

University of Windsor

Scholarship at UWindsor

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Theses, Dissertations, and Major Papers

9-5-2018

Digital demos: Exploring communicative rationality on Reddit

Evan Alexander Nevard
University of Windsor

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd>

Recommended Citation

Nevard, Evan Alexander, "Digital demos: Exploring communicative rationality on Reddit" (2018). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 7550.
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd/7550>

This online database contains the full-text of PhD dissertations and Masters' theses of University of Windsor students from 1954 forward. These documents are made available for personal study and research purposes only, in accordance with the Canadian Copyright Act and the Creative Commons license—CC BY-NC-ND (Attribution, Non-Commercial, No Derivative Works). Under this license, works must always be attributed to the copyright holder (original author), cannot be used for any commercial purposes, and may not be altered. Any other use would require the permission of the copyright holder. Students may inquire about withdrawing their dissertation and/or thesis from this database. For additional inquiries, please contact the repository administrator via email (scholarship@uwindsor.ca) or by telephone at 519-253-3000ext. 3208.

Digital demos:
*Exploring communicative rationality on
Reddit*

By

Evan Alexander Nevard

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminology
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2018

Windsor, Ontario, Canada
© 2018 Evan Alexander Nevard

Digital Demos:
Exploring communicative rationality on Reddit

by

Evan Alexander Nevard

APPROVED BY:

J. Essex
Department of Political Science

S. McMurphy
Department of Sociology, Anthropology & Criminology

J. Ku, Advisor
Department of Sociology, Anthropology & Criminology

August 27, 2018

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I hereby certify that I am the sole author of this thesis and that no part of this thesis has been published or submitted for publication.

I certify that, to the best of my knowledge, my thesis does not infringe upon anyone's copyright nor violate any proprietary rights and that any ideas, techniques, quotations, or any other material from the work of other people included in my thesis, published or otherwise, are fully acknowledged in accordance with the standard referencing practices. Furthermore, to the extent that I have included copyrighted material that surpasses the bounds of fair dealing within the meaning of the Canada Copyright Act, I certify that I have obtained a written permission from the copyright owner(s) to include such material(s) in my thesis and have included copies of such copyright clearances to my appendix.

I declare that this is a true copy of my thesis, including any final revisions, as approved by my thesis committee and the Graduate Studies office, and that this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

ABSTRACT

Centring around the 2016 American election, this thesis explores how Reddit and its subreddits actualize Habermas' notion of the public sphere and communicative rationality. It compares and contrasts two of the largest and most popular political subreddits, /r/Politics and /r/The_Donald, to analyze how political groups contextualize political issues, and the discourse that manifests regarding them. The purpose is not to study all the ways in which individuals use Reddit to discuss general politics, but the ways in which consensus and majority opinions are reached and perpetuated through these subreddits. This thesis seeks to examine the extent to which political discussion on the social news aggregate website Reddit facilitates the conditions of a public sphere, and fosters democratic communicative characteristics.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. Jane Ku — Thank you for your guidance, your mentorship, and your ability to put up with my frustrating habit of always wanting to bite off more than I can chew. During your Social Movements course, you inspired me to engage with contemporary social issues, and to pursue a path dedicated towards social change. It was because of you that I found what direction I want to take my academic pursuits. I am grateful to have had the privilege of working under your direction. I am beyond appreciative for everything you have done for me the past two years. From the bottom of my heart, thank you so much for everything.

Dr. Suzanne McMurphy — Thank you for your keen insight, constant support, and motivation. Your kindness and approachability were able to turn moments of frustration into outlooks of inspiration and positivity. Not only were you able to evolve my understanding of how to engage in social research, you were able to help me find the joy of actually doing it. What you've taught me over the past two years will be instrumental as I work to improve and develop my research abilities.

Dr. Jamey Essex — Thank you for agreeing to work with me on this project. Your kindness and willingness to be apart of the committee was greatly appreciated. Your impeccable comments, suggestions, and levity towards the often depressing nature of online discourse not only made the thesis conceptually stronger, its inspired me to continue building and modifying my understanding of digital political communication.

Dr. Ronjon Paul Datta — Thank you for challenging and expanding my theoretical underpinnings. Your passion and vigour for the craft has set a foundational love for social theory. Learning from you has been nothing short of inspirational. Thank you for your guidance and support for the past four years.

Ryan Nevard — Thank you for always being there to give me rational, sound advice when I needed it most. You've been there to support me throughout my entire academic career. Everything I have accomplished was only possible because you.

Grandma — Thank you for all your love, and supporting me when I needed it most. I would not have been able to focus and finish on time without you. Thank you for always believing in me. I am beyond grateful for everything you have done for me.

Diane Leach — Thank you for being there to listen through my often incoherent babble, and to provide support and advice when stuck in the writing process. Whenever I needed help, advice, or a time-sensitive edit, you were always there to help without question. Words cannot describe how grateful I am for your support.

Chloé Leach — Thank you for being the drive I needed in order to push myself to keep going. You're always there when I need you most — may that be due to stress of

academics, or the challenges that life happens to throw in my direction. You've listened to the ramblings of a madman, you've cheered me on I wasn't sure of myself, and you've done it all with unconditional love and support. You inspire me to be the best person I can, and to push myself as far as I can go.

Finally, to my friends and colleagues, Herman, Mat, Travis, and Sasha - thank you for your constant support and encouragement. I would not have made it through the conceptual developments and subsequent mental breakdowns without you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|------------|
| DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY | iii |
| ABSTRACT | iv |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | v |
| LIST OF FIGURES | xi |
| LIST OF APPENDICES | xii |
| I. INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| II. ESTABLISHING THE POLITICAL CONTEXT | 5 |
| The Ubiquity of Social Media | 5 |
| Facebook: How Algorithmic Filtering Shapes Online Discourse | 9 |
| Technology as Instrumental | 12 |
| Finding an Alternative Space for Political Engagement | 16 |
| III. LITERATURE REVIEW | 22 |
| IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK | 33 |
| The Public Sphere and Argumentative Analytics | 33 |
| The Rhetorical Level of Processes | 37 |
| The Dialectical Level of Procedures | 40 |
| The Logical Level of Products | 45 |
| Critiques of Habermas | 49 |
| Working Towards an Understanding of Multiple Publics | 49 |
| Locating Publics within Reddit | 54 |
| Social Movements and the Public Sphere | 59 |
| V. DATA SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY | 64 |
| Data Collection | 65 |
| Data Processing | 67 |
| Data Analysis (Discourse Analysis) | 70 |
| VI. FINDINGS | 72 |
| Thematic Analysis of /r/Politics | 73 |
| Theme 1: Trump Focused Discourse | 74 |
| Critical of Trump's candidacy | 74 |
| Discourse which views Trump without disdain | 82 |
| Theme 2: Clinton Focused Discourse | 83 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| Discourse critical of Clinton | 83 |
| Political optimism of Clinton candidacy | 85 |
| Theme 3: Political Dissatisfaction | 87 |
| Theme 4: Political Optimism | 89 |
| Thematic Analysis of /r/The_Donald | 90 |
| Theme 1: Make America Rhetoric Again | 90 |
| 1.1 Statements | 91 |
| 1.2 Narratives | 93 |
| 1.3 Identity | 98 |
| Theme 2: Drain the Swamp | 102 |
| 2.1 The Swamp | 103 |
| 2.2 The Trump administration as the solution | 107 |
| Theme 3: Build the [Digital] Wall | 111 |
| 3.1 Antagonistic towards others | 112 |
| 3.2 Favourable towards the community | 114 |
| VII. DISCUSSION | 117 |
| The Rhetorical Level of Processes | 117 |
| The Ideal Speech Situation on Reddit | 117 |
| Rule 1.1 Unconditional participation | 118 |
| Rule 1.2 Unrestrictive discussion | 119 |
| Rule 1.3 Free from coercion and oppression | 124 |
| The Dialectical Level of Procedures | 127 |
| Oriented Towards a Mutual Understanding | 128 |
| Communicatively Competent | 132 |
| Cognitive Validity Claims | 137 |
| The Logical Level of Products | 139 |
| VIII. CONCLUSION | 146 |
| REFERENCES | 153 |
| APPENDIX A: Tables | 164 |
| APPENDIX B: Thematic Analysis | 165 |
| APPENDIX C: Figures | 171 |
| APPENDIX D: Reddit Threads | 175 |

| | |
|----------------------|------------|
| /r/The Donald Posts | 175 |
| /r/Politics Posts | 175 |
| VITA AUCTORIS | 177 |

LIST OF TABLES

| | |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| Table 1: Table of procedures | 166 |
| Table 2: Communication metrics | 166 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| | |
|--|-----|
| Fig 1: /r/Politics on topic statement | 173 |
| Fig 2: Restricted Community Example | 173 |
| Fig 3: /r/Politics submission guidelines | 174 |
| Fig 4: Trump supporters only | 174 |
| Fig 5: Ama restrictions | 175 |
| Fig 6: Ama ban | 175 |
| Fig 7: Ask Trump Supporters | 176 |

LIST OF APPENDICES

| | |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| Appendix A: Tables | 166 |
| Table 1: Table of procedures | 166 |
| Table 2: Communication metrics | 166 |
| Appendix B: Thematic Analysis | 167 |
| Appendix C: Figures | 173 |
| Appendix D: Reddit Threads | 177 |

“I am not concerned with what rational, reasonable or correct argumentation is, but with how people, dumb as they are, actually argue”
-Klein, 1980: 49

I. INTRODUCTION

Despite clear predictions of a Clinton victory and lowest favourability ratings of any presidential candidate in American history (Katz, 2016; Yourish, 2016), Trump's candidacy, filled with overtly simplistic rhetoric, anti-elitism and anti intellectualism lead to his election. Such contentious politics, with contradictory low voter turnout, raises sociological questions about public, political engagement.

Neoliberalism has displaced standard forms of politics and reframed the very meaning of politics (Brown, 2015: 17). The rise of digital publics requires a reconceptualization of the mobilization and deliberative action of political agents through a different method of engagement. While theoretical debate has raged in the past two decades over the public sphere's (Chadwick, 2013; Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlgren, 2005; Downey & Fenton, 2003; Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010 Morozov, 2011; Rheingold, 1993; Shirky, 2011) potential to facilitate participatory democracy, or its inability to incite authentic deliberation, it has nonetheless been seen as irrevocably altering how individuals engage with the system. The past decade has yielded various studies trying to exemplify the latent potential that social media giants such as Facebook and Twitter hold as potential public spheres that facilitate participatory democracy (Howard & Hussain, 2011; Juris, 2012; Milner, 2013; Romero et al., 2010; Semaan et al., 2014; Sergerberg & Bennett, 2011). However, with the structure of those sites emphasizing and prioritizing personal relationships, the possibility of establishing deliberative political action (in the Habermasian sense where relationships exist by virtue of argumentation and debate) requires further study. This thesis seeks to analyze Reddit, which unlike Facebook or Twitter, was designed as a way to organize

deliberative discussion by content or specific topics. Reddit can be seen as a mechanism to facilitate foundational support for specific issues or political candidates. This engagement draws parallels to the way in which new social movements mobilize across geographical and national borders in the digital sphere — rendering a physical presence minimal, but nonetheless just as powerful their physical counterparts (Bennett, 2012; Buechler, 2007; Martin et al., 2007).

Centring around the 2016 American election, this thesis will explore how Reddit and its subreddits actualize Habermas' notion of the public sphere and communicative action. It will compare and contrast two of the largest and most popular political subreddits, /r/Politics and /r/The_Donald, to analyze how political groups contextualize political issues and the discourse that manifests regarding them. My purpose is not to study all the ways in which individuals use Reddit to discuss general politics, but the ways in which consensus and majority opinions are reached and perpetuated through these subreddits. This thesis seeks to examine the extent to which political discussion on the social news aggregate website Reddit may facilitate the conditions of a public sphere and foster democratic communicative characteristics. As such, it consists of three primary objectives. First, it looks to assess whether or not, and to what extent, Reddit and its subreddits /r/The_Donald and /r/Politics constitute as a public sphere which engages in communicative rationality. Second, it seeks to critically analyze the discourse that manifested within the two aforementioned subreddits regarding the 2016 presidential election. Finally, it seeks to provide insight on the potential implications that virtual discourse may hold on the experiences of everyday (private) citizens. The questions that this thesis seeks to understand are: How does Reddit

produce publics and how do they maintain communicative action? These questions are accompanied by four subquestions: (1) How is consensus achieved? (2) Is it democratic and inclusive? (3) What kind of messages or knowledge is created in this public space? (4) What does this tell us about the potential of digital political action?

