (2006)

found most users spend at least 20 minutes per day on the website with nearly two thirds of users reportedly logging in at least once per day. Due to the tremendous success of Facebook on college campuses a High School version was launched in late 2005. By 2006, communities for commercial organizations were introduced. Shortly thereafter, nearly 22,000 organizations had a presence on Facebook (Smith, 2006). That same year, Facebook continued to enjoy widespread use on college campuses. Cassidy (2006) showed nearly 2,000 campuses had their own Facebook network in 2006.

Despite the recent development and innovation of Facebook, it has received some scholarly and academic treatment. Much of this treatment has been relegated to identify presentation and privacy controls. Acquisti and Gross (2006) were among the first to analyze the amount of information college students disclose on Facebook and how privacy settings were utilized. What they found was that only a small percentage of users actually changed their privacy settings. They further argued that by not utilizing these settings these students actually placed themselves in great danger in offline situations.

The role of Facebook in academic settings and for education purposes has also only found recent consideration. Much of this work has dealt with student's perceptions of instructor presence and self-disclosure (Mazer, Murphy, & Simmonds, 2007). Additionally, temporal patterns of use (Golder, Wilkinson, & Huberman, 2007) and friend articulation (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2007) have been explored as it relates to Facebook.

Impression Management and Friendship

One of the more intriguing aspects of Facebook and the numerous other SNS is the ability to create personalized profiles that enable users to manage their own impression. Facebook profiles are essentially individually constructed self-representations. Thus,

Facebook affords a unique context in which to analyze and evaluate the process of self-presentation and impression management. Boyd (2006) found that one's online "friends" play a role in this process. She observed a keen difference in the role of online "friends" and that of friends in the everyday sense. Boyd found that friends in online contexts fill a normative role. Their research concluded that online "friends" serve as an imaginary audience that serves the purpose of serving as guide of behavioral norms.

Much of the early research in the field of online self-presentation concerning impression management primarily dealt with anonymous environments. These studies often found that individuals in these online settings often engaged in role-playing and those behaviors that would be considered anti-normative. More recent treatments have sought to analyze less anonymous environments such as dating websites. Zhao, Grasmuch, and Martin (2008) explored self-presentation in the more public arena of Facebook. Through a content analysis of Facebook profiles they determined users claim their identity implicitly rather than explicitly. This can lead individuals to sometimes be more honest or realistic in their presentations. The implication is that social identity is not purely created purely by society nor is it a personal characteristic. Instead, Zhao et al. determined social environments heavily influence it.

Impressions are formed and managed based upon several aspects of individually constructed and managed profiles. Kleck, Reese, Behnken, and Sundar (2007) concluded that the number of friends displayed on one's page does indeed prompt positive social judgments. Conversely, an implausible number of friends were shown to conjure negative sentiments and reactions. Still, the concept of an online "friend" can significantly differ from that of an offline friend. Tong et. al (2008) submitted that the term friend, as employed by

Facebook, can carry several connotations. It can often be indicative of an offline acquaintance the user has had some degree of interaction with. Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2006) contend the broad definition that Facebook offers for what a friend is can contribute to varied, vast and large social networks.

These findings provide causality and often dictate how users of SNS interact with other users but present themselves in public profiles. Bobkowski (2009) applied the principles of Grounded Theory to explore the religious expression of young people on websites like Facebook. Through interviews of five conservative Christian college students, it was found these students did not label themselves as such on Facebook. Rather, they showed identification with the Christian faith through activities and relationships. The researcher concluded the participants sought to present themselves as more mainstream. Rather than identifying themselves as politically conservative, they chose to identify themselves as moderate. As it related to their religious beliefs they were either left blank or more broadly stated as Christian, rather than fundamentalist or a specific denomination.

Tong et al. (2008) observed how the interactive nature of websites like Facebook further complicates impression management and formation. He noted,

That people other than the person about whom the site is focused also contribute information to the site. Such postings may or may not include secondhand descriptions about the target individual and his or her conduct. More importantly, whereas postings by other people on one's own profile reflect the character of the individuals who made the postings, it is also possible that observer' reactions of those others may affect perceptions of the target profile maker as well, even though the profile maker his- or herself did not initiate or condone the postings. This makes

participative social networking technologies different from Web pages, e-mail, or online chat because all those technologies allow the initiator complete control over what appears in association with his- or herself (Tong et al., 2008, p.29)

Tong et al. ultimately concluded that the friends one does keep online can negatively or positively impact other's impressions. Thus, individual Facebook users are not in complete control of what information about them is disclosed. Mazer, Murphy and Simonds (2007) recognized online "friends" have the ability to post discrediting or defamatory messages on users' Facebook websites. Still, Lenhar et al. (2007) found nearly half of all SNS users do not make their profiles completely public and employ some level of privacy restrictions even amongst online "friends".

Furthermore, Facebook users are able to manage impressions more fluidly through status updates. While prior studies have primarily concerned themselves with the static offerings of individual Facebook pages, Kelley (2007) considered the role of constant status updates play in impression management. An increased awareness of other's minute actions may have unique implications for how one relates to others and how they understand themselves. It appears that status updates are utilized to prompt others to interact with their profile in positive ways. What individual users are not always aware of is how some status updates can make them appear self-important and actually achieve negative ends.

Since Facebook affords users the ability to contribute to others impressions, the concept of online "friends" plays a critical role in any analysis. Contrary to popular opinion, Haythornwaite (2005) found most do not use SNS to connect with strangers. Instead, most use these services to connect with pre-existing social networks. One of the primary motivations for individual use of social network sites was to maintain strong bonds with

distant friends or relatives. Haythornwaite (2005) argued the uniqueness of these websites are found in their ability to allow users to shape and make their network visible to others. Often, offline friends are found online through various friend networks.

Several factors contribute to the intensity one may exhibit in expressing themselves in online settings. Suler (2004) underscored six factors that contribute to what he called “the online disinhibition effect”. These factors include dissociative anonymity, the ability to separate ones actions on-line from their in-person lifestyle. Invisibility was shown to have the greatest factor in providing courage to act in ways they otherwise would not. Asynchronicity removes the need to provide an immediate and uncalculated response. Often, online users form a mental image or solipsistic introjections of other users. Dissociative imagination is the phenomena in which SNS users blur the line of online fantasy and offline reality. Additionally, Suler noted that societal cues of power and authority are minimized in online settings that further contribute to less inhibition. He rejected the notion of disinhibition as the revealing of the “true self” but rather a shift in self-structure.

These factors have an associative relationship with the heuristics of online communities developed by Gallant, Boone and Heap (2008). In this study a content analysis was performed using two popular social media websites, MySpace and Facebook. The analysis tested concepts that had emerged in past research and saw five heuristics emerge. These were: interactive creativity; selection hierarchy; identity construction; rewards and costs; and, artistic forms. Participants were shown to view these websites as flexible forms of their own expression, exhibiting minimal concern for privacy and time expended. The

heuristics produced in this study provide a framework to analyze social media use in a variety of cultural contexts as it relates to how one expresses them.

Current Social Network Trends

A great deal of the current focus on social network sites has dealt with the uses and gratifications of websites like Facebook. There exists much interest not only how users utilize social network sites but why they use them as well. Joinson (2008) investigated the uses and gratifications of Facebook use among American College students. Participants were asked to generate words or phrases to describe how they use Facebook. These words and phrases were then coded for use in a second study to further determine uses and gratifications. What were determined from this study were seven unique uses and gratifications of Facebook. These included: social connection, shared identities, content, social investigation, social network surfing and status updating. User demographics, site visit patterns and the use of privacy settings were all shown to have varying bearings on individual uses and gratifications. While there has been much attention given to identifying the specific uses and gratifications of SNS in American contexts, such studies have yet to emerge in a cross-cultural context. Joinson (2008) also found that these findings do pose a problem in developing privacy policies because some may be too restrictive in fulfilling certain gratifications while not doing enough for others.