The Second chapter establishes the political context in which this thesis is situated. It breaks down how social media was utilized, what its overall impact on the election cycle was, and its political viability for both politicians and digital technology firms. Furthermore, it highlights why Reddit is the focus of the study for civic deliberation over Facebook by critically assessing the way the latter operates. Paramount to this analysis, includes examining its algorithms and process of 'datafication,' as well as how this information has been utilized by political consulting firms such as Cambridge Analytica. It concludes by analyzing how this information can be cultivated and manipulated by bots, the propagation of fake news and the potential subversion of civic deliberation in the digital public sphere. The Third chapter provides an outline on the literature regarding the digital public sphere debate and its potential to either facilitate deliberative civic engagement, or hinder it. Furthermore, it explores the real world implications that a digital sphere holds, underscoring that regardless of how it operates, there are repercussions to the discourse which manifests online. The Fourth chapter provides the theoretical basis which serves as the crux of my analysis. Here, Habermas' notion of the public sphere and communicative rationality is explicated. It is also expanded upon and modified using the works of Nancy Fraser, Geoff Eley, and Catherine Squires to indicate that there exists not a single public sphere, but a plurality which exist in tandem with each other. It concludes by providing

an analysis of how we may be able to locate and demarcate different forms of publics within Reddit itself. Chapter Five provides the details regarding the methods and procedures used to collect and analyze the data. It discusses the value of thematic analysis and how it can be utilized to address the questions posed in this thesis. Chapter Six discusses the findings of discourse analysis, such as common themes as a means to address the second objective: critically analyze the discourse that manifested within the two aforementioned subreddits regarding the 2016 presidential election, and subquestions three and four: What kind of messages or knowledge is created in this public space and what does this tell us about the potential of digital political action? Chapter Seven is a discussion chapter, where I amalgamate the data collected from the thematic analysis and the theory on argumentative analytics established in Chapter Four. Herein, I critically assess the mechanical workings of each subreddit in order to address objective one and three: assess whether or not, and to what extent, Reddit and its subreddits /r/The_Donald and /r/Politics constitute as a public sphere which engages in communicative rationality, and provide insight on the potential implications that virtual discourse may hold on the experiences of everyday (private) citizens. Furthermore, the analysis addresses subquestions one and two: How is consensus achieved, and is it democratic and inclusive? This discussion hopes to provide an answer to the overarching questions of how Reddit may produce publics, and how do they maintain communicative action? The Eighth and final chapter provides a summary of the results and discussion of the thesis, the limitations of this analytical approach, what this work hopes to have contributed to the growing body of literature, and possible future directions for new research.

II. ESTABLISHING THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

The Ubiquity of Social Media

The political sphere has irrevocably been altered by the presence of social media and digital technology firms. Reports on the 2016 presidential election indicate that social media had become one of the largest platforms for news acquisition and discussion (Gunn, 2017: 50). While television, newspapers, press conferences and other traditional outlets remained the dominant source for political communication, social media changed the way citizens engage with legacy outlets (Gunn, 2017: 51). What occurs in the political sphere becomes documented, debated, and shared online (Gunn, 2017: 51). The ubiquity of social media has allowed political campaigns to broaden their reach — new services and platforms have emerged, replacing campaign websites as politicians main channel for online communication (Gunn, 2017: 51). It has been attributed to being the biggest factor in opinion formation during the election (Papacharissi, 2009). Statistics indicate that 62% of American adults acquire news from social media, with a staggering 18% doing so often or exclusively, resulting in an overall 12% increase from studies conducted in 2012 (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016: 2). Furthermore, a study conducted by Pew Research Center in 2012, indicates that nearly 66% of all social media users have utilized platforms in order to post thoughts or articles about civic and political issues, like or promote related material, encourage people to vote, encourage others to take action on a political or social issue, belong to a group online dedicated to political or social issues, and/or follow elected officials or candidates for office (Raine et al., 2012: 2) As such, the use of social media is becoming a cornerstone for political participatory democracy (Raine et al., 2012: 1).

This change in engagement has required politicians to have performative flexibility in order to reach out and connect with potential voters (Gunn, 2017: 53). Campaigns are undergoing a process of adaptation to a post-material political culture, where digital media plays a critical role in the process of civic engagement and enables organizational experimentation of mass democratic politics (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016: 5). While blogs were utilized as early as the 2004 election, it wasn't until the 2008 political cycle where social media became a central force driving campaigns away from traditional avenues, hailing in what Gunn calls 'The Era of Social Media' (2017: 53). The 2008 election saw both Republicans and Democrats utilizing the major platforms, such as Facebook, Youtube and Twitter for their marketing campaigns (Gunn, 2017: 53). In the 2012 election, the Democratic Party had doubled down on their approach, 'pioneering' new mobilization techniques that combined voter records and social media data to facilitate support for their platform (Chadwick & Storm-Galley, 2016: 3). It was during this election that saw Democrats almost double the amount of social media platforms (9) compared to the Republicans (5), and demonstrate the strategic and analytical advantage of digital outlets, leading to a second successful election (Gunn, 2017: 54; Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016: 4).

Unlike the previous cycles, the 2016 election saw a drop in the total number of platforms utilized by both parties (Gunn, 2017: 54). It is argued that the impact of social media has not become any less prevalent, but that the way in which it functions, and the way in which they reach the consumer base has become more consolidated over the past five years (Gunn, 2017: 54). To an extent, this was to be expected, as there is a historical precedence of new media technology undergoing a period of

experimentation, expansion, and consolidation when entering the political foyer (Gunn, 2017: 54, 57). It is during the process of consolidation where new forms of media will revert to previous models of usage which reinforce traditional forms of existing power - where campaigns prioritize self promotion over interactivity (Gunn, 2017: 57-58).

Indeed, one of the chief criticisms of the 2016 campaign appears to be an overall decline in opportunities for public participation (Gunn, 2017: 59). The sanctioned social media accounts were often heavily monitored to control the messages of public participation, and official campaign websites lacked comment sections altogether (Gunn, 2017: 57). Despite this reduction of interactivity, and the consolidation of various social media platforms, there has been a substantial push in order to integrate digital media on a more fundamental level for campaigns. Following the success of the 2012 election, the Clinton campaign was advised to form 'working relationships' with digital technology firms such as Google, Facebook, Apple, and other digital technology firms (Wikileaks, 2016). As such, social media has become one of the most prominent channels for communication for American campaigns since the Obama administration in 2008, with an increasing emphasis on its use to bypass editorial outlets altogether.

In turn, the post material political cycle has proven to be lucrative for technology firms¹ (Fuchs, 2017: 4). In the United States, political advertising on digital media is utilized across local, state and national elections (Bossetta. 2017: 2). In 2012, advertising on these platforms attributed to 1.7% of ad spending costs. In 2016, this had increased to 14.4% (Bossetta. 2017: 2). As a result, technology firms are becoming increasingly motivated to actively participate in the democratic process for marketing

¹ The four most prominent technology firms are Facebook, Google, Microsoft, and Twitter (Kriess & McGregor, 2018)

purposes, advertising revenue, and relationship-building in the service of lobbying efforts (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018: 161). New branches have emerged within these firms dedicated to the partisan nature of American politics (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018: 155). For example, Google acquired an old industrial property and redesigned it as a tech space for the Democratic National Convention (DNC) for the purpose of promoting the wares of major digital technology firms, and facilitating intercommunication between tech companies, journalists, and politicians (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018: 156). Twitter set up a booth where they worked with politicians to set up promotional material for social media, as well as provide real-time analytics on the use of their platform (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018: 155). Microsoft played an 'infrastructural' role for political campaigns, providing back end data to help politicians organize and manage their digital operations (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018: 162). Facebook not only had a sizeable presence at the DNC, they also donated \$62,500 to the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) where they sought to influence the ways in which candidates communicate and understand public discussion on their platform, and establish a working relationship with electorates (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018: 155; Romm & Scola, 2017)². Central to this was their analytics platform, where data results could be used to shape messaging and advertising strategies (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018: 165). Real-time analytics were used to monitor content posted on the website and track issues of prevalence for effective target marketing (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018: 163). As such, technology companies

² It has been speculated that the outreach to CPAC was in part a mending between the political party and the media firm. Facebook had recently come under fire over a report that they had stifled conservative leaning news from appearing on the trending section (Romm & Scola, 2017)

'inadvertently'³ play a role in shaping the political communication of electoral campaigns in the United States.

This is especially true for Facebook, as they are by far the largest reaching social network website, encompassing 67% of US adults (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016: 5). Statistics indicate that at least two-thirds of Facebook users utilize the platform to acquire news, amounting to 44% of the population (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016: 2). At 1.1 billion active daily users, it held unequivocal dominance as the primary social media platform during the election cycle (Bossetta, 2017: 11). Facebook's ubiquity in daily life, coupled with their investment into political lobbying, as well as their market driven approach with an emphasis on attracting users, soliciting advertisers, and sustaining economic viability has brought forth questions of how their platform may influence online discussion (Bossetta, 2018: 2). Understanding that the technology is not neutral (Cockburn, 1985; 85), new literature is emerging that analyzes how network structure, site algorithmic filtering, and 'datafication' shape the visibility of content and public discourse (Bossetta, 2017: 7; Kreiss & McGregor, 2018: 158).

Facebook: How Algorithmic Filtering Shapes Online Discourse

Facebook's network structure is composed of internal protocols which governs connections between user accounts (Bossetta, 2018: 5). There are three differences in protocols that determine how users are able to connect with one another:

searchability, connectivity and privacy (Bossetta, 2018: 5). Searchability protocols determine how users can discover and subscribe to other users and content (Bossetta, 2018: 5). Connectivity protocols determine how connections are initiated and

³ Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook, had been criticized for rejecting the notion that Facebook could have influenced the election (Solon, 2016).

established (Bossetta, 2018: 5). Privacy protocols allow users to place restrictions on both searchability and connectivity (Bossetta, 2018: 5). The interconnectivity of these three elements of network structure influence the topography formed on a platform, and the type of content which may be generated as a result (Bossetta, 2018: 5).

All content which is posted on Facebook is then subjected to algorithmic filtering (Radar & Gray, 2015: 1). According to Bucher, algorithmic filtering refers to how developers prioritize the visibility of posts (2012: 1165). Algorithms are intermediaries which determine what becomes visible and what is hidden from public view (Radar & Gray, 2015: 1). Users constantly produce content that becomes apart of Facebook's corpus. The algorithm selects a subset of this information where it proceeds to rank and organize them for consumption by the user base (Radar & Gray, 2015: 1). Bucher describes how the algorithm is affected in three primary ways:

(1) Affinity. This pertains to the nature of the relationship between the viewing user and the item's creator. Here the amount and nature of the interaction between two users is measured. Sending a friend a private message or checking out his or her profile on a frequent basis heightens the users' affinity score to that particular friend (2012: 1167).

(2) Weight. Each post is given a specific 'weight' depending on how popular or important Facebook considers it to be. Therefore, not every post gets weighted the same. Some types of interactions are considered more important than others. Arguably, a Comment has more importance than a Like (2012: 1167).

(3) Time decay. Probably the most intuitive component relates to the recency or freshness of the post. Older posts are thus considered less important than new ones (2012: 1167).

The algorithmic filter becomes the arbiter in determining which users are deemed important and thus worthy of achieving visibility on Facebook. The algorithm itself is rendered to the periphery of user consciousness (Radar & Gray, 2015: 8). The few who

are savvy or aware enough of these systems are able to take advantage of them and adapt their behaviour in order to boost visibility across broadcast feeds (Bossetta, 2017: 7; Radar & Gray, 2015: 8). Coincidentally, this has a secondary effect in which the drive for visibility leads to a digital panopticon, where users mediate their own posts during online discussion (Butcher, 2012: 1165). Furthermore, the purpose of algorithmic filtering is to drive revenue for Facebook (Bossetta, 2017: 7). Facebook allows companies, social providers, and high profile clients to override the mediation process and further their overall reach with pay-to-promote services, known as 'boosting' (Bossetta, 2017: 7). Posts and discussion can thus be influenced and/or dominated by those with substantial wealth and power.