Applying grounded theory and a uses and gratifications approach, Urista, Qingqen, and Day (2009) established a framework to better understand why young adults use social network websites. They furthered prior research by finding young adults use these sites for more than entertainment and information. Fifty undergraduate students from a California University participated in this study and it was found the students used websites like

Facebook for immediate connections with others in order to satisfy their own interpersonal communicative needs. Most of these needs were created by the desire of close friends or family members to establish more effective means of communication. Additionally, it was found students use social networking websites to gain approval of their friends. Some participants even admitted to using Facebook as way to determine whom their true friends are.

Racke and Bonds (2008) conducted a similar study that sought to measure uses and gratifications of SNS across varying ethnic groups amongst college students. The study gathered the characteristics of social media users and what uses and gratifications were met by using websites like Facebook and MySpace. They found the primary use and gratification met was finding new and locating old friends with nearly 3 hours or more a day spent on SNS. The results held true for males and females and across all ethnic groups.

Even when socioeconomic backgrounds were considered similar results have been found. Greenhow and Robelia (2009) evaluated SNS use amongst lower income American High School students. Their findings exhibited that similar trends emerged even when socioeconomic status is considered. The study revealed three common needs that these students met through the SNS MySpace. These needs included emotional support, relational maintenance, and self-presentation. Often, these students felt more comfortable expressing themselves online and that SNS actually helped strengthen existing relationships with family and friends.

Boyd's (2008) ethnographic work in this area further found that race and social class have little bearing on access to SNS but do impact how SNS are used. Poor urban black teens appeared to be just as likely to join an SNS as wealthier Caucasian teens. The

differences existed in those students that accessed SNS primarily from school as opposed to their home. Students from lower socioeconomic classes that did not have access to SNS in their homes were found to primarily use websites like MySpace and Facebook for asynchronous communicative purposes. Conversely, those with continuous nighttime access were found to engage in deeper levels of impression management. This included changing their profile pictures and making other modifications to their personal profile, along with collecting friends and meeting new ones.

While nearly half of American teens aged 12-17 have not only created an online profile, they are also regular users of websites like MySpace and Facebook according to recent Pew Research (Lenhart et al., 2007). Where differences do exist in the use of SNS is primarily seen across age and gender spectrums. Senior researchers at the Pew Researcher Center, Lenhart et al. (2007) found nearly 48% of teens access SNS daily. Older boys aged 15-17 was shown to be the demographic that was most likely to meet new friends using these services. Lenhart et al. (2007) underscored that this demographic was the one group that was truly taking advantage of the networking features of SNS even finding comfort flirting in online environments. However, older girls aged 15-17 demonstrated they were more likely to have used an SNS. A majority, 82% utilized an SNS to maintain a relationship with a friend they rarely see in person. Another 72% stated their primary use of a SNS was to make plans with friends. What the Pew Research findings seem to indicate is that the primary uses of Facebook can be contingent upon the age and communicative needs.

Cultural Influences on Social Network Users

Globalization has rapidly spread communication technologies around the world. More and more people have quicker access to information and can disseminate information to broader audience much faster than ever before. While some governments have embraced this, other more repressive ones have not an embraced this means to freely exchange ideas. For cultures where debate is rarely fostered and uniformity of thought and conformity are heralded this poses a threat to their way of life. This is why such measures are not always seen as limitations in these countries. Bollinger (2010) examined what governments like China and Iran have done and are presently doing to squelch free speech. He dispelled the notion that the Internet makes complete control impossible. Bollinger's observed implications concerning government controlled Internet He explained that governments that control bandwidth were more prone to place heavier restrictions on its use, often limiting it.

Individualism and collectivism have often been identified as the most important cultural dimension related to social ties. Trinadis (1995) discovered individualists to have more friends but have fewer, more intimate long-term relationships. The reverse held true for collectivists. These are trends that have continued to emerge over long periods of empirical research. China however was the only notable exception in the level of trust they display. A majority of research conducted between collectivists and individualists has shown individualists to be more trusting (Trinadis, 1995). However, individuals in China have appeared to show higher levels of trust compared to most collectivist societies. This has yet to be analyzed and tested in online settings.

Much scholarship has been provided demonstrating how differences in culture affect perceptions, adoption and diffusion of information technologies. Differences in culture, according to Hofstede (1991), are found in five domains. These domains encompass power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation. Power distance is understood as the extent to which the less powerful members of a society expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. Individualism is the level to which a society functions as a group or reinforces the individual. Masculinity refers to how a society understands and distributes gender roles and how distinct these roles are. Uncertainty avoidance deals primarily with the extent to which a society can tolerate or feel threatened by uncertain conditions. While long-term orientation focuses on whether a society embraces or rejects long term devotion to traditional forward thinking values. Hofstede's model is of value in analyzing cross-cultural use of SNS. This model can be applied and provide insight into how and why certain cultures utilize SNS differently than others.

Cordon et al. (2009) analyzed the impact of collectivism and individualism on SNS by evaluating online and offline ties of students from eleven different nations. Among the nations represented in the study were China, Egypt, France, Israel, India, Korea, Morocco, Sweden, Thailand, Turkey and the United States. Their findings were contrary to popular literature in determining that there was no difference in the number of offline friends of students in collectivist and individualistic societies. The same held true for the amount of online friends for students from collectivist or individualistic nations. Where disparities did exist were in the realm of offline personal connections. While students from collectivist

countries did have more online social ties, they never met in person. Heavy SNS users in individualist societies demonstrated a higher number of offline social ties.

DeAndrea, Shaw and Levine (2010) evaluated the Facebook pages of Caucasian Americans, African Americans, and Ethnic-Asian Americans. Much of the research centered around the cultural influences on self-expression and self-construal. These students from a Midwestern University were analyzed using information they had posted on their own Facebook profiles. The researchers concluded that culture has a significant impact on how these people groups communicate through Facebook. They found great variance in the amount of self-descriptive expression as well. While ethnicity was found to have no bearing on how one's likelihood in participation, the influences of individualistic and collectivist societies were shown.

Despite the regulation the Chinese face when it comes to online expression, the Chinese public is increasingly viewing the Internet as a legitimate platform for public expression. Still, as Arsene (2008) related, a great majority of this population reports lacking the self-confidence to writing their opinions online. Conversely, some find the obvious government censorship a welcome aspect of promoting healthy online conversation. Participants in Aresene's study recognized the need to censor in order to reduce conflicts and promote a socially secure in environment. This acceptance of censorship was found in the Chinese culture providing a justification for what the communist system forbids. The social network sites of China are often viewed as channels of conformity (Aresene, 2008). Consequently, Chinese users are far less likely to test original ideas in online forums. Clearly, the influence of their collectivist society extends to the Internet. Unlike their American counterparts, The Chinese are far less likely to engage

in rigorous political and social debate. Rather as Aresne (2008) found, work together to build, foster, and promote unanimity.

Modern Political Communication and the Internet:

Political observer and former Republican strategist Kevin Phillips once observed, “In the age of the mass media, the Old Republican and Democratic parties have lost their logic. Effective communications are replacing party organizations as the key to political success...As the first communications society, the United States is on its way to becoming the first “mediacracy “ (Phillips, 1975, p. 13).”

Phillips made that observation in 1975, noting several shifts that had occurred in American political oratory. The advent of Radio in the 1920’s sparked this shift and was propelled further through television. Jameison (1988) contended that through television candidates became able to connect with their electorate in more personal and intimate ways. Thus, ever since television candidates have had to adopt what Jameison deemed “a new eloquence”.

This eloquence translates to a more personable rhetorical style through which candidates and politicians alike are personal and revealing and seek to engage in the audience in the conversation. The twenty-four hour news cycle has demonstrated how candidates utilize shorter speeches, one’s that are more crafted for television. These messages are far more personalized and self-revealing (Jameison, 1988).

Having an extensive background in front of the camera as a famous screen actor, Ronald Reagan was able to turn his experience into a strong political rhetoric. Many political observers recognized Reagan to be the first president to truly excel at this style in contrast to the more conversational style of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Denton (1988)

related that the strength of Reagan's rhetoric was that he knew he understood the electorate, and that in turn they understood him. Reagan frequently spoke in colloquialisms, used contractions, and told stories making his Oval Office address more into conversations with the American people.

As Cathcart (1986) understood the presumption of intimacy causes audiences to project positive personal judgments on politicians. Politicians and those seeking office achieve this through adopting higher levels of intimacy and expressiveness in their television appearances. What ensues is that the audience and electorate begins to feel as though they know the official as a dear friend and are forced to perceive them in more likeable and positive fashions. The more an official has frequent conversations with the voting public, the more they build friendship, trust and intimacy with the electorate (Cathcart, 1986).

President Bill Clinton introduced another avenue through which to build and maintain closer connections with the nation. The town-hall meeting was his preferred method to communicate policy orientations and foster a greater image projection. Through the town-hall meeting, Clinton embodied the epitome of "presidential mediated interpersonal communication" (Denton & Holloway, 1996). Through televised town-hall meetings and talk show appearances he was able to make the public far less removed from the presidency while establishing himself as friend in the minds of his audience.

Denton and Kuypers (2008) recognized the secret of mediated presidential communication is having a controlled response. Especially on television, how an official or candidate responds is just as important of the content of their particular response. The example of George H. Bush glancing at his watch during a 1992 presidential candidate

debate in Richmond is demonstrative of this. Such behavior served to promote the negative perceptions and that Bush was callous and cavalier toward his audience and the event (Denton & Kuypers, 2008).

The oratory of American political communication has seen a unique evolution and development over the nation's history. As new communication technologies are adopted, so are changes in rhetorical style. In modern political times, the convergence of the town hall into easily accessible audio and video is no better seen than the realm of the Internet. Its use has dramatically increased since the 1992 presidential election between George H. Bush and Bill Clinton. By 1997 the Internet was only reaching 23% of American that increased to 41% two years later. In 2006, it was reported almost 75% of adults were online. Of these adults, 65% use the Internet as a news source with 58% seeking specific political information or news ("Percentage of Adults Online," 2006).

Increasingly, more American's are turning to the Internet as their source for news, especially political headlines. This is evident in the 55% drop in local news consumption and 20% surge in online consumption in 2000 ("Internet Sapping Broadcast News Audience," 2000). Demonstrative in this Pew study is the increasing appeal of the Internet as a political news source for young people. Nearly half of those under 30 turn to the Internet for news compared to only 20% of those over 50 ("Internet Sapping Broadcast News Audience," 2000). Paul (2004) reported that 63 million Americans sought online sources for political news during the 2004 campaign. Another 43 million discussed politics over e-mail, with 13 million making campaign contributions via online means. In total 52% reported that online sources ultimately affected their final voting decision. In total, 75 million Americans participated in at least one online campaign contact or activity.

Similarly to the impact traditional media has been found to have on political engagement, online communication has been found to have positive implications as well. Tian (2004) discovered that users who engage in online political deliberations improve the quality of debate. Furthermore, it was found that the Internet does not discourage the public to vote but rather very much so encourages them. In turn, the greater the American public utilizes the Internet for public debate, discussion and news the more positively they perceive the effects of the Internet on political life (Tian, 2004).

Chadwick (2006) has suggested six themes that are central to online political communication. These include decentralization, participation, community, rationalization, governance and libertarianism. According to Chadwick decentralization refers to the removal of the elite intermediaries in the shaping of political opinions. Public opinion is being shaped less by media professionals and increasingly more so by small groups and individuals taking to the Internet and social networks. Conversely, the gatekeeping function the traditional media has held in shaping public political discourse has in many ways diminished.

Participation and community often go hand-in-hand when it comes to online political dialogue. In large part, the Internet has been seen as an avenue through which to combat citizens' apathy towards politics in general. While Chadwick (2006) pointed out that many take to online forums to reinforce already held political beliefs, other scholarly treatments of the matter have demonstrated the opposite to be true (Williams, 2005; MacDougall, 2005; Cornfield et. al, 2005; Bowman & Willis, 2007; Cooper, 2006). Still, the Internet has appeared to provide a new form of online campaigning. This style of campaigning is far more interactive and seeks to lower voter apathy and increase citizen

participation. This in turn is accomplished, as Chadwick (2006) argued, through inventing strong cyber communities.

In terms of rationalization, the Internet has become a valuable tool for segmented marketing. Now, online behavior patterns are being used to send more targeted messages. Through rationalization, the Internet can be used to process and gather vast amounts of information with the intended consequence of influencing behavior. Campaigns now have the ability to send more specific messages to particular groups or individuals with a more focused message (Denton & Kuypers, 2008).

A governance approach to analyzing the Internet recognizes the vital role networks, interaction, and participation are having in contemporary politics (Chadwick, 2006). Governance encapsulates the entire range of persons and institutions that are involved in governing society. The Internet enables a wider proliferation of information, resulting in a paradigm shift. Rather than focusing upon central government agencies, Chadwick (2006) contended the shift is now upon the diverse actors, new communities, interests and interdependencies that they foster.

The ideation that government regulation and intrusion is unwelcome in Cyberspace hits at the core of the Libertarian nature of the Internet. "Cyberlibertarianism" refers to the prevalence of hatred of market regulation by government along with the perceived erosion of civil liberties and privacy rights found throughout cyberspace (Chadwick, 2006). The fact that many view the Internet as an unfettered communication medium matched with the passions of entrepreneurs that seek to monetize from it, only fuel this more libertarian approach to online communication.

Over the past decade the Internet, and more recently social networks have been utilized by campaigns to engage the electorate at unprecedented levels. Cornfield (2005) traced the origins of effective online campaigning to Howard Dean's 2004 presidential bid. Dean in many ways led a revolution of sorts in terms of online campaigning. The democratic candidate capitalized on the immediacy of the Internet for fundraising efforts. John Kerry adopted similar tactics of news-pegged fundraising appeals to raise over \$5 Million (Cornfield, 2005).

Furthermore, the campaign leveraged the power of a decentralized campaign approach by adopting the campaign slogan "You have the power". This extended to allowing his supporters to decide whether or not he would accept public funding. A model later used both by John Kerry and George W. Bush to break down barriers of participation. Lee, Cornfield & Horrigan (2005) reasoned that by the 2004 election the Internet had become an essential part of the American political process.

By 2006, the emergence of social networking sites was already heavily influencing the political process. For the first time in history, the Internet demonstrated its prominence in the American political process. In the summer of 2006, CNN utilized the popular online video community YouTube as the basis for a preprimary Democratic debate. Over 3,000 videos were submitted through the site covering a myriad of topics (Johnston, 2007). This format was the first of its kind to enable voters to directly engage candidates through social networking in a national debate.

Perhaps no one knows the impact of social networking upon the American political process than former US Senator George Allen. In his 2006 re-election bid, a video of Allen using a racial epithet spread rapidly via YouTube. Denton & Kuypers (2008) offered three

lessons from the Allen gaff. It demonstrated the ability of campaigns to score political points by posting unflattering videos of their opponents and draw attention away from the mainstream. Opposition research can be easily disseminated and attack material can be spread more rapidly and easily. Finally, social networking platforms provide no-cost outlets for candidates to present their message to the masses. By 2007, a specific webpage was dedicated for every candidate on YouTube. Facebook has also followed suit, with nearly all-major candidates having Fan page highlighting campaign information and videos. Candidates can simply not afford to not engage the electorate without the use of the Internet

Additionally, the widespread use of social network sites does present challenges to current research paradigms and theories. Better and more detailed theories must be explored and developed to aid in explaining the complex system of online social networks. This literature found that current models of computer-mediated communication are not sufficient enough to explain the roles and functions of how members of social network impact and influence others.