The interaction based upon these filtered posts are further subjected to a process called 'datafication': 'the transformation of social action into quantified data for the purpose of tracking and predicative analysis' (van Dijck, 2014: 198). These actions are usually daily social occurrences, such as the interaction between friendships, the conversations and discourse which manifests online, information searches, and emotional responses to events and/or posts (van Dijck, 2014: 199). It seeks to 'extract' useful information for future endeavours from the digital trails left behind by users (van Dijck, 2014: 200). In a more political vein, datafication is especially pertinent for campaigns, as they are able to create models which mimic audiences they believe to either be favourable with, or potentially persuade (Bossetta, 2017: 7). This digital corpus is then merged with the primary data collected by campaigns and material purchased from third party companies which specialize in personally identifiable information (i.e., credit card companies) to create profiles on

citizens that cover their ideological stance to socioeconomic status (Bossetta, 2017: 7; Cambridge Analytica). The data is used to create advertisements on the selected platform (Bossetta, 2017: 7). Campaigns are then able to analyze the algorithmic filtering to undergo multiple and simultaneous experiments in order to test and maximize campaign efficiencies (Bossetta, 2017: 8). This results in a semi-perpetual loop, in which algorithmic filtering is subjected to datafication, which is then used to modify or 'increase the efficiency' of the algorithm, resulting in more datafication.

Technology as Instrumental

One notable example of data collection comes from the now defunct political consulting firm, Cambridge Analytica. Established in 2013, Cambridge Analytica offered data driven services in order to identify persuadable voters and change audience behaviour (Cambridge Analytica). Using data integration, audience segmentation, and targeted advertising, the firm would develop and employ targeted messages at key times in order to move voters to action (Cambridge Analytica). The company played a pivotal role in the Brexit campaign, and in 2016, signed on to be the primary consulting firm of Trump's candidacy (Cambridge Analytica; Persily, 2017: 3). Employing a variety of campaign services, such as polling, predictive analytics, targeted advertisements, event-promotion, data compilations, and new uses of social media, the campaign target around 13.5 million voters in sixteen key states, and placed 1.4 billion web impressions through advertisements or other forms of communication (Cambridge Analytica; Persily, 2017: 3). Facebook had played a critical role in Cambridge Analytica's data collection procedures, where they had acquired between

87 - 220 million users personal information for the purpose of building a dataset on voters (Fuchs, 2017: 2; Rosenberg et al., 2018; Solon, 2018). While considered a 'data leak' by Facebook, this allowed the political consulting firm to get unrestricted access to information regarding a users profile, page likes, birthday, what would be visible on their news timeline, interaction between facebook friends, as well as private and public messages, and location services (Coulter, 2018; Lapowsky, 2018). This cornucopia of information allowed Cambridge Analytica to create psychographic profiles of the users, complete with the information of where that individual is located (Persily, 2017: 3; Rosenberg et al., 2018). This allowed the company to create a comprehensive analysis regarding which advertisements would be most effective at key times in order to move political actors to action (Cambridge Analytica).

Cambridge Analytica wasn't the only group to utilize Facebook's algorithmic filtering and datafication to their advantage. The 2016 Political cycle saw an influx in the use of software robots (hereinafter: Bots or Social Bots), fake news, and fabricated social media accounts designed to take advantage of the social media's network structure in order to influence economic, political, and ideological causes (Fuchs, 2017: 3). Companies and campaigns have become incentivized to create efficient programs (Social bots) that exude human-like behaviour in order to rapidly promote material beyond what is normally feasible (Ferrara et al., 2014: 1). According to Ferrara et al., "A social bot is a computer algorithm that automatically produces content and interacts with humans on social media, trying to emulate and possibly alter their behaviour" (2014: 1) The purpose of bots are often multifaceted; Certain bots can be benign, where they are designed to aggregate news feeds or automatically respond to

questions, or harmful, where they focus on persuading voters, smear political candidates, propagate false information, manipulate online discourse, and facilitate political astroturfing (Ferrara et al., 2014: 2; Howard et al., 2018: 86). Social bots have played an increasingly important role in the past 6 years as a means to influence public opinion (Howard et al., 2018: 87). They have been designed to sway citizens on single issues⁴, inflate the follower lists of politicians in order to seem popular⁵, as well as create and spin content for political gain⁶ (Howard et al., 2018: 85-86). Social bots are also particularly effective at steering the flow of online discourse (Howard et al., 2018: 87). They have been used to astroturf legislative campaigns, coordinate campaign and communication strategies in complex ways, as well as solicit voters for donations of time and money (Howard et al., 2018: 87). As a result, digital discourse and authentic engagement has been seen as eroding into a state of decay, where campaign staff no longer need to communicate with voters or political opponents in order to garner support (Howard et al., 2018: 87-88).

Social bots have also been attributed to the exponential increase of low-credible content, or 'Fake News' (Shao et al., 2018: 1). Defined as articles that are intentionally and verifiably false for the purpose of misleading readers, the 2016 election has brought forth concerns regarding how fake news had been utilized and circulated on

⁴ Obama had sent automated messages to his twitter followers during the debt ceiling crisis (Howard et al., 2018: 87)

⁵ Mitt Romney's campaign was accused of buying thousands of followers on Twitter (Howard et al., 2018: 87). It is also estimated that 52 percent of Trump's 43 million followers are fake accounts (Fuchs, 2017: 3).

⁶ Trump had spent 70 million dollars on facebook advertisements while slandering traditional news outlets as 'Fake News' (Howard et al., 2018: 87).

social media (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017: 214)⁷. Recent evidence has shown that Facebook was the largest propagator of low-credible content, and that many people who viewed fake news on the website had reported believing the misinformation (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017: 212)⁸⁹. Due to the nature of how Facebook (and other social media) operates, false claims are just as likely to go viral as reliable sources (Shao et al., 2018: 10). It is estimated that 68% of visits to fake news websites originated from these locations (Fuchs, 2017: 3). There are a couple of reasons for this. The first is that information is presented in 'thin slices' in order to simplify and streamline content on news feeds (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017: 221). This often remove vital information which make judgement regarding an articles accuracy difficult (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017: 221). The second is that social media networks are often ideologically segregated. Individuals are more likely to read and share news articles that are aligned with their current political positions, and less likely to come across competing evidence that may challenge their assumptions (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017: 221). There is strong evidence that social media networks function as echo chambers and filter bubbles, as it is estimated that 85% of fifteen million tweets and posts occurred amongst like minded users (Fuchs, 2017: 3). Indeed, the relatively homogeneous nature of a user's friend network has been the focal point to ensure the effectiveness of advertisements for political consulting firms and campaigns (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017: 221). As noted

⁷ It has been argued that the primary purpose of fake news has been to foster support for political candidates. For example, there were three times more fake news stories that supported Trump than Clinton (Fuchs, 2017: 3).

⁸ Facebook has confirmed that it harbours more than 240 million fake accounts (Naff, 2018: 18).

⁹ In a survey, in which 3,015 Americans participated, 75 per cent of the presented fake news stories were considered to be very or somewhat accurate (Fuchs, 2017: 3).

earlier with Cambridge Analytica, propaganda campaigns utilize social bots designed to amplify the reach of their posts, by strategically targeting users who have a strong presence on social media, in order to push misinformation to go viral (Cambridge Analytica; Shao et al., 2018: 1). Research indicates that sharing activity by bots triggers a disproportionate amount of human engagement (Shao et al., 2018: 8). Once a bot targets and engages the appropriate outlet for diffusion, users take that information and amplify it across their personal networks (Shao et al., 2018: 7). Part of the problem is that due to the complexities of social bots, they are often seen as indistinguishable from actual users (Shao et al., 2018: 8). This makes the users susceptible to manipulation, where they will re-tweet or share a post supplied by a social bot just as much as they would another person (Shao et al., 2018: 8). As a result, social bots, which are designed to spread misinformation, populate huge segments of social media ecosystems (Ferrara et al., 2014: 1). Due to their elusive nature, they often go unnoticed amongst the population of real people, where they are instrumental¹⁰ in shaping, altering, or otherwise deteriorate public discourse online (Ferrara et al., 2014: 1). Thus the potential for a digital public - one that engages in authentic civic deliberation - becomes difficult to actualize on social media.

Finding an Alternative Space for Political Engagement

The 2016 presidential election brought forth a new precedence of online discussion, in which instrumental gain has reigned supreme at the expenditure of open

¹⁰ Conceptualizing technology as instrumental is critical in identifying the purpose, intent, and deliberativeness of an emergent rationality. Technology is instrumental regardless of how it is utilized - may that be for reaching a mutual understanding or promoting a particular idea or political standpoint. To be clear, to be deemed instrumental is not always associated in the negative. Instrumental may be seen as positive in some circles which require deliberative action in order to make social significant change, such as the #hashtag occupy movement (See: Juris, 2012).

and authentic debate (Fuchs, 2017: 5). This domination of the public sphere by corporate and political interests echoes Habermas' colonization thesis (Habermas, 1985: 155), where systematic interests consume what little potential citizens have to mobilize (Edwards, 2008: 313), leaving agents with minimal time, and which does not foster adequate space for political engagement and debate (Fuchs, 2017:5). In place of open publics emerges a new space of advertisements and particularistic interests — one which thrives off a culture of fragmentation and superficiality, and where users are prone to manipulation (Fuchs, 2017: 5). Persily describes the subversiveness of this new political climate best:

“How does one characterize a campaign, for example, in which the chief strategist [Steve Banon] is also the chairman of a media website [Breitbart] that is the campaign's chief promoter and whose articles the candidate retweets to tens of millions of his followers, [utilizing algorithmic filtering, datafication, and social bots] with those posts and tweets then picked up and rebroadcast on cable-television news channels, including one (RT, formerly known as Russia Today) that is funded by a foreign government?” (2017: 3)

The proliferation of instrumental action raises concern for the advancement of social inequalities, fears of social decline, and the emergence of new nationalisms (Fuchs, 2017: 5). Furthermore, it represents a clear threat to democracy. The undermining of a persons ability to employ validity claims results in a one-dimensional and polarized politics — one which risks intensifying political aggression and even violence (Fuchs, 2017: 6).

To combat the colonization of digital publics, legal, political, economic and media innovations are required (Fuchs, 2017: 6). According to Fuchs, this involves the “facilitation of a culture of slow media that acts as a public service platform, where individuals have access to fact checking, and participate in new forms of political

engagement and debate” (2017: 6). This requires new digital platforms which decelerate political communication and foster open ended debates (Fuchs, 2017:6). Ideally, this should be a social media space that is non-profit and advertising free, subsidized by an online advertising tax which could fund fact checking systems (Fuchs, 2017:7)¹¹.

Unfortunately, we do not currently have access to such a system. However, if Fuch’s idea is correct, we should be able to find traces of the emergence of communicative rationality within systems that are able to approximate those conditions. Such an analysis would require the examination of a digital media space which does not function in the same regard as traditional social media. Thus, this thesis seeks to analyze Reddit, which unlike Facebook or Twitter, was designed as a way to organize deliberative discussion by content or specific topics and foster open ended debate.

Reddit is a website that goes beyond the workings of traditional social media website; it plurally functions as a “social news” aggregation website (Weninger, 2014: 1). Self described as “the front page of the internet,” Reddit provides the means to submit and discuss nearly anything (Weninger, 2014: 1). Founded in 2005 by Steve Huffman (who goes by the alias /u/spez) and Alexis Ohanian (who goes by the alias of /u/kn0thing) Reddit is a complex system that is built around three simple components: Posting, commenting, and voting (Reddit). Community members share content by posting stories, links, images, and videos. These posts are then commented upon by other community members. Both posts and comments may be voted upon (Reddit).

¹¹ There are criticism to this approach; government funded digital spaces have been known to exhibit topdown characteristics with discursive constraints deriving from the elite control (Dahlgren, 2005: 154).

Posts which are deemed to be insightful, interesting, or well put together are likely to be voted to the top of visibility, while disliked posts are voted down (down voted) into obscurity (Weninger, 2014: 173). Voting upon posts usually represents the community's interest on the topic, while voting on comments usually indicates opinion regarding that topic (Weninger, 2014: 173). Comments and submissions are thus ranked, with top ranking posts deemed the most important issues to discuss for the community.

Commenters are not only able to respond to posts, but to other commenters within a post as well. This results in complex conversation branches (also known as threads) which allows users to trace how the conversation develop over time (Weninger et al., 2013: 1). This allows for the manifestation of diverse and divergent sub-topics, creating a more robust conversation (Weninger et al., 2013: 1). Unlike the way discourse manifests on other social media platforms, comments threads are usually well formed, hierarchical by virtue of democratic engagement, and permanent¹² (Weninger et al., 2013: 1).

The entirety of the site is fragmented into smaller parts called “subreddits”. Subreddits are specialized communities that focus on specific topics which individuals can subscribe to (Anderson, 2015: 8). Any post submitted to Reddit must first be assigned to a specific subreddit pertaining to that topic (Anderson, 2015: 8). Subreddits are created and moderated by members of the community (Anderson, 2015: 8). Users are able to subscribe to subreddits to stay up to date on topics and conversations (Anderson, 2015: 8). Depending on the community, topics can be very

¹² Comments are able to be edited up until a post has become archived, in which case no changes may be made at all. Edited posts are indicated as such by the website

broad (such as the subreddit /r/politics, /r/gaming, /r/science) or highly specialized and esoteric (/r/criticaltheory or /r/chomsky)¹³.

Anyone is able to read and discover content without registering to the website (Anderson, 2015: 8). However in order to participate in posting, commenting, or voting, one needs to create an account. There is no cost for joining Reddit, but users do have the option of purchasing a premium membership (Anderson, 2015: 8). As Reddit was designed with anonymity in mind, registration is a straightforward process with few restrictions (Anderson, 2015: 8). Users are able to create single or multiple accounts, and are able to do so without providing an email address (Anderson, 2015: 8). Users who do register, are colloquially termed 'Redditors'. Creating a Reddit account allows users to customize their experience, and filter posts based upon personal interests to create their own unique 'Home page'(Anderson, 2015: 8). A home page is where posts are filtered into a feed, showing material from all subscribed subreddits. Users can change which posts will show up on their feed by clicking the appropriate tab. Posts can be organized by top, new, hot, rising, controversial, gilded, and promoted (Anderson, 2015: 8). The 'Top' tab shows the items which have acquired the most amount of upvotes (Anderson, 2015: 8). Filtering by 'Hot' shows posts which are rapidly gaining popularity (Anderson, 2015: 8). The 'New' tab filters posts based upon how recently they were submitted (Anderson, 2015: 8). 'Rising' shows posts which are becoming more popular, but not at the same rate as 'Hot' posts (Anderson, 2015: 8). 'Controversial' posts are submissions which have garnered an equal amount of upvotes and downvotes, indicating a submissions contentious nature (Anderson, 2015:

¹³ Subreddits are identified with the naming convention "/r/subreddit", which is used in the URL for direct access

8). The 'gilded' tab shows posts and submissions which have been awarded gold from members of the community (Anderson, 2015: 8). The promoted tab shows posts which have been promoted by Reddit itself (Anderson, 2015: 8). In addition to a home page, there is also a 'front page'. The front page is what users automatically see when they first enter the website (regardless of if they have an account or not). Instead of highlighting posts from subscribed subreddits, the front page filters posts from the entire corpus of Reddit. How these posts appear on the front page may be organized in the same manner as the 'home page'.

Fundamentally, social news websites such as Reddit function in a way that is dissimilar to traditional media platforms where news is either determined by an organization or an algorithm (Mills, 2011: 1). Social news sites are able to offer a kind of web-democracy, in which the 'agenda' is determined by the population (Weninger et al., 2013: 1). While it may not actualize the ideal conditions that Fuchs puts forth in order to address growing instrumental rationality on social media, it does approximate the conditions (Fuchs, 2017: 6). Thus, this thesis seeks to examine the extent to which political discussion on the social news aggregate website Reddit facilitates the conditions of a public sphere, and fosters democratic communicative characteristics using the 2016 presidential election as a focal point¹⁴.

¹⁴ It is important to note that I do not argue that Reddit is some haven for communicative rationality. Indeed, while the capacity exists for authentic deliberation to exist, at its worst it is morally destitute (See: Bell, 2017)

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The most prevalent issue that contemporary political agents face, is an increase in social fragmentation and a decrease in group cohesiveness stemming from personalized politics (Bennett, 2012: 37). In part, this was due to the intensification on the “commodification” of time and the “juridification” of space, in which the amount of effort and energy which may be applied to rallying behind a political cause is mitigated (Edwards. 2008: 307). The personal resources of time and space becomes consumed by other activities considered to be more pertinent to neoliberalism (Brown, 2017). Not only do individuals lack the time to form a political advocacy campaign, the spaces in which communicative action can occur dissipate (Edwards, 2008: 313). Neoliberal rationality has depredated the ideal, imaginary, and political project of democracy (Brown, 2017: 201). Policies which have been ‘legitimized’ under this system dismantle social infrastructure, privatize public goods, deregulate commerce, destroy social solidarities, and ‘responsibilize’ subjects for its shortcomings (Brown, 2017: 201). In short, it is the loss of bare democracy, where the rule of the ‘demos’ becomes the rule of economic interests — where ‘homo politicus’ (political engagement) is vanquished by ‘homo oeconomicus’ (Economic rationality) (Brown, 2017: 208). The neoliberal approach to ‘democratic rule’ has always been increasing the volume of markets, increase financialization, and to privatize resources (Brown, 2017: 221). For neoliberalism, the solution is:

“Anything but collaborative and contestatory human decision making, control over the conditions of existence, planning for the future; anything but deliberate constructions of existence through democratic discussion, law, policy. Anything but the human knowledge, deliberation, judgment, and action classically associated with homo politicus” (Brown, 2017:221-222)

It is the quintessence of instrumental rationality that Habermas argued had been taking over democratic spaces; it is a parasitic relationship in which the 'system' consumes various aspects of everyday communication which he decried as 'the colonization of the lifeworld'. (Habermas, 1985: 155). Of course, democracy has always been an empty form which is filled by the will of political actors; it can be filled with instrumental purpose and immoral content, including xenophobia, sexism, capitalist hegemony, and racial inequality. However, democracy also facilitates the ability to mobilize against these issues (Brown, 2017: 209). Replacing a democratic system for an economic one sets the condition for democracy to die (Brown, 2017: 209). Without these fundamental principles, establishing critical elements needed to sustain deliberative spaces such as social networks, collective identities, and other cultural formations is not feasible (Edwards, 2008: 313). Habermas argues that the constraint of these resources produces 'strains' on political movements which are required to mobilize around in order to be successful (Edwards, 2008: 313). Social media facilitates easy accessibility while providing foundational support in which individuals are not simply passive consumers of information and activism, but participants in digital political spaces, effectively regulating time consumption and circumventing the issue of physicality (Edwards, 2008: 313). The use of media creates a landscape that amalgamates the complexities and diversities of the social, cultural, economic and political spheres (Chadwick, 2013: 24). While there has been no shortage in academia to analyze the impact of a digital sphere concerning politics, the implication surrounding it has been contentious at best.

“Virtual communities” (Rheingold, 1993) are now considered to be synchronistic with face to face communities and have thus become the site for analyzing public spheres, structured as they are with similar features and frameworks for organizing social interactions (Dahlgren, 2005: 147-8). Digital spheres are no worse or better, but are in a state where they constant change and evolve with the kind of speech acts which emerge on the digital front. With the continuing destabilization of the public sphere, and the constant struggle between fragmentation and solidarity, digital publics represents both opportunities and dangers for democratic deliberation (Downey & Fenton, 2003: 200). There is increasing evidence that the internet is able to facilitate discourse which replicates the basic structure of rational-critical debate in ways that approximate the conditions of a public sphere (Dalhberg, 2001: 616). Such digital communication manifests online in three distinct ways (2001: 616). The first is communitarian, where the internet enhances communal spirit and values which and emphasizes communication based around shared values (Dahlberg, 2001: 616). The second is its ability to assist in the expression of individualized private interests (Dalhberg, 2001: 616). The final, is its ability to expand the public sphere of rational-critical public discourse, where individuals engage in a deliberative communicative engagements (Dalhberg, 2001: 616). Of course, like real world engagements, digital discourse does not manifest unprovoked and without form; there are structural components which entices certain aspects of communication (Dahlgren, 2005). Dahlgren focuses on three main facets of communication – the structural (institutional), representational (ideological and symbolic), and interactional encounters among actors – in analyzing how the internet has changed political discourse (2005: 149). The

structural dimension refers to formal institutional features, such as media organizations, political economy, ownership, control, and the legal framework defining the freedoms and constraints on communication (Dahlgren, 2005: 148). He notes that as far as the internet is concerned, the structural dimension focuses attention to the different formations and spaces which exist on the web, and how they reflect the spaces that exist offline; that is to say, the virtual geography mimics that of 'real' spaces (Dahlgren, 2005: 149). Representation refers to the output of media that targets small groups on the basis of information and ideological basis (Dahlgren, 2005: 149). It seeks to understand which groups are represented and which groups are excluded from these systems (Dahlgren, 2005: 149) Representation becomes amplified with the 'massification' of communication on the internet, allowing for a greater range of ideological diffusion, but also criticisms regarding fairness, accuracy, completeness, pluralism of views and agenda setting (Dahlgren, 2005: 149). The final dimension, interaction, refers to either citizens encounters with the media, and encounters between citizens themselves (Dahlgren, 2005: 149). This is where Dahlgren locates what Habermas would be considered to be a public sphere, where citizens make sense of, interpret, and make use of the output of media sources, as well as engage in formalized deliberation with other citizens (2005: 149). This political space not only exudes communicative qualities, but facilitates the development of an entire civic culture, where agents anchor political debate through shared experiences, personal resources, and subjective dispositions (Dahlgren, 2005: 157-158). It allows users to test and challenge values, affinity, knowledge, identities, and practices through civic interaction (Dahlgren, 2005: 159). The internet accentuates this process in a way that is

historically unprecedented as its scope and ease of access facilitates participation on a macro level (Dahlgren, 2005: 149). Furthermore, digital democratic spaces are not confined to western context; there is international evidence to support the growth of a 'universal' digital public, where issues are negotiated across the globe from local to international levels (Dalhberg, 2001: 621). The internet is at the forefront of an evolving public sphere, where social agents are playing a role in the development of new democratic practices (Dahlgren, 2005: 160). This theoretical conception allowed for a revitalization on the notion of communicative action at a time when political communication was becoming increasingly destabilized in western society (Dahlgren, 2005: 150). There is an interconnectivity between spatial dimensions which virtual communities go beyond that of the political (Dahlgren, 2005:147-8). What is important here is to recognize that digital spaces exist and work beyond the level of a tool used for personal or democratic purposes. The virtual space is indeed a political one, but something that is shaped in relation to other spatial dimensions.

The virtual world is a fluid and malleable alternate dimension that is influenced and influences the physical world even as it is grounded in the corporeal (Graham, 2010). Graham argues that its geography is characterized by both black holes of information and hubs of rich description and detail. This dimension exists in a symbiotic, reflexive relationship to the physical world, which by becoming a new layer in the palimpsests of place ultimately can shape our genius loci and change the very natures of place (2010: 430). Virtual geographies help expand the application of Habermas public sphere in order to navigate and make meaning within a digitized era. It informs us of a link between the spaces in which individuals participate in online

communication and its relation between other spatial dimensions of more traditional spheres of shared experiences and meaning making. Indeed, Graham, Sabbata, and Zook build upon this by arguing how information hubs always have geography; they are from somewhere, about somewhere, and evolve and transform from somewhere. They are mediated by networks, infrastructures and technology; all of which exist in the physical material world. The arguments that manifest online are an expansion of the debates which occurred in traditional publics. Furthermore, these geographic augmentations don't simply reflect reality, they are a place in their own right (Graham et al., 2015). The digital and the material spheres are continually re-combined into lived, subjective space as one negotiates through time, space and information. Thus, what we can infer from virtual geographies is that the discourse which manifests online is not an isolated instance, but something that holds real world precedence. Digital spheres are inexplicably intertwined with the workings of every day life - the information and knowledge that is created online helps shape the experiences of everyday citizens. Virtual geographies provide evidence in which the public sphere has migrated to online spaces.