This thesis contributes to the literature on the role Facebook is having and has the potential to have in the near future in several ways. First, this study traced the development of social network theory and analysis and offered it as a more useful and necessitated means to evaluate and understand social networks. Secondly, the literature of impression management considers the most recent developments in online self-presentation and friends, namely status updates. Additionally, how the information on one's online profile provides social cues to others. Finally, the culmination of this literature lays a strong foundation in which to apply the principles of social network theory to find

causal relationships between ideologies and expectancies on Facebook. By understanding the ideological background and mindset of partisan SNS users, predictions and evaluations can be made when these users engage in political discourse at a heightened level.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study intends to evaluate two research questions:

R1: How does Facebook use shape one's political ideologies, perceptions and behaviors?

R2: How are one's political views reinforced, challenged, or adjusted through socially networked relationships facilitated through Facebook?

The methodology chapter has five divisions. The first section underscores the theoretical framework of the proposed study. The second section states the research strategies and methods of inquiry employed for this study. The third section relates the details of the interviews process. These details include settings, participants, and procedures, along with ethical applications. The fourth section provides an overview of interview analysis. The fifth section surveys strategies used for analysis and validation.

Theoretical Framework:

Network analysis or social networking theory considers how the social structure of relationships around a person, group or organization impacts or influences behaviors and beliefs (Barnes, 1954). This theoretical framework takes a relational approach in its methods as it seeks to measure and detect the magnitude of social pressures. The focus of such analysis is not upon personal characteristics but rather upon the relationships between people. For the purposes of this study the information exchanged between individuals will be considered. By mapping relationships, the network analysis can expose emergent and informal communication patterns (Haythornwaite, 2005). In turn, these patterns will be used to explain communication phenomena occurring among a people group. For this study, online social networks will be considered in relation to online friendships and their effects on online postings.

Strategies and Methods of Inquiry:

This study seeks to explain how participants not only share meanings, but how they understand and explain them as well. Since the purpose of qualitative research design is to explore how participants understand and explain meaning, this methodology is best suited for the purposes of this study (Morrow & Smith, 2000). More recent scholarly evaluations of qualitative design appear to avoid a fixed definition (Morse & Richards, 2007; Weiss, 1994).

Denzin and Lincoln (1994, 2005) have conveyed a seemingly evolving definition. Their most recent definition of qualitative research as,

A situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomenon in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3).

Creswell (2007) stated that qualitative research begins with assumptions and the possibility of the application of a theoretical lens to inquire the meanings individuals or groups assign to a social or human issue. Likewise, qualitative design affords this researcher to collect data in a natural setting that is sensitive to the participant's comfort level. Additionally, it affords data analysis that is inductive and that can establish patterns. Thus, utilizing a qualitative methodology allowed the researcher to observe the Facebook practices of partisan Facebook users in a depictive and naturalistic setting.

Personal interviews, also known as face-to-face interviews, were conducted during this study. Face-to-face interviews are used to gather information about participants, others, groups or even entire networks of which they may belong (Merrigan & Huston, 2009). They were useful in establishing a rapport and climate of trust between the interviewer and participants. Merrigan and Huston (2009) noted this format often elicits higher response rates and allows the interviewer to probe for more in-depth responses. Qualitative methods also provide a more comprehensive methodology for learning about personal experiences and ideologies.

Media can also be combined with interview questions. This may include photographs or videotapes of interaction (Merrigan & Hutton, 2009). Furthermore, this can extend to online and computer mediated communication. In interview settings, Facebook profile pages and online communication were utilized.

According to Stake (1995) interviews can serve as a tool of investigation. The researcher has an interest in the interviewees for their uniqueness, commonalities and personal stories. In interview settings,

“We may have reservations about some things people tell us, just as they will question some of the things we will tell about them. But we enter the scene with a sincere interest in learning how they function in their ordinary pursuits and milieus and with a willingness to put aside many presumptions while we learn”. (p.1)

Consequently, the use of interviews is not only a vital component of this research it is necessary in achieving its objectives. Thus, it is appropriate to utilize interviews to determine how the Facebook use of Republicans and Democrats, respectively, may influence beliefs, attitudes and perceptions.

Interview Process and Procedures:

Settings. Twenty (20) interviews were conducted via telephone and face-to-face and. All efforts will be made to utilize face-to-face techniques, should time and distance not permit, the interview will be conducted via telephone. By utilizing telephone interviews the research will not be constrained to geographical constraints and will allow participants from around country and varying political environments the ability to participate.

Participants. The participants were a snowball sample of convenience, recruited through the researchers personal Facebook. The choice of this type of sample is related to time constraints and the limited accessibility to the population on the part of the researcher. Half of these participants will be Registered Republicans while the remainder of will be Registered or Democrats. A non-random sample will be chosen based upon the following criteria: (1) be registered or as either a Republican or Democrat. (2) Frequent and active Facebook users with over 150 friends, because the goals and research questions of this study require this level of usage. Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007) determined the average Facebook user has between 150-200 friends. Additionally, the application of a social network analysis necessitates a sizeable number of friends. (3) Operate a public and complete Facebook profile that includes religious views, political views, quotations, and about you sections. The profiles must be public since the aim of this research is not to exam any information that may be deemed confidential. Additionally, profiles that provide religious and political views along with quotations and about you sections serve as a measure of validation of interview responses.

The purposes of network studies are to emphasize the uniqueness of each network as a whole (Merrigan & Huston, 2009). In fitting with this purpose, selection methods are almost always purposive and involve snowballing. Thus, this research will employ this selection method in an effort to sample a social system and analyze a network of online friends. The choice of only

ten participants is related to the constraints of the researcher. Many of these constraints are related to time and accessibility. Simply, the interview process according to Patton (1990) is often a lengthy, detailed and time consuming process.

Process. The interview protocol that will be employed will consist of three phases: (1) planning the interview, (2) conducting the interview and (3) analyzing the interview (DeWine, 2001). The researcher asked the twenty participants ten major questions and approximately eight follow up questions. The questions asked will be open ended in nature and will encompass demographic information, religious and political ideologies, perceptions and understandings of freedom of speech, how the participant utilizes Facebook and the nature of their online social network. The ten major questions are as follows:

- (1) What is your primary purpose for using Facebook?
- (2) How were you introduced you to Facebook?
- (3) What are your political philosophies, What Party are you registered with?
- (4) What are your religious beliefs or affiliations?
- (5) What does freedom of speech mean to you?
- (6) Describe your Facebook friends. How do you know them and why are they your friend?
- (7) Describe the political philosophies of your Facebook Friends
- (8) How do you express your religious beliefs on Facebook?
- (9) How do you express your political beliefs on Facebook?
- (10) How would you say your friends influence what you post on Facebook?

The eight follow up questions are:

- (1) Why are you a registered member of your political party?

- (2) Describe the political leanings of the state you currently are registered to vote
- (3) Why did you join the Facebook community?
- (4) How do your friends express their religious beliefs on Facebook?
- (5) How do your friends express their political beliefs on Facebook?
- (6) What causes, political organizations, politicians or campaigns are you a fan of on Facebook?
- (7) How do you respond when your friends express political or religious beliefs on Facebook?
- (8) How do you utilize Facebook to educate yourself concerning candidates and other political issues?
- (9) By loading your public Facebook page, can you explain your political and religious beliefs and the information you have provided in the about me section?
- (10) How, if at all, has the Facebook postings of friends holding differing political beliefs changed your own?
- (11) Please provide more detail

These questions were asked in a semi-structured format. This format has four characteristics: (1) It asks respondents to reflect on shared concepts or experiences; (2) it refers to constructs that have been analyzed and predefined prior to the interview. (3) The interviewer uses a guide that specifies topics of interest rather than an interview schedule, and (4) the focus is upon the participants' understanding or interpretation of a particular concept or experience (Nachmias & Frankfort-Nachmias, 1996). For these reasons this interview structure was most fitting to stimulate discussion and to determine any thematic consistencies that serve to further the validity of this research.

All of these semi-structured interviews occurred at a location or by a means in which the participant was most comfortable, and are intended to last no less than thirty minutes and no longer than one hour. During the interview, the researcher took notes and digitally recorded the audio of the interview for further analysis and evaluation. If at any time the participant felt need to take a break during the interview, they were permitted in an effort to maintain a comfortable and cordial environment. The participants were informed that an alias was provided to conceal their identity. Each participant was provided with a consent form and made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time during the interview process.

Ethical Considerations. Prior to any research involving human participants is conducted; permission was received from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Liberty University. While there appear to be no apparent risks associated with this study, all precautions were taken to seek information that has already been made public through participants Facebook profiles. No confidential information was solicited. These precautions were implemented during the design stage. All efforts were taken to safeguard the participants' safety, anonymity, comfort and the right to withdraw at anytime; for any reason should they desire to do so. Consent forms were issued before the start of the interview detailing the nature of the interview and underscoring the voluntary nature of their participation. A completed consent form was required from all participants in this study.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) step-by-step guidelines were applied to the analysis of the interview responses. The guidelines feature six phases that include (1) the researcher familiarized themselves with the data, (2) generated initial codes, which encompassed "coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code", (3) seeking themes which includes "collating codes into potential themes, gathering

all data relevant to each potential themes,” (4) reviewing themes (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing a report (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87) . These guidelines were beneficial to the process of making generalizations concerning interview responses and recognizing any themes that may emerge.

Interview Analysis Procedures

Confirmability and validation for qualitative research can be achieved through several means. Member checks, peer debriefing, triangulation, and audit trails are some of the strategies qualitative researchers often employ to establish the validity of interpretations and confirm findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000). To establish credibility and confirm findings and interpretations, member checks, triangulation and peer debriefing were utilized.

The member check will enable research participants to review some of the material the researcher has prepared. This includes field notes, transcripts and reports. In this vein, interpretations that have been attributed to members can be verified (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For reliability purposes, the researcher maintained an ongoing dialogue with all participants as it related to arriving at accurate interpretations of their responses.

This study utilized multiple data source triangulation to compare data from more than once source. During the interview, participants were asked to load their public Facebook page to highlight their political, religious and about me sections. The purpose of this is to discover any inconsistencies or contradictory findings that “may actually help to understand the richness of what is being studied” (Stage & Russel, 1992, p, 489).

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study is to discover how Facebook shapes ideologies and practices of Republicans and Democrats and how online socially networked relationships between these two groups may influence beliefs and behaviors. In this chapter of the study, the researcher arranges the findings from all conducted interviews. These findings will be arranged according to themes and topics that emerged through data analysis. Similarities and dissimilarities among participant responses will be addressed. Additionally, key issues and anomalies shared by the participants will also be underscored. Table 1 provides an overview of participant's demographics information, their pseudonym for the purposes of this study, and their political ideologies.

Among the more prominent themes discussed by interviewees were purposes for using Facebook, impression management, characteristics of individual social networks; the nature, degree and extent of politically related exchanges among socially networked relationships, and the response; and finally how it effects or reinforces existing ideologies and behaviors.

Purposes for Using Facebook

Overwhelmingly participants indicated a desire to stay connected with friends, colleagues, and family as their primary purpose for using Facebook. This relates strongly to how a good deal of the participants was initially engaged to use Facebook. "Jameson" recounted how he joined Facebook in its infancy,

I was a freshman in college and I was one of the first users at my university. I actually was one of the first of my school to join. My sister told me about this thing called Facebook, so I went to facebook.com and nothing appeared. Back then it was thefacebook.com. I remember putting up my first profile picture and suddenly 15 girls

Table 1
Overview of Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Location	Political Affiliation
Allen	Male	19	NH	Democrat
Angelica	Female	27	Washington, DC	Democrat
Allison	Female	32	Washington, DC	Democrat: Liberal
Byron	Male	28	VA	Republican: Tea Party
Courtney	Female	37	Washington, DC	Democrat: Very Liberal
David	Male	25	TN	Democrat
Ellis	Male	23	VA	Republican: Tea Party
Eileen	Female	32	MA	Democrat: Liberal
Gretchen	Female	20	VA	Republican: Christian Conservative
Jameson	Male	24	Washington, DC	Republican: Classical Liberal
Jackson	Male	22	VA	Republican: Conservative
Leon	Male	21	VA	Democrat
Lucinda	Female	34	VA	Democrat: Liberal
Luke	Male	26	VA	Republican
Mallory	Female	27	NH	Democrat: Moderate
Olivia	Female	24	VA	Republican
Roy	Male	26	VA	Republican: Constitutional Conservative
Victoria	Female	21	MA	Democrat
Vincent	Male	42	MA	Republican: Fiscal Conservative
Veronica	Female	23	VA	Republican: Very Conservative

that I had just met asked to be my friend. Nearly every one of them said hi cutie. Too me it was great way to stay in touch with girls I had just met. I didn't need their number I just needed their name. Some of my closest friends are from my very first day at school and I credit Facebook for sustaining those relationships. This was back when you had to have an .edu e-mail, so it was only college students.

“Jackson” recalled joining after he toured prospective colleges. He stated that he became a member after one of the students told him “it’s what college kids do”. “Veronica” was a MySpace user in her last year of High School when her friends told her that Facebook was a better alternative. She added that MySpace was getting a bad rap for “creepy old men preying on young girls” and she thought Facebook would be safer.

A secondary purpose for many of the interviewees was for professional reasons. Several participants indicated the role Facebook has played in expanding their professional networks. Facebook has aided many of the participants in building and fostering professional relationships. A few interviewees noted how their use of Facebook has facilitated career advancement. “Roy” observed the utility Facebook offers in listing where online friends work,

I’ve used my Facebook before to see where friends work. It’s great to see who I may know and how I can use that connection as springboard for job opportunities. The same has happened in the other direction. Friends have looked at where I work and have asked about job opportunities. I’ve actually been able to plug people in really well that way. As a manager it also can help give valuable background information on who I am considering to hire. I can tell pretty quickly if I want to hire someone by what kind of things are on their Facebook.

Nearly all participants highlighted their use of Facebook for amusement and entertainment functions. “Victoria” recognized how fun it was to see the ridiculous things her friends would post. She stated, “When I’m having a bad day I can usually have a good laugh at a funny saying or something a friend would share on Facebook.” Others admitted to wasting a good deal of time on Facebook. “Allan” confessed to spending hours at a time watching videos his friends would share on Facebook. “Mallory” echoed similar sentiments, “Yes, I’ve killed a lot of time looking through old photos or looking at friends pictures.

All of the respondents indicated similar shared purposes for their Facebook use. Specifically, eighteen of the twenty participants all used the term “connection” in conjunction with their purposes for using Facebook. Most indicated using Facebook to connect to old friends from High School and College. Familiar connections were also found to be a common purpose for Facebook use among participants. Many shared that their parents use it as a means to feel connected to offspring that are away at college.

Impression Management

All participants indicated the importance of what is posted and appears on their individual Facebook pages. “Victoria” exclaimed,

I always cringe a little bit when I see the pictures some of my girlfriends post. I’m like, don’t you realize this is out their for like the whole world to see? You don’t look classy at all with drunken pictures on Facebook.

Nearly all participants expressed a certain cognizance of how what they post could positively or negatively impact them. Several noted that they would post anything they would not want their boss or potential employer to see. In this vein, most expressed a degree of restraint

in not only what they post but also how they post. “Jameson” stated, I always make sure my Facebook is the best representation of me.

A large portion of participants demonstrated they put much thought into what they chose to reveal in their public about me sections. When it came to quotes, many shared unique anecdotes of how certain quotes personally impacted them or how a certain Biblical passage guided them. Dissimilarities existed in how Republicans and Democrats portrayed themselves online. Participants that identified as Republican often described themselves in more specific terms on their Facebook pages.