Similar to that of face to face interactional spaces, the digital sphere is considered a single entity which is composed of multiple publics. Despite focusing on a single point on a virtually endless horizon, digital spaces can represent a cornucopia of communicative engagements. (Rheingold, 1993: 40-43). These engagements are sparked and fuelled through interconnective cyber-relationships which results not only in the creation of a place for debate, but an entire cultures and subcultures in the process (Rheingold, 1993: 127). The virtual, as Rheingold argues, is multifaceted tool

and space for establishing various types of communities with diverse objectives (Rheingold, 1993: 5).

“There is no such thing as a single, monolithic, online subculture; it's more like an ecosystem of subcultures, some frivolous, others serious. The cutting edge of scientific discourse is migrating to virtual communities, where you can read the electronic pre-preprinted reports of molecular biologists and cognitive scientists. At the same time, activists and educational reformers are using the same medium as a political tool. You can use virtual communities to find a date, sell a lawnmower, publish a novel, conduct a meeting” (Rheingold, 1993: 5)

Fundamentally, much of what Rheingold conceptualizes resonates strongly with Habermas' notion of the lifeworld, as it draws off establishing mutually shared meanings and experience (Mahoney, 2001: 209). The lifeworld is represented by “culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretive patterns” (Habermas, 1985: 124). It is the boundaries in which people understand their everyday experience through culture and language. It becomes the quintessential element whereby subjects engaging in communication facilitate a mutual understanding between the objective world, the social world, and the subjective world (Habermas, 1985: 119). In performing any form of speech act, participants move within the structure of language and culture insofar as they create an experience that is intersubjective (Habermas, 1985: 125). To simplify, the lifeworld is the everyday world in which we share with other beings. It is a ‘reservoir’ for the simple interactions of everyday communication (Habermas, 1996: 360). It allows for individuals to engage in mutual recognition and meaning making to negate the impending consequence of destabilized political communication (Mahoney, 2001: 209). Because it holds the potential to be free of instrumental or strategic input, the potential of CMC (Computer

mediated communication) manifests in its ability to challenge existing hierarchies on powerful communications media (Rheingold, 1990: 13). Rheingold hypothesizes that the power of virtual communities could either herald the revitalization of participatory democracy, or be misconstrued as a substitute for democratic discourse (Rheingold, 1990: 238).

Indeed, many researchers are torn between enthusiasm for the capacity to facilitate participatory democracy (Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlgren, 2005; Downey & Fenton 2003; Rheingold, 1990; Shirky, 2011) or pessimism stemming from pre-established asymmetrical power relations engrained within technology (Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010; Morozov, 2011). The birth of each new media technology has historically brought with it the expectation of a critical revival of democratic practices and a redistribution of power dynamics that empowers the people (Gunn, 2017: 57). Social media has often been herald as a bastion of free speech, a way to spread true and authentic information, and to unify a social cohesive that promotes inclusivity of different members of society (Papacharissi, 2002: 9). This has often been little more than ideological, as eventually new media reverts to reinforce the traditional forms of existing power hierarchies, as political campaigns do not often prioritize dialogue and interactivity, but for self promotion (Gunn, 2017: 57-58). Furthermore, there are issues of information access inequalities, and media illiteracy amongst the general population (Papacharissi, 2002: 9). The romanticization of digital publics has been criticized as a fallacy of “cyber-utopianism”, wherein advocates propound the ideological misconception that the flow of ideas will remain unbiased, impartial, and work against authoritarian politics (George, 2013: 123). Subverters of digital communities

engage and in proactive instrumental work, which may include the willful censoring of particular information, as well as purporting political propaganda (George, 2013: 124). Indeed, critics of this line of thought argue that the construction of digital media as unbiased and mediated is fundamentally a “myth” (Couldry, 2009: 6). Media institutions hold a particular inclination in facilitating and using social power (Couldry, 2009: 3). This power is used to speak on behalf of members of the public, to reinforce their own legitimacy, and to provide “authentic” accounts of the world (Couldry, 2009: 3). This is apparent in authoritarian governments where the flow of information is heavily restricted, and the ability to mobilize and engage in unrestricted deliberation is almost non-existent (Shirky, 2011: 30). While arguably more open, in democratic societies the internet has always been to some extent, developed, monitored and regulated by the government (Dahlberg, 2001: 617). Political movements originating from social media are undergoing additional complications in western societies, where the state is gaining increasingly sophisticated means of monitoring, interdicting, or co-opting these tools (Shirky, 2011: 38) Apart from governmental intervention, it has been noted that technology firms are always in a process of shaping social relations, with significant implications regarding social, economic and technological organization (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018: 158). Technological firms such as Google and Facebook actively seek political business for revenue purposes, as well as gaining influence with policy makers for regulatory purposes, often resulting in asymmetrical power relations, issues regarding neutrality, and fairness (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018: 175). Google’s search engine for example, may actually silence debate, as they give higher precedence to established actors, institutions, and subsidized companies (Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010:

156). Thus, while digital spaces may have facilitated the conditions in which individuals are able to circumvent diminishing political contribution, it also contributed to the destabilization of political communication systems (Dahlgren, 2005: 151). Habermas himself echoes these concerns, as he notes that the increasing complexity and rationalization of society, in tandem with the growth of mass media, has transformed the public sphere away from critical debate and towards a platform for prestige and advertisement (Downey& Fenton, 2003: 186). Dahlgren concludes that while it is evident that the internet is at the unequivocal forefront of an emerging public sphere, its impact on the larger democratic system remains to be tested (2005: 160).

It is important to note that a 'digital' sphere is at conceptual odds with Habermas, as he has expressed a general distaste and overt skepticism at the notion of the virtual public. He has articulated that no form of technology could replicate the conditions of facilitating an authentic public sphere, due to the locus of control and power of those systems being outside the realm of everyday citizen (Habermas, 2006, 419). This sentiment is shared by any who understand technology from a Marxist point of view: technology is not neutral; it is designed for a particular purpose (Bennett and Sergerberg, 2012: 762). However, to relegate the digital sphere as irrevocably corrupted and beyond the capacity for productive deliberation is needlessly pessimistic in nature. It assumes the inability for individuals to either understand, critically use, or control digital spaces themselves. There should be no mistake; there are clear barriers to entry which bar everyday citizens from accessing these 'social spaces' and empirical circumstances in which the locus of control is firmly in the hands of those in power. However it is also becoming more evident that the internet is becoming more

ubiquitous; its accessibility continues to grow and the ability to communicate through the expression of everyday communication grounds virtual speech in a physical one.

Despite these criticisms, digital publics have been regarded as an irrevocable force in reshaping interaction with the political sphere. As digital and social media develops on prominence and stature, it becomes a stronger force capable of inciting political change for either better or worse (Segeberg, A., & Bennett, 2011: 5). The debate over the potential of the digital spheres in facilitating participatory democracy requires further study.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This thesis draws from Habermas's pragmatic concern with communicative utterance and/or speech acts and the performative aspect of language in communicative debate; this concern bridges the gap between theoretical components of speech acts and practice (Sudersan, 1998: 263). This Habermasian perspective informs critical theory as it critiques communication ideology (Sudersan, 1998: 257) and seeks to contribute to practical efforts towards social transformation through questioning the invisible workings of the public sphere (Renault, 2016: 18). This perspective is used to analyze Reddit as a potential public sphere which facilitates communicative action/rationality.

The Public Sphere and Argumentative Analytics

The emergence of what can be considered a public sphere, one that is distinct from that of a private realm, is a relatively recent phenomena. Habermas notes that there is no historical indication such a concept existed other than a loose manifestation of the term 'public,' which emerged in the high middle ages (Habermas, 1991: 113). It wasn't until the end of the eighteenth century where the representative public sphere morphed into a new sphere of 'public authority' and general society now representing a private realm (Habermas, 1974: 49). This allowed the newly established private citizens to form together to engage with rational debate, as well as establish institutions to facilitate them as a means to undermine domination (Habermas, 1991: 28).

For Habermas, the public sphere is the model site where private citizens produce discourse and debate on shared group interests and individual affairs, including the role of the government/state, the market economy, and cultural interests, thus

constituting the “public” where group consensus is reached (Poole, 1989: 9). Public social life places individuals into relationships with other private citizens, creating the conditions for facilitating an arena for public opinion formation, rather than a pre-defined order (Mahoney, 2001: 47). At its core, Habermas’ conceptualization of the ideal public sphere centres around the notion of it being a communication structure rooted in the workings of everyday life of civil society (Habermas, 1996: 359). This structure facilitates the means for establishing a network in which information and points of view are clearly communicated to other active participants (Habermas, 1996: 360). This communications network fosters organic debate, allowing the free-flow of either affirmative or negative attitudes so long as it pertains to issues demarcated by those who partake in conversation within these social spaces. Indeed, it is important to note that the content, arguments, and opinions which manifest within the public sphere are unrestricted insofar that the direction of understanding and attitudes towards issues are not preordained; consensus is achieved by the virtue of the stronger argument (Calhoun, 1992: 1). Any and all arguments are permitted insofar as they adhere to the parameter of communicative rationality. Communicative rationality can be articulated as behaviour that is oriented towards reaching a common understanding or consensus (Risse, 2000: 9). He purports that its purpose is to act as ‘sounding board for problems that must be processed by the political system because they cannot be solved elsewhere’ (Habermas, 1996: 359). To state another way, it acts as a warning system for the political sphere regarding social and economic issues in which private citizens problematize issues, amplify the pressure regarding their immediacy, and ‘convincingly and influentially’ thematize them with possible solutions to

parliamentary complexes (Habermas, 1996: 359). The public sphere does not exist to solve problems on its own, as its form and function is limited. However, it serves to act as a mechanism to direct public authority on how its power should be actualized, as the political system itself remains sensitive to the influence of public opinion ¹⁵ (Habermas, 1996: 368).

To discuss the mechanics within the public sphere, is to discuss how people engage in forms of communication with each other. The public sphere, as Habermas articulates, 'does not refer to the specific content or function of daily communication, but the social space generated in what he considers to be communicative action' (1996: 360). That is to say, that when we deal with the public sphere, we are conceptualizing a space in which communication takes place and the stipulations which define a public sphere, but not the content that is being discussed, nor the purpose for which the debates occur (save for the fact that there is a general aptitude towards politically relevant topics). While there are variances in strength and form of a public sphere across social situations, the ideal conditions of the communicative structure must be normatively maintained through rules and practices of argumentation including rhetoric, dialectics, and logic (Habermas, 1984: 25). The first (Rhetoric) is considered a process in which individuals participating in forms of communication with each other facilitate and maintain ideal conditions in which free speech may occur (Habermas, 1984: 25). This 'ideal speech situation' facilitates argumentation as "a

¹⁵ Habermas explains that remaining sensitive to the influence of public opinion is critical to the political system, as it is intrinsically intertwined with the public sphere and civil society. (1996: 368). Social power manifested from public opinion is converted into political power and distributed amongst Governmental authority through the legislative process and administrative apparatus, such as political parties and elections. The policies which emerge from the interplay of social forces can be converted into binding decisions. Failure to remain sensitive to the influence of the political system risks losing political power (Habermas, 1996: 331).

reflective continuation, with different means, of action oriented to reaching understanding,” and continually ensures that conversation between subjects is not limited or coerced (Habermas, 1984: 25). The second aspect (Dialectic) conceptualizes argumentation as a procedure, in which interaction is subject to special rules (Habermas, 1984: 25). It analyzes the discursive process as being normatively regulated by various speech acts, in order for participants to work towards thematizing problematic issues, work towards a mutual understanding of the issue, and test arguments with validity claims (Habermas, 1984: 25). This adheres to the principle that Habermas later articulates as communicative rationality for determining what constitutes as valid speech while engaging within debates. The third aspect of argumentation (Logic) is production, in that participants aim to produce cogent arguments which seek to come to an understanding and create knowledge about the issue deemed pertinent. This concept heavily refers to the notion of communicative action, where there is a general purpose behind engaging in argumentative debates in order to reach an agreement about a given topic (Habermas, 1984: 397).