While stating they were Republicans, two participants listed their political views as Tea Party under their “About Me” section on Facebook. Another Republican participant listed his views as “Classical Liberal”. When asked, most Republicans specified in very specific terms what political philosophies they subscribed to. Their Facebook pages were more explicit in their descriptions. These descriptions ranged from constitutional conservative, very conservative, Christian conservative, fiscal conservative and only two listed their views as strictly conservative or Republican.

This trend also continued with Republicans offering more specificity on their religious philosophies. Even on their Facebook pages, many were not content to merely list Christian.

“Roy” stated,

I list Baptist because I think it’s a clearer picture of what I believe. There is a lot I disagree with the Catholic church about and I am not so comfortable with the practices of so-called mainstream Protestant denominations. It’s not meant to be divisive, just a clear picture of what I hold to be true.

“Veronica” echoed similar sentiments when she stated, “I think Christian is far too broad, I’m not Catholic. It’s too easy to just put Christian, what does that mean?”

Conversely, those who identified as Democrat did not choose to make such distinctions on their Facebook page. When asked their political philosophy many proudly stated “Democrat”. Only four of the participants that self-identified as Democrats, expressed their philosophies in terms of liberal or very liberal. Very few Democrats drew such distinctions on their Facebook page. On their Facebook pages, 5 described themselves as Democrat, 3 as Liberal, 1 as very liberal and another as moderate.

Both Republicans and Democrats also expressed concern over what their friends post on their wall. “Allison” indicated,

While it’s never been a huge problem, I have deleted posts friends have made on my wall. If someone is starting drama on my page or just is being stupid, ya, I have and will delete that. Some people post things just to tick people off and gang up on people.

That’s just dumb and not acceptable. Find a better use of your time.

Others expressed their use of Facebook’s privacy settings to best moderate what appears on their walls. “Olivia” expressed,

I used to always be scared when I saw I was tagged in a photo. I mean, everyone has a smartphone. I don’t want ugly pictures of me online or ones that can embarrass me.

I’m glad Facebook now lets me approve of images I am tagged in. Seriously, I always hated it when these really bad pictures would show up of me on Facebook.

Associations were demonstrated to be significant to the participants in this study. Many felt that what they “Liked” on Facebook was a reflection of their values, worldview and general interests. Republican participants indicated they liked conservative politicians, causes and news sources.

Democratic participants revealed they too extended their political ideologies in liking candidates such as Barack Obama. “David” related that he felt like he was part of the process by liking Barack Obama on Facebook. Additionally, he conveyed that by aligning himself that way there was no question among his friends where he stood. Similarly, Republican participants expressed how their liking of particular primary candidates demonstrated to their online network a more descriptive indicator of what matter the most to them in the upcoming election.

Characteristics of Individual Social Networks

As a social network analysis this study seeks to examine more than just dyadic communication. This study seeks to examine the unique relationships and interaction among socially networked relationships. Thus, participants were asked questions concerning the nature of their online social networks. These responses served to provide a framework to analyze the two research questions of this research dealing with usage and how socially networked relationships reinforce or challenge beliefs attitudes and perceptions.

Questions related to the nature of individual social networks and online friends prompted more careful reflection from participants. All participants mentioned that their online social networks contained a broad spectrum of friends. Many of which stemmed from pre-existing relationships. For participants who classified themselves as students, their primary source of online friends was other classmates. Older participants also indicated college friends, high-school friends and family as the primary consistency of their online friends.

While many participants conveyed that they were only friends with those whom they already knew, others welcomed new online friendships through Facebook. “Jameson” stated,

I usually will be and stay anyone’s friend on Facebook until they remove me.

Honestly, I probably do have some friends I have never talked to in person.

Others, were more selective in who they added. “Veronica” noted,

I always get creeped out by those guys that meet once and then send me a request to be my friend.

Other females in the study repeated similar sentiments; whereas, the males in the study were more prone to accept most friend requests.

Personal ideologies appeared to have no bearing on any of the participant’s online social networks. All participants indicated that their social network was comprised of individuals that held a wide range of differing views. “Angelica” observed,

In a college setting you just know all sorts of people. Like, I’m Catholic and Democrat but like, when I look at my friends list I really see everything. Jews, agnostics, atheists. gay, straight, bi, transgendered. I mean it’s the world we live in. Like, going to college and being in that environment just kind of brings those people together. I think it’s really neat to see all those different people on Facebook. They all have different things to say, some are more vocal than others.

While most interviewees felt they had a great diversity in their online friends, some indicated that many of their friends did mirror their own beliefs. “Luke” related,

I have friends that are polar opposite of me. But really when I when I think about, a lot of my friends probably are more conservative. I think it has to do with [the school I go to].

Those that expressed a higher degree of political engagement indicated that many of their online friends are from campaign events, or partisan related activities. Thus, those that were more active in their respective parties had more online friends that shared their views.

Politically Related Exchanges

The Republicans and Democrats included in this study spoke to a wide array of manners in which they encountered or took part in political dialogue. The most common was through the postings of friends. Based upon the responses of interviewees it could be surmised these postings could be classified into one of four categories. These categories are: criticism of the current administration, affirmation of the current administration, policy related matters, and get out the vote efforts. “Byron” remembered the cross-section of responses he witnessed on Facebook during the debate over healthcare,

It suddenly seemed like everyone was a constitutional expert. Everyone seemed to have an opinion. I would see posts going on and on about the ills of the current system and how what congress was doing was a good thing. Then I saw the unending posts about why the government should not be involved in healthcare and why we do not want to be like Canada. Some had funny posts and others just got very nasty with each other. You can have debates but you don’t have to get crazy.

A considerable amount of the participants indicated that they often observed politically charged discussions but engaged at a minimal basis or only if they truly felt antagonized. Some related that if they agreed with a particular post they would add their support by choosing to “like” the post. What was shown to illicit a good deal of response were the sharing of news articles. “Roy” related

If a story really grabs my attention, I may be more inclined to comment. Just regular news not so much. If it is good opinion or I completely disagree with it, I may say something. Usually, I just read it and that’s it.

Only a few interviewees revealed that they were likely to start a politically charged discussion. “Ellis” explained

I love to debate, I like to argue. I've had some great debates on Facebook. Ya, people get really passionate. Facebook can be a good place to stir the pot. I think its good to talk about politics and how it affects people at a practical level. I have no problem with another person's opinion, backing it up-well that's another story.

Others were more prone to respond only when they felt passionately about a given subject matter or policy. "Gretchen" conveyed

I am passionately pro-life. When I see the lies put out there by pro-abortion people I will address it. Facebook is a good way to put the truth out there. So many young girls are just spoon fed what the media tells them and think it is ok. I like to think I get a lot of my friends thinking. Like when I see the government telling the Church they have to provide contraception, you bet I am going to say something about it. We need people to speak up for those who can't speak for themselves in whatever way possible. Facebook really reaches people, that's where people are.

In terms of the degree and extent to which participant's friends engaged in political exchanges, most provided sentiments similar to "Lucinda's"

I have a wide range of, of friends with political backgrounds. Some of them are very adamant, some of them that's all they post. Others are more antagonistic and will kind of drop a line to see who is going to pick up the fight. Then other people, they just don't care.

There appeared to be a partisan divide when it came to utilizing Facebook as a news source and learning tool. Republicans revealed they were less likely to use Facebook as a source to learn more about candidates. Conversely, Democratic participants appeared to favor Facebook

as a means to learn the most about a candidate. “Roy” felt that candidate Facebook is not the best means to learn objective information about a candidate He stated,

Rarely do I use Facebook to learn about candidates. I tend to look for more objective media sources. Sometimes, I will go directly to the candidates website. Facebook is more about what others are saying than what may actually be true. I see it more as a real time reaction to news, not news itself.

“Jackson” echoed similar sentiments, “I use Facebook as means of easier navigation of the web and to get to those websites that have the content I want to look at.”