Before engaging further with these concepts, and exploring the ways in which Habermas demarcates how each concept is achieved through argumentative speech, it is important to note that while being conceptually distinct, they are intrinsically intertwined to the public sphere. These principles shape the conditions in which a public sphere may become actualized. Indeed, a public sphere cannot exist without the principles of communicative rationality and the facilitation of an ideal speech situation. That is to say, the public sphere is created and reproduced through communication. To have a public sphere requires the existence of a set of principles within which open and

equal argumentative debate may occur. In order for these principles to manifest, there must exist a social space in which they can be articulated. Thus, the structure and the principles mutually reinforce and ensure the others existence. Much like how the lifeworld reproduces the conditions of its maintained existence, the public sphere utilizes general comprehensibility of shared discourse to facilitate open debate amongst all members (Habermas, 1996: 360).

The Rhetorical Level of Processes

If we are to conceptualize the public sphere as a discursive arena in which participants engage in acts of debate, argumentation, and reasoning (Villa, 1992: 712), then ideal speech situations are the implied normative rules which govern the conditions for the possibility of free and open dialogue (Habermas, 1990: 89). Conceptually derived from Aristotle's rhetorical level of processes, it seeks to present itself as a 'form of communication that adequately approximates 'ideal conditions' that allow social actors to engage in debate (Habermas, 1990: 89). Habermas argues that when individuals engage each other in argumentation, they do so under the presupposition that sets of conditions are adequately fulfilled through an unrestricted communication community (Habermas, 1990: 88). These presuppositions are internally tested through a systematic analysis of performative contradictions; through the structure of communication, any external or internal coercion of force is removed in favour of the better argument, in which anyone is allowed to participate (Habermas, 1990: 88). In doing so, ulterior motives by groups or individuals are rendered null in the face of a cooperative search for truth (Habermas, 1990: 88-89). Following this analysis,

Robert Alexy (As cited in Habermas *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*)

explicates a list to express Habermas ideal conditions of communicative speech:

1.1 Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse

1.2 A) Everyone is allowed to question any assertion, whatever

1.2 B) Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse

1.2 C) Everyone is allowed to express their attitude, desires, and needs

1.3 No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion from exercising their rights as laid down in 1.1 and 1.2 (Habermas, 1990: 89)

Rule 1.1 highlights which participants are able to engage in the public sphere. It stipulates that so long as an actor holds the capacity to engage in debate, they should be unrestricted in doing so (Habermas, 1990: 89). Capacity in this sense should be conceptualized at a base level, insofar that it is comparable to consciousness and willingness. Any conscious being capable of thought should be able to engage in debate if they so desire. Other factors, such as creed, class, gender, racial, or education level are unimportant in determining if one is able to participate in the public sphere (Habermas, 1990: 89). Rule 1.2 ensures that all participants garner equal opportunity to contribute to the argumentation and put forth their own ideas (Habermas, 1990: 89). Furthermore, sub-clause A) indicates that any individual who engages in public debate holds the right to question any assertion or argument presented by another actor, without restriction. Sub-clause B) indicates that an individual is able to put forth their own argument or idea without limitation. Sub-clause C) explores this notion further, and argues that not only do actors hold the right to put forth any ideas or arguments, but that they are able to express them in any manner

they deem fit (Habermas, 1990: 89). Finally, rule 1.3 explicates a universalist principle in which any repression, coercion, or ulterior interest that seeks to manipulate and subdue open communication is not allowed, as this would infringe on rules 1.1 and 1.2.

By delineating these presuppositions in the form of rules, it succinctly defines the principles behind an ideal speech situation. Conversely, in doing so Alexy's approach may be misunderstood as promoting the idea that any and all discourse must rigidly adhere to them (Habermas, 1990: 91). A more nuanced approach understands the conditions of argumentation not as absolute, but as approximations, in which engagements strive for the ideal but succeed insofar as they reach an adequate enough level for the purpose of argumentation (Habermas, 1990: 91). Arguably, the paradoxical notion that unconditional free speech holds its own condition is essential to maintain open dialogue and comprehensible sensibility amongst all participants. As Habermas notes:

“To avoid the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, one must carefully differentiate between rules of discourse and conventions serving the institutionalization of discourses, conventions that help to actualize the ideal content of the presuppositions of argumentation under empirical conditions. If after these cursory remarks we accept the rules tentatively set down by Alexy (pending a more detailed analysis), we have at our disposal, in conjunction with a weak idea of normative justification (i.e. , one that does not prejudge the matter), premises that are strong enough for the derivation of the universalization principle” (1990: 92)

It is important to note that at this point Habermas is preemptively defusing a potential discrepancy between the normative conditions that establish an ideal speech situation and the dialectics of discourse regarding the validity of the content. This discrepancy renders the communication that occurs within debate sensible and comprehensible, insofar as it holds the universal applicability that any person may engage in debate

freely. It is a necessary contradiction required to ensure the public sphere remains open and the conditions ideal for any and all to engage or participate. This is imperative for the process of argumentation, as argumentation in regard to communicative action, requires two or more individuals engaging in debate in order to come to a mutual understanding or consensus about a given topic (Habermas, 1984). Thus, those who engage in argumentation subject themselves to a communicative rationality to ensure the sensibility and comprehensibility of their arguments. Without these tests of validity, the contradictions regarding an ideal speech situation would be irrelevant as argumentation would fail to occur in the first place¹⁶.

The Dialectical Level of Procedures

If we consider that the ideal speech situation concerns itself with establishing the conditions in which open dialogue occurs (Habermas, 1984), then the second aspect of argumentation, the dialectical level of procedures, concerns itself with the method of argumentation. In particular, it seeks to analyze discursive argumentation as normatively regulated by various speech acts, wherein participants work towards a mutual understanding of each other, thematize problematic issues, and test arguments with validity claims (Habermas, 1984: 25). Arguments are understood as a “ritualized competition for the better argument” between a proponent and an opponent under a dialectical obligation to discuss the problem at hand, and turn something collectively problematic into something valid (Habermas, 1984: 26). This discursive procedure, oriented towards reaching a mutual understanding so that proponents and opponents

¹⁶ This is explicated further in *The Dialectical Level of Procedures*

are able to test problematic validity claims, is understood as communicative rationality, by Habermas (Habermas, 1984: 72).

In addition, engaging in the processes of communicative rationality requires subjects to exhibit communicative competence (Habermas, 1984: X). Although the fundamental aspect of mutual recognition is rooted and vindicated in language itself (Habermas, 1979: 1), communicative competence is not simply a matter of being able to produce grammatically correct sentences and understanding the basic foundations of language (Habermas, 1984: X). It requires individuals to be able to express thoughts relating to the material world, express the speaker's own desires and interests, and to be able to articulate this towards someone else in a way that is comprehensible (Habermas, 1984: X). In essence, to be communicatively competent is to make claims regarding and relating to different aspects of social life, may that be objective or subjective (Habermas, 1984: X). Of course, any of these claims may be rejected on the basis of validity, but in order to get to that point requires the utterance to be rendered intelligible (Habermas, 1990: 88). Communicative rationality depends on the notion that social actors hold the capacity to recognize the intersubjective validity of different claims (Bohman & Rehg, 2017). The contents of argumentation are deemed intelligible and legitimate when intentions are rendered transparent and positions falsifiable (Bohman & Rehg, 2017). In this conceptualization of rationality, Habermas asserts the notion that communication involves claims that are open to both criticism and justification (Bohman & Rehg, 2017). It is through this, that Habermas makes the claim "anyone who acts communicatively must, in performing a speech action, raise

universal validity claims and suppose that they can be vindicated. In doing so, they cannot help but raise the following:

- a) Uttering something understandable
- b) Giving the hearer something to understand
- c) Making themselves thereby understandable
- d) Coming to an understanding with another person”
(Habermas, 1979: 2)

Once speech has been understood— in the literal sense — they are subjected to further stipulations, which demarcate rules of jurisdiction and relevance that regulate themes for discussion (Habermas, 1990: 88).

2.1 Every speaker may assert only what they really believe

2.2 A person who disputes a proposition or norm not under discussion must provide a reason for wanting to do so (Habermas, 1990: 88)

These presuppositions render arguments intelligible and tangible, as they establish conditions for mutual recognition (Habermas, 1990: 88). Some clarification is required in understanding the implications of each rule. Rule 2.1 indicates that each actor who engages in debate be authentic, as authenticity is the precondition for truthfulness. Those who do not engage authentically are unable to produce truthful claims. Rule 2.2 maintains coherency within the debate. While rule 1.2 allows for any actors to question any assertion, whenever, those assertions must be rendered intelligible and pertinent in order to maintain understanding. Argumentation cannot progress forward towards mutual consciousness unless there is an understanding of what is being debated. To break away from what is being understood is only acceptable assuming that this new form of engagement facilitates a better

understanding or a reconceptualization of the problem that is more cohesive. However, in order to reach that point, the proponent must establish a conceptual link that allows others to understand its relevancy. These conditions, derived from Apel, are the presuppositions of the normative conditions for the possibility of *understanding* (Habermas, 1979: 2). They are the conditions which all participants have already accepted, and all future and active engagements in communication are built upon. Communicative competence not only determines intelligibility, but facilitates conditions that test the validity of what is being said. It is at this stage that Habermas clarifies the mechanism which makes rationally motivated agreement possible. Through the notion of communicative rationality, he establishes a conception of reason that expresses itself on various forms of cognitive validity: a multidimensional conception of reason grounds itself through claims about the material world, the 'rightness' of the treatment subjects owe each other as people, authenticity claims of life itself, and the technical-pragmatic goals which serve to solve problematic issues (Bohman & Rehg, 2017). These are claims that stretch across the claims of: 1) propositional truth, 2) personal sincerity, and 3) normative rightness (Habermas, 1996: 5). There is a pragmatic component to this, in which communication, in essence, seeks to represent something within the world, to express the intentions of who is speaking, and to establish interpersonal relations based upon shared meanings (Habermas, 1979: 33). Thus, the workings of a speech act is measured against the validity conditions of 'truth, truthfulness, and rightness. Therefore, every speech action can be viewed and validated from the corresponding analytical viewpoints (Habermas, 1977: 33). Furthermore, these validity claims may be examined by concentrating on their

correlating domains of reality, such as a) the external reality of what is supposed to be an existing state of affairs, b) the internal reality of what a speaker would like to express before a public as their intention, and c) the normative reality of what is intersubjectively recognized as a legitimate interpersonal relationship. (Habermas, 1979: 27-28). These three universalistic assumptions presuppose that all participants espoused in communicative action are understood to hold in common, and serve as a way to validate the claims of proponents engaged within debate. The above claims can either be redeemed because they: 1) explicate a state of affairs in the world which is true, 2) conform to the adopted norms (on top of the ideal speech situation) regarding communicative utterances, and 3) raise no doubts concerning the true intent of the speaker (Habermas, 1984: 25). Alternatively, they may fail because: 1) they explicate a state of affairs which may not be true, or deemed contentious, 2) do not confirm to expected norms (or fail the conditions of an ideal speech situation) and/or 3) raise doubts concerning the authenticity of the speakers intent (Habermas, 1984: 25).

Finally, it is imperative to note that rationality, in respects to validity claims, does not refer to the possession of a particular knowledge, but rather how speaking and acting subjects acquire and use the knowledge (Habermas, 1984: 8). Knowledge itself can be criticized as irrational, and as various other theorists have argued before, bodies of knowledge change over time as new knowledge emerges (See: Foucault, 1972). Referring to Wolfgang Klein, Habermas emphasizes this notion stating that collective validity are views that are specific to certain groups at specific times (Habermas, 1984: 27). This denotes an aspect of local, temporal and social limitations; validity and the questionable are relative to the persons and the times (Habermas,

1984: 27). A pragmatic approach to rationalization concerns itself with how individuals engage in performative attitudes of knowledge. A performative attitude for Habermas, occurs when a participant who engages in argumentative debate examines a problematic validity claim, and if need be, criticize it (Habermas, 1984: 103). Drawing off of Bohman and Rehg's understanding of performative attitudes, "the fundamental form of coordination through language, according to Habermas, requires speakers to adopt a practical stance oriented toward "reaching understanding," which he regards as the "inherent telos" of speech" (2017). This requires the manifestation of particular acts to represent the speakers intent.

The Logical Level of Products

The final aspect of argumentation, the logical level of products, aims to produce cogent arguments that are convincing based upon the intrinsic properties, and which the validity claims presented in the dialectical level of procedures, are either redeemed or rejected (Habermas, 1984: 25). It is through the process of argumentation and deliberation that new forms of understanding emerge and in which public opinion is transformed into knowledge (Habermas, 1984: 25). Propositions become solidified as rational arguments and in turn becomes the basis for social action and coordination (Habermas, 1984; 397). Arguments that have been redeemed by validity claims undergo another level of presupposition, to which they must adhere to, to maintain their legitimacy.