Conversely, “Leon”, a Democrat, stated,

I stalk candidates on Facebook. I want to know what their saying, how they are responding to the issues of the day. More than anything I want to see consistency. Are what they saying today different from yesterday? How soon do they respond to different issues? Are they the real deal and how are they trying to engage me. To me, I want to make sure they don’t post one thing on Monday and then post something totally different by Friday. With Facebook you can go back and look at what they say. I think it helps keep politicians honest.

The Impact of Partisan Interplay on Facebook Users

The focus of this study exists in two research strands. The first being how Facebook use shape one’s political ideologies, perceptions and behaviors. All participants indicated that their personal Facebook use has played a significant roll in helping them engage in civic dialogue in a civil manner. “Veronica” mentioned how her Facebook use has helped her in seeing others viewpoints and being more respectful in how she expressed her own. She related,

It's helped me to be, not necessarily more open minded but more receiving of different beliefs. It's polished up my ability to respond politely and not to offend. Whereas before, I may not have paid so much attention as to how my comments will be perceived.

Nearly all participants expressed how their Facebook use changed their perceptions of those who held differing political opinions. Many indicated that it helped them to understand the basis for other's beliefs and why they feel the way they do. "Jameson" a Republican ,concluded,

I like to see how others arrive at their conclusions. If they base it in logic and it is philosophically sound, it helps me to see how they construct their arguments.

A lot of people my age don't just say I agree or disagree with this or that, but many give strong whys. I think Facebook has helped me in determining why I feel or believe the way I do. It almost forces me to always back up what I believe. I can see how others arguments make sense, even if I don't subscribe to their way of thinking. I used to think, well supporting this or that is dumb but sometimes the other side may have good arguments. It forces me to come up with better ones.

"Lucinda," a Democrat, added

I value education, whether that's learning in conversation or learning in life. I feel I have viewed things posted that help me to see things in a different light. I like to see a different side of the coin.

It was also observed by numerous participants that Facebook gives a more holistic view of individuals. Participants noted that Facebook allows users to see what may influence the views of their friends. Many recognized education, location, and professional experience all as factors that shape individual views. Additionally, by being able to see quotes, religious views and what

individuals and causes they “like” on Facebook they can better understand the reference points of their online friends.

“Leon” surmised,

Politics should never divide people. It’s a part of who they but not the complete picture.

Someone’s political views are not who they are exclusively. I feel you have to understand people, their goals and their objectives in life. You have to know their past. You have to know who they are and why they are that way. I feel it’s totally unacceptable to look at a single posting and making a judgment from that. I look to look at who they are. Who do they quote, who do they read, what are their religious views. Where do they go to school? All these things play a huge role in why people are the way they are. Facebook helps paint a bigger picture of who people are. It kind of gives the back story to why they say the things they do.

The most prevalent trend in this research strand is that of understanding. Several participants recognized that Facebook aided in contextualizing how they should interpret what their online friends posted. By utilizing the “About Me” features of Facebook, a large portion of the interviewees felt they gained a better understanding of their friends. This was especially the case in connecting with old friends. “Vincent” related,

I grew up and went to school in Massachusetts where Republicans are very few and far between. We’re a kind of dying breed here, you know? So when I reconnect with friends from High School I am always shocked at who lists their views as conservative. It helps me to see I am not as much of a lone-wolf.

One participant, “David”, expressed the reaction he received when he changed his party affiliation from Republican to Democrat,

Obviously it was a shock to my friends that I saw on a regular basis. What was more surprising was the feedback I got on Facebook. I mean, it really showed me how much attention some people pay to their news feeds. When I changed from Republican to Democrat on Facebook some old friends came out of the woodwork to call me a traitor or to simply ask why. I guess they looked at my pictures and saw I campaigned for Romney, and pictures with George W. Bush. Something probably didn't add up. Everything on my Facebook screamed Republican, and here I am saying I'm a Democrat. I'm sure over time my Facebook will reflect the change. I guess I can see how I am painting a confusing picture. This whole thing showed me that while people might not always say something about what they see on your Facebook, more people than you know look at the little things on your [Facebook] page.

The second research strand dealt with how political views are reinforced challenged, or adjusted through Socially Networked relationships facilitated through Facebook? Only one participant indicated a shift in party affiliation but did not attribute that to his personal Facebook use. He did note that Facebook has better solidify his choice to register with the Democratic party. The most common response from interviewees was that Facebook served to reinforce existing political ideologies. One participant compared his engagement in political dialogue on Facebook as "iron sharpening, iron". Still, others noted that while it reinforces their views it does challenge them. "Jackson" considered,

I can't really say that anyone has really changed my views by what they post on Facebook.

What I can say is that I have looked more into issues, or why I believe what I do because

of what someone has posted. I can really think of only one time where what someone posted really made me see something in a whole new light .

A large portion of the Democratic participants indicated similarly that diverging Facebook posts reinforce their views but their response was markedly different than that of the Republicans. Many expressed it spurred an openness to new ideas. “Leon” postulated,

I am always open to new ideas. That’s why I’m a Democrat. I think it takes real intellectual honesty to say here is a better idea. Many Republicans and conservatives tend to put their views in a box. Most that I encounter are not open to new ideas. They are pretty steadfast and unchangeable in what they believe. I think it’s more respectable to show that you can be flexible.

Conversely, while a majority of the Republican participants conveyed strong convictions in their mindsets, they did express a certain degree of openness to other view points. “Jameson” stated,

When people have different viewpoints it only solidifies my own by offering an alternative way to explain my own viewpoint. It’s an intellectual sharpening I guess you could say where I have to reevaluate my own viewpoint ideologically and philosophically to see if it is sound and then move back up. You know, once I deconstruct it down to the foundation, ensure that my argumentation can still withstand whatever their new found discovery of information or logic is. And If it does then I reconstruct it back up and I realize I can add a layer of fortification to my argumentation in relation to how I talk with them because it is still sound. If I find that my logic is not sound then I am willing to change it. But that is not something that really ever happens. I think people’s posting of their own viewpoints and how it relates to me changing mine, often I very vehemently

disagree -rarely do I necessarily agree. Rather than producing a change it produces a desire to dialogue back and forth. To me it's getting at if people really mean what they say and see the logic in it.

While many Democratic participants argued that Republicans are not open to new views or ideas, all Republican participants indicated that they are always willing to hear new ideas. Still, many expressed a clear rejection of ideas they felt violated their values or what they considered against what the country was founded upon and the constitution. "Vincent" furthered,

It's not that I am closed-minded. I know what the constitution says. It doesn't allow for the government to run health care, there is no right to kill your unborn child, and it is pretty clear about the role of government. It comes down to this: I don't see the constitution as an evolving document. Sure, I can have a spirited discussion on Facebook but I derive my views from the constitution. There are many things the founding fathers didn't spell out but they left principles for us. I hate this idea that we are the party of no. We are the party that stands for the Constitution. So I guess the whole idea of America and our founding fathers is close minded? Give me a break, these guys were brilliant and had objective principles and values that guided them.

Summary

In summation, the main themes which emerged from this study were purposes for using Facebook, impression management, characteristics of individual social networks; the nature, degree and extent of politically related exchanges among socially networked relationships, and the response; and finally how it effects or reinforces existing ideologies and behaviors. The final chapter will analyze these findings in light of existing literature in this field.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The primary focus and purpose of this study of this study is to discover how Facebook shapes the ideologies and practices of Republicans and Democrats. More specifically it is concerned with how online socially networked relationships between these two groups may influence beliefs and behaviors.

While recognizing the limitations inherent therein of qualitative research design and qualitative studies, this study appears to indicate that Facebook use serves to reinforce pre-existing ideologies while making users more understanding of opposing viewpoints. As highlighted in the literature review more and more individuals are sharing their political views via online forums and are finding communities of like-minded individuals. Scholars have offered varying opinions as to how online political communication affects political views. A significant body of research has demonstrated that online political exchanges lead to new ideas (Williams, 2005; MacDougall, 2005; Cornfield et. al, 2005; Bowman & Willis, 2007; Cooper, 2006). While others have found the case to be that such communication draws upon pre-existing ideologies. In this vein, political interactions on Facebook serve to reinforce and heighten all-ready held political beliefs, behaviors and perceptions (Chadwick, 2006).