3.1 no speaker may contradict himself

3.2 every speaker who applies predicate F to object A must be prepared to apply F to all other enacts resembling A in all relevant aspects

3.3 Different speakers may not use the same expression with different meanings. (Habermas, 1990: 87)

These rules predicate logical consistency within argumentation to facilitate the transitional process from developing an understanding to its application. This becomes essential to ensure the progression towards a consensus based conclusion and mitigate any potential stagnation that would result from confounding variables. Rule 3.1 articulates that once an individual has established what is deemed to be a rational, reasonable argument, they must continue to follow the same logic. Deviation from established positions results in the communicative impotence. Rule 3.2 ensures that once an argument has been established, its inherent principles must be applied to other topics or objects with comparable inherent qualities. Rule 3.3 ensures the conditions in which communication remains universal for all applicants and eliminates conceptual inconsistencies which would stifle understanding. Assuming that these conditions have been met, social actors are able to transition from trying to achieve understanding, to producing social actions on the newly established knowledge about the topic.

For Habermas, communication is broken down into two components. These are communicative action and strategic action, to which he is primarily concerned with the former (Habermas, 1984: 333). A small caveat to consider moving forward regarding communicative action; while this generally refers to the entire process of argumentation (the three levels of argumentation), what we are focused on here is the production of social actions. Specifically, the focus is on its ability to take these issues and create a definitive stance on them. In communicative action, social agents coordinate their efforts towards goals on the basis of a shared understanding that the goals at hand are

inherently reasonable (Habermas, 1990: 67). According to Neimi, communicative action is a form of action that attempts to solve issues regarding action coordination through the use of language itself. Its success is defined solely on the possibility of achieving a mutual understanding (and maintaining that understanding) which in turn made possible by responding to a claim with either 'yes' or 'no' (Neimi, 2005: 520).

Communicative action therefore succeeds if all parties agree that their purpose, goal, or understanding of a particular issue is reasonable and merits cooperative behaviour (Bohman & Rehg, 2017). It is therefore inherently consensual process that comes to fruition by the virtue and grace of a rational public (Habermas, 1990: 67). Furthermore, with communicative action, each actors seeks to engage in rational debate by virtue of a locutionary bonding/binding effect contained within speech acts. Actors engage with each other on equal footing and continue to treat each other and their intentions with mutual respect (Habermas, 1979: 58). Strategic action on the other hand occurs when an actor or group strives to influence the behaviour of the others within a social space, through either 'the threat of sanctions, or the prospect of gratification,' to ensure that the interaction or desired outcomes turns out in their favour (Habermas, 1979: 58). To simplify, it is communication oriented towards achieving the goals of the individual. Parties or individuals who partake in debate through strategic action do so not because they find the project or propositions of alternative parties interesting or mutually beneficial, but because they stand to gain something of value that would otherwise be unattainable (Bohman & Rehg, 2017). It is important to denote however, that strategic action consist of subdivisions; variations that change the nature of how strategic action occurs within dialogue (Habermas, 1984: 333). The two major

subdivisions are concealed strategic action and open strategic action (Habermas, 1984: 333). Open strategic action is self explanatory; an individual or party explicitly states that they are working towards a desired goal. It is explicit in nature insofar that manifest use of language appears in the forms of overt threats, imperatives, ostensive requests, gratification, or other forms of language that explicitly eliminates communication geared towards mutual understanding (Neimi, 2005: 518). Concealed strategic action is a more complicated notion to analyze. While it proposes that an actor still seeks to achieve a particular agenda, they do so while keeping their intentions or particular desire hidden (Neimi, 2005: 519). Concealed strategic action may be actualized in one of two ways; Conscious Deception (Manipulation), and Unconscious Deception (Systematically distorted communication). In either case, these forms of communication (aptly described as a pathology by Habermas) can be conceptualized as a misinterpretation between actions oriented to reaching an understanding, and actions oriented towards success (Habermas, 1984: 332). Conscious deception (Manipulation) results from subversive communication, in which the actor engaging in strategic communication keeps their intentions hidden as a means to persuade or acquire a desired result from the oppositional party through deception (Neimi, 2005: 518; Habermas, 1984: 294). Unconscious deception, on the other hand, results in a condition where one or more agents are disengaged from the context of communicative action (Habermas, 1984: 295). Those proponents engage with form of self deception to the extent of being *confused* with communicative action (Habermas, 1984: 332). In other words, these actors are misinterpreting forms of strategic action as communicative.

Critiques of Habermas

While highly influential, Habermas' concept of the public sphere has spurred contentious debate amongst sociologists regarding its theoretical fullness and completeness (McCarthy, 1992: 68). Critics have noted that a singular model of public sphere does not account for ingrained systematic social inequalities and neoliberal ideologies which merge public, private, civil, economic, and political interests (Calhoun, 1992; Eley, 1992; Fraser, 1990; McCarthy, 1992; Squires, 2002). These issues manifest as a result of underlying assumptions about the public sphere which are latent within Habermas' original theory (Fraser, 1990: 62). These issues include the notion that that social equity isn't necessary for political democracy, that single public will unequivocally be better than a nexus of multiple publics, that private interests and issues are always undesirable, and that a functioning democratic sphere necessitates a sharp separation between civil society and the state. (Fraser, 1990: 62-63). Fraser's deconstruction takes issue of open access, participatory parity, and social equality (1990: 63). The bourgeois public sphere requires bracketing inequalities of status, and yet, it fails to eliminate the social stratification which restricts participants from engaging altogether (Fraser, 1990: 63). Arguably, bracketing has the effect of working to the advantage of the dominant group, while disadvantaging the subordinates (Fraser, 1990: 63). Thus, full parity of participation in public debate and deliberation is not within the reach of possibility (Fraser, 1990: 66). What constitutes as a 'common good' and the requirements of a sharp separation between civil state and society only benefit those whom already gain from the system.

Working Towards an Understanding of Multiple Publics

The notion of multiple competing publics has been advanced to reconstruct the usefulness of Habermas' public sphere. Fraser argues that the idea of the public sphere is an indispensable tool for critical theory, but in its current form is unsatisfactory (Fraser, 1990: 57). Fraser argues that using a model of a single public sphere does not accurately describe real world engagements in actually existing democracies, wherein there is a long history of inequalities between groups (Fraser, 1990: 59). Furthermore, the conceptualization of a singular public sphere eliminates the possibility for subordinated and marginalized groups to engage in deliberation (Fraser, 1990: 66) In contrast to the singular model that Habermas presents in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, multi-sphere theorists advocate a model which recognizes a multitude of coexisting and competing publics under the purview of a dominant public (Fraser, 1990; Eley, 1992; Squires 2002). She suggests the term 'subaltern counter-publics' to describe their relation to the sphere that they contest (Fraser, 1990: 67). These subaltern counter-publics exist a means to agitate the exclusionary norms of the dominant public, advocating for alternative styles of political behaviour and public speech, while broadening participation and perspectives (Fraser, 1990: 61). These plurality of publics do not live in isolation, but are in a state of inter-public discursive interaction within a single structured setting (Fraser, 1990: 68). Thus, they can be conceptualized as a subset within a larger public, where cultural and ideological contestation and negotiation takes place (Fraser, 1990: 68).

Counter-publics never becomes established as separate because it has always existed as a contention to the dominant (Im, 1991: 142). Fraser contends that due to stratification, "Arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality

of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public” (Fraser, 1990: 66). Counter publics foster and consolidate marginalized groups’ positions allowing them to contest against the dominant sphere (Fraser, 1990: 66). A historical re-evaluation would discover that there has always been a plurality of competing publics, but the nature between these publics and the dominant public has always been conflictual (Fraser, 1990: 60). Indeed, there has been a precedence in which subordinated social groups have found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics (Fraser, 1990: 66). These counter publics seek to contest the exclusionary prospects of the dominant public by elaborating alternative forms of discourse and behaviour (Fraser, 1990: 60). What Fraser is essentially arguing, is that a multiplicity of publics is essential in stratified societies to contest asymmetrical power relations. And even through the development of more complex multicultural and egalitarian ideologically driven societies, the notion of a multiplicity of publics will allow for a more cohesive intercommunicative public that furthers engagement between individuals.

Subaltern publics acquire power and legitimacy through their emergence in response to exclusions within dominant publics (Fraser, 1990; 68). Their emancipatory potential resides in the ability to straddle between the space of withdrawal and regroupment and their agitational activities against wider publics. In doing so, they expand the discursive space, which forces discussion regarding assumptions that were previously exempt or excluded from the purview of public debate (Fraser, 1990; 68). These spaces not only foster safe passage for those who are not included in public

debate, they help establish the condition in which discussion on those topics become legitimized through oppositional forces (Fraser, 1990; 69).

However Fraser explicitly forewarns *against* conceptualizing subaltern publics as a virtuous entity; they may engage in forms of participation which are inherently anti-democratic and anti egalitarian to the point where they exude their own form of exclusion (Fraser, 1990: 67). Despite this, these publics become legitimized through the same processes as any other subaltern public - recognition and engagement from dominant publics. It is through the emergence of counter publics in response to exclusion within dominant to expand discourse where they are beneficial to the democratic realm (Fraser, 1990: 67).

Squires argues that while theoretically useful, the conditions which define functions and cohesion within subaltern publics remains ambiguous (2002: 446). Simply defining a public as counter to something which is dominant overlooks the political, economic, social, and cultural difference which contribute to their development (Squires, 2002: 448). As such, she proposes three subcategories of subaltern publics which seeks to explain differences beyond identity markers in how subaltern publics interact or intersect, as well as how politically successful certain publics are in relation to others (Squires, 2002: 447). The three subcategories are *Enclaved*, *Counter* and *Satellite* publics. Enclaved public spheres are small publics which shelter themselves, hiding counter ideas and strategies in order to survive or avoid violence and disrespect from the state and the dominant public, while internally producing lively debate and planning (Squires, 2002: 458). Enclave publics may be characterized as closed, with the purpose of preserving culture, foster resistance and/

or create strategies for the future (Squires, 2002: 458). They are often inaccessible and produced solely from group members as a means to keep its population private (Squires, 2002: 458). Counter publics represents the largest public and stands to oppose the dominance of larger public spheres when they are under decreased oppression and an increase in resources (Squires, 2002: 460). They are often signified by the increase in public communication between the marginal and dominant groups (Squires, 2002: 460). They exist outside of the safe spaces as a form of direct contestation (Squires, 2002: 460). Satellite publics seek separation from other publics for reasons other than oppressive relations (Squires, 2002: 463). Satellites are formed by collectives that do not desire typical discourse or interactivity with other publics, and are only involved in the wider public sphere discourse from time to time when there is a clear convergence with their own interests (Squires, 2002: 463). These publics rely on the group media only to support internal discussions. Satellite publics can emerge from both dominant and marginalized groups (Squires, 2002: 463). Dominant satellite publics often reify the ideals of larger publics, while non-dominant are often in opposition of it (Squires, 2002: 463).

While these conceptualizations of different types of publics provide depth and detail in how they interact with one another, the typology is not meant to be rigid (Squires, 2002: 457). The way in which discursive and political responses will emerge will differ depending on the larger social context, internal concerns, available sources, institutions, and cultural norms (Squires, 2002: 457). The categorizations of satellite, counter, and enclave publics are thus adaptable to our theoretical inquiry so long as they fulfil the fundamental conditions which define their function.

Locating Publics within Reddit

To reiterate, public spheres can be broken down into two categories: dominant and subaltern public spheres. This thesis conceptualizes the *entirety* of Reddit as a dominant public sphere. Some clarification is required regarding what it meant by this. As a social news aggregation website and company, Reddit not only fulfils the conditions of a space where users engage in deliberation with each other, it is also comprise of a collective administration or ‘state’. This is composed of Reddits executives, staff members, administrators, and moderators, which fulfil the requirements of political and social dominance which shapes the overall experience of users. It is within this body where Reddit takes on the form of a ‘government’ – where legislation, judiciaries, and executives impose their authority on those who do not consent (either actively or passively) (Gramsci et al., 1999: 145). Legislation manifests as the user agreement, privacy policy, and content policy on Reddit which all must consent to in order to become an active participant within the social space (Reddit Content Policy). Reddit establishes the rights and liberties which shape user experience, as well as the ‘law’ which determines what actions are permissible and what are forbidden (Reddit Content Policy). These policies are implemented by Reddits ‘judiciary commission,’ comprised by the administration team and who establish website wide policies¹⁷, and locally by subreddit moderators¹⁸¹⁹ (whom have limited authority bestowed onto them by Reddit) (Reddit User Agreement). They prescribe

¹⁷ This would be akin to a federal government implementing nation wide laws and policies.