The findings of this research were more in line with the latter. Participants in this study strongly indicated that Facebook did not cause them to adopt new views. Rather, the interplay of partisan dialogue usually served to reinforce already held beliefs. In this manner this researched confirmed Chadwick's (2006) findings concerning the reinforcing affect Facebook has upon already held political beliefs. All participants in this study

indicated that their Facebook use has helped them to frame and view issues differently, but has never actually changed their individual ideologies.

This may be more endemic of why individuals are drawn to social networking websites. There is ample research to suggest that the primary purpose for using websites such as Facebook were to build and sustain connections (Joinson, 2008; Urista, Qingqen & Day, 2009). Similarly, this research demonstrated that Facebook use and engagement is an extension of one's offline world (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe 2007). This research revealed this on several levels.

First, the Facebook users in this study built their social networks upon pre-existing relationships. This mirrors Haythornwaite 's (2005) findings that most SNS users utilize services such as Facebook to strengthen bonds with friends and family, especially those that are at a distance.

Second, individual online social networks were organized more around people than interests. As Boyd (2008) recognized, earlier online forums garnered members by appealing to interests. Participants revealed they have a vast array of individuals with competing ideologies as part of their networks. Thus, while participants have friends with similar political views in their network, it is not the sole reason an online relationship exists.

Third, Republicans or those that subscribe to more conservative political and religious ideologies are unashamed to portray this in online settings. This is in stark contrast to Bobkowski's (2009) findings, which indicated more timidity on the part of religious conservatives. Conversely, the religious conservatives in this study sought to

convey their religious and political beliefs in explicitly clear terms. Many appeared to express a high degree of passion for holding more specific views.

The only marked difference between online and offline political communication was its moderating effect. Greenhow and Robelia (2009) noted how online SNS users feel freer to express their views. While this is often true, most participants indicated how their Facebook use has made their political discourse more civil. More than one participant noted how seeing their views expressed in writing made them more cognizant of how their views may be perceived. Since Facebook use is not solely dyadic, the response of online friends and other users may produce this moderating effect.

The research questions were appropriate for guiding this study and the twenty interviews provided sufficient justifications for the inferences and conclusions made. These results add to an ever-growing body of literature into an emerging communication context. Thus, there exists an imperative to continue to investigate and further this line of research. Since online political communication is still in many ways in its infancy, it does require more attention utilizing various methodologies and approaches that can provide a more comprehensive view.

Limitations of Research

By their nature, qualitative research and the methodologies employed have an increased opportunity to reflect the researchers bias. There is a higher probability for this to occur inadvertently or through other means. While every effort was made to minimize this and maintain fairness, the ideological background and personal experiences of the researcher has bearing on his interpretations.

While the sample size provided a sufficient cross-section of voters and personal backgrounds to meet the demands of the study, it is hardly sufficient enough to make more sweeping generalizations concerning SNS use. Since snowball-sampling techniques were utilized, the sample does not necessarily represent all Facebook users, or Democrats and Republicans respectively for that matter. The researcher's personal network and his own limitations more directly affected the sample. While northern and southern voters were included in the study, it lacked representation from the mid-west and west portions of the country. Participants from these areas may have had different experiences and insights that could better enrich the study. Additionally, the majority of Republicans in the study were from southern states. The study also limited itself to registered or self-identified Republicans and Democrats. Independent or self-described moderate voters were not included in the study. Perhaps a more comprehensive study would consider further segmenting voting blocks and regions to best gauge how they interact on Facebook and who is more easily influenced through such interaction. The study also did not seek to trace how Facebook interaction may have changed over time. A far more robust study should consider these factors.

Future Research

As previously noted, online political communication is an emerging communication context. A majority of studies of computer-mediated communication have focused primarily upon uses and gratifications. In this regard; this is one of the first studies to consider the implications of the interplay of divergent political communication on Facebook. While this study was qualitative in nature, future studies would benefit from a

quantitative or even mixed-method approach. Since qualitative research and interviews are highly subject to interpretation, such methods would leave little room for researcher bias.

Rhetorical approaches, including content analyses could reveal who engages in political dialogue more, Republicans or Democrats. Additionally, such approaches may do more to reveal the nature of the dialogue and their responses. Also, of value may be more longitudinal approaches. To best ascertain true shifts in beliefs and behaviors, this may be best measured over time. Future studies should consider how continued exposure and engagement in political discourse has on users over time.

Conclusions

The findings in this research are of value to communication theorists, political observers and most certainly politicians. By understanding the role socially mediated online communication plays in the political process, politicians may gain more insight into how to leverage this for political gain. There also are inherent challenges to traditional media; this study may be of value to such outlets in learning to best engage a growing population that increasingly is taking to the Internet. This research has demonstrated that more and more younger audiences are seeking opinions online rather than through traditional means. Indeed, more studies need to devote themselves to the nature and impacts of online political communication. There are far more research strands to explore than this study has attempted to.

It is the aim of this study to underscore the important role the Internet, especially Facebook and other socially networked online media are having upon the political process. Especially as it relates to the American democratic process, the monumental impact of Facebook and social media should never be underestimated. There is still much to be

examined, evaluated, and considered in terms of online social media use. This is just one small part of a larger, necessary discussion of the role of social media in every-day life. Only more time and attention will reveal the full impact this new communication phenomena is having, will continue to have and may have in the future.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent

CONSENT FORM

The Rancor of Republicans, The Diatribe of Democrats
A Social Network Analysis of Partisan Interconnectivity
Sean Langille
Liberty University
School of Communication

You are invited to be in a research study about the influence of your online friends and political ideologies upon your Facebook use. You were selected as a possible participant because your political affiliations and Facebook habits fit the demands of this study. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Sean Langille, a graduate student at Liberty University School of Communication.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to discover to discover how Facebook shapes ideologies and practices of Republicans and Democrats and how online socially networked relationships between these two groups may influence beliefs and behaviors.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, you would be asked to do the following things:

1. You will be asked to answer approximately ten questions.
2. The whole interview process will be audio-recorded.
3. The length of time for your participation will be 30 minutes to 1 hour.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The study will provide insight into an emerging communication context and to those studying Social Media use as it relates to political communication.

The study has two risks: first, you will be asked questions that will encompass demographic information, religious and political ideologies, perceptions and understandings of freedom of speech, how you utilize Facebook and the nature of your online social network. Second, your responses will be audio-recorded. For these reasons pseudonyms will be used in all published and presented works relating to this study.

There are no benefits to participate in this study.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify your identity. Research records, including notes and digital recordings, will be stored in a locked drawer and digital recordings will be in password-protected files. Furthermore, only researchers will have access to the notes and digital recordings. All the notes will be erased once they are typed into the computer. All recording files and notes files will be maintained for no more than three (3) years preceding the completion of this study.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the university that you are studying at and online friends you have. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw:

You may recuse yourself from this study at anytime simply by contacting the researcher and stating so. No reason will need to be provided for your withdrawal, nor will any questions be asked concerning your choice to withdraw from the study.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher of this study is Sean Langille. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact:

Sean Langille,
Liberty University School of Communication,
(434) 879-1330,
slangille@liberty.edu

If you would like to contact someone other than the researcher you may contact:

Stuart Schwartz, Research Chair
Liberty University School of Communication
(434) 592-3712
sschwartz@liberty.edu

Liberty University Institutional Review Board
Dr. Fernando Garzon, Chair
1971 University Blvd, Suite 1582, Lynchburg, VA 24502
fgarzon@liberty.edu

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

I provide my consent and permission for audio of this interview to be recorded

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____