¹⁸ This would be akin to a state/provincial government. They are obliged to follow federal law, however each subreddit may also establish their own policies in addition to them.

¹⁹ Reddit moderators will often act as executives in minor cases pertaining to their own subreddits, where they create the legislature and enforce subreddit rules.

enforcement upon those who breach the terms and conditions, which includes, but is not limited to: temporary or permanent suspension of accounts, removal of privileges from or adding restrictions to accounts, adding restrictions to Reddit communities, such as adding NSFW (Not safe for work) tags or quarantining, removal of content, and banning of Reddit communities (Reddit Content Policy). These branches are overseen by Reddits' executive committee, who act as heads of state in their respective positions, as well as exercising their authority to enforce the policies upon users or subreddits whom violate the terms and conditions (Reddit User Agreement).

Where Reddit as an entity may be conceptualized as a large, dominant public sphere, this thesis posits that subreddits fulfil the role of subaltern or 'mini' publics. These multitude of smaller publics coexist and/or compete with each other under the purview of the broader entity (Fraser, 1990; Eley, 1992; Squires 2002). Drawing off of Squires model of subaltern publics, and modifying it to our purpose, we can conceptualize that subreddits can manifest in one of three ways: satellite publics (with dominant or non-dominant delineations), enclave publics, and counter publics²⁰, (2002).

Satellite publics constitute the vast majority of publics which manifest on the website. These entities form for reasons other than oppression, and do not typically engage or interact with other publics, except when there is a convergence with their

²⁰ While this thesis restricts its scope to Reddit, it is worth noting that users and communities that have been deliberately excluded from participating on the website have established counter publics and havens outside of this space. For example, following Reddit's infamous 'Pizzagate' incident (see Kang, 2016) the website had banned numerous users and communities for breaching policy guidelines (See: Ohlheiser, 2016). These members, now excluded from the public sphere had migrated to the social news aggregation website Voat to reengage in these types of conversations (See: Rosenberg, 2016).

own interest (Squires, 2002: 463). Of course, satellite subreddits are not wholly independent from other publics or the state (Squires, 2002: 463). They are fragmented amongst themselves, but as an entity they encompass an almost limitless variety of potential topics for debate and discussion. Subreddits by nature fulfil these conditions, as they are sub-communities built upon a specific topic, interest, or purpose (Chen et al., 2014: 407; Singer et al., 2014; Anderson, 2015; Weninger, 2015). Subreddits will often contain unique subcultures, terminology, media, and beliefs, (Weninger, 2013: 173; Hsieh et al., 2014; Singer et al., 2014: 2-3) which are unique to that specific public. Thus, while existing within Reddit, each subreddit is separate and distinct with the aim to maintain a specific group identity and build independent topics of conversation (Squires, 2002: 463). For example, /r/politics is a subreddit dedicated to American politics ([reddit.com/r/politics](https://www.reddit.com/r/politics)). International issues which do not directly involve the US, and any non-political posts are explicitly excluded as acceptable topics of conversation. Conversations that do not pertain to the specialized interests of each subreddit are often removed with the suggestion of the user moving the conversation to a more appropriate subreddit (See Fig. 1). Every subreddit by nature is a satellite public, with the vast majority falling under the delineation of 'dominant'²¹. This thesis locates the subreddit /r/politics as a satellite public with the delineation of 'dominant'.

The second category of subaltern publics are enclave publics. These spaces and discourses are hidden from public view, and produced solely by group members (Squires, 2002: 458). They will often emerge as private subreddits. Members may move and engage with the wider public (i.e. other subreddits), but are able to return to the

²¹ Unless a subreddit has been quarantined, banned, or explicitly stated as controversial by Reddit's administration, all subreddits are assumed to operate under the dominant delineation.

safe space, where they are able to preserve culture, foster resistance, and create strategies for the future (Squires, 2002; 458). Enclave publics provide a bedrock for marginal publics even if they may benefit from engaging in broader social relations (Squires, 2002: 459). This characterization is critical, as enclave publics manifest as a specific kind of private subreddit on the website. It is through the persecution of a marginalized group and resistance to a dominant public where private subreddits may be deserving of their enclave status (Squires, 2002: 459). Thus, while all enclave publics are private subreddits, not all private subreddits are enclave publics. Admittance to the enclave subreddit usually requires some form of verification to ensure authentic membership (See: Fig. 2)²².

The final category, counter publics, provides a unique challenge to our theoretical approach. Counter publics typically manifest as a direct contestation to a dominant public when they are under decreased pressure from opposition (Squires, 2002: 460). These groups are usually forged directly as a response to the relation between dominant and marginalized groups. According to Fraser, they are “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (1990: 67). In the strictest sense of this definition, counter publics would emerge as a direct response to larger social issues concerning marginalization and domination which occur beyond the confines of the digital sphere. Such subreddits would include /r/blacklivesmatter, /r/occupywallstreet, /r/lgbt, or another other similar publics which seeks to challenge traditional social relations in the corporeal setting.

²² While the provided figure is not from an enclave public, it is able to approximate the conditions which maintain their safe space.

However, if we limit ourselves to this conceptualization wherein counter publics can only emerge only through marginalized publics, we blind ourselves to other kinds of ‘counter publics’ can manifest and understand how they interact. Thus, the understanding of a counter public must be adapted to incorporate a broader range of interaction between publics. Counter publics in online spaces should not be differentiated by their composition, nor by their capacity to produce counter-discourses, nor even by their ability to exert influence on a political system (Milioni, 2009: 411). Instead, their character manifests in their “transformative orientation, which is a modification of existing norms and patterns, and the actualization and, potentially, radicalization of the normative content of the critical public sphere²³” (Milioni, 2009: 411). Not only does this modification illuminate a greater range of counter publics, ones which are based upon their relation and interaction to other spheres, but it allows a greater understanding of the relation between a dominant and a subaltern sphere.

A counter-public is defined as such based upon its relation to the dominant sphere (Williams, 1973: 137). The larger sphere not only defines the conditions of what is acceptable, it also defines the practices, experience, meanings, and values it does not consider to be apart of the dominant culture (Williams, 1973: 137). On Reddit, counter publics will often emerge as ‘controversial’ subreddits; communities that are deemed to exude characteristics contrary to the spirit that the website wishes to exhibit (BBC, 2012). Such subreddits have been deemed distasteful, toxic, and antagonistic (Lee, 2012). While the website has explicated its moral ethos as being grounded in a culture of free speech (Chen, 2012), certain exceptions do apply.

²³ Radicalization does not necessarily entail advocating for equitable status. It may include the advocacy of anti-democratic, and anti-egalitarian principles (Fraser, 1990: 67).

According to its content policy, prohibited behaviour includes posting illegal material, involuntary pornography, sexual or explicit material involving minors, encourages or incites violence, threatens, harasses, or bullies, which provides personal and confidential information of others, and impersonates others (Reddit Content Policy). Furthermore, Reddit provides a guideline concerning proper online etiquette when engaging in online discourse, known as Reddiquette (Wiki Tools, Reddit). Counter publics thus manifest on the precipice of what is deemed acceptable behaviour; they represent communities and discourses which test and challenge existing norms and seek to radicalize the visible content on the website (Miloni, 2009: 411)²⁴. Being deemed 'toxic and antagonistic' by Reddit and other members of the community (See: Romano, 2017), as well being accused for inciting racist, misogynistic, and nationalistic behaviour from mainstream media outlets (See: Martin, 2017), this thesis locates /r/The_Donald as a counter public.

It is important to note that while we identified what kinds of publics these subreddits may exist as in relation to other publics, we have yet to determine if they exude characteristics of communicative rationality. Thus, while they are indeed public insofar as accessibility is concerned, and the way they may operate, they are yet to be confirmed as a public sphere in the Habermasian sense.

Social Movements and the Public Sphere

²⁴ It is important to remember that Reddit as a dominant public is not totalitarian in nature; it is under constant process of construction and contestation (Eley, 1992: 333-334). While distasteful, Reddit has held reservations regarding punitive action against contentious subreddits, prioritizing their ethos of free speech above their 'Reddiquette', often allowing explicit racist content to emerge unchallenged (Chen, 2012; Statt, 2018). It wasn't until there was enough public outcry from both members of the community, and prominent social figures, such as CNN's Anderson Cooper (Morris, 2011), where Reddit would outright ban communities for repeatedly violating its terms and conditions. Banned subreddits include /r/jailbait, /r/creepshots, /r/beatingswomen, /r/thefapping, /r/fatpeoplehate, /r/pizzagate, and /r/incels.

Defining publics based upon their relation to other publics, may they be dominant or not, only represents a portion of how they interact and engage with each other. Publics are also understood by their interlocking relationship of mutual transformation in the political discourse (Guidry, 2003: 449). All publics exist in tandem with each other, even if they may create separate spaces for themselves, they nonetheless confront other publics or social authorities by bringing the concern of their public to the forefront of social debates (Guidry, 2003: 449). This process of confrontation may be recognized as a social movement, where the focus of the public sphere is oriented towards reorienting the agenda of public discourse (Calhoun, 1992: 36). Depending on how social movements actualize, they may be conceptualized as either a subsidiary public engaging in the deliberative process, or a group which attempts to use force and coercion to acquire instrumental ends (Calhoun, 1992: 36). Defining and classifying publics ahead of time allows us to understand and anticipate what kind of communication may manifest as a result of these publics.

Social movements can be conceptualized as a form of interactive performances by a collective in which they make particular claims against elites, authorities, and other groups (Taylor et al., 2009: 866). However, having an issue to rally behind isn't enough to kindle the flame of contention, nor does it allow their concerns to be recognized in the political sphere. According to Edwards, in order for a movement to gain momentum, it must have a readily identifiable discourse around key fracture points in a given society, and that there must be more than simply the existence of discontent (2008: 301). Political advocacy is sustained by individualized collective

action, where individuals join coordinated activities based on personal emotional identifications and rationales (Bennet, 2012: 26). Solidarity thus becomes ratified around the establishment and maintenance of personal identity frames (Bennet, 2012: 31).

Collective action requires a form social support which other potential members can easily recognize and adhere to (Benford & Snow, 2000: 612). Social actors will often utilize rhetoric as a means to shape the way political actors make sense of reality and induce collaboration from other agents (Hensmans, 2003: 358). Utilizing rhetoric consolidates the processes, where agents are able to adhere to tangible subjectivities and to make sense of enacted practices (Hensmans, 2003: 358). In short, its the process of rendering their political consciousness discursive (Hensmans, 2003: 358). One notable characteristic of rhetoric is the use of 'highly emotional slogan-based, tabloid style language, exaggerations and 'verbal radicalism' (Bos & Brants, 2014: 706). Easily identifiable slogans have been a primary rallying tactic for political advocacy, as exemplified by political candidates like Obama (Change we can believe in), and Trump (Make America great again), to civil rights movement activist (Black Lives Matter). Political slogans and rhetoric are often used to rally behind a political cause and induce conformity reactions amongst supporters (Vaes et al., 2011). In contrast to traditional forms of slogan sequences, rhetoric usage through social media often results in a "more elaborate packaging and ritualized action to reintroduce them into new contexts" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012: 747). These phrases develop beyond rallying tactics, and into an intrinsic part of the communities discourse and discussions through framing.

Framing is an active perceptual phenomenon in which individuals denote agency at the level of reality construction (Benford & Snow, 2000: 614). Social actors engage with the creation of meaning for their social cohort, antagonists, and bystanders (Benford & Snow, 2000: 613). This production process facilitates the conditions for interpretation enabling social actors to “locate, perceive, identify and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large (Benford & Snow, 2000: 614). Frames create the conditions in which individual are able to make sense of the world. It allows individuals to render occurrences and events intelligible to their particular discourse in a way which can be used to guide action and organize experience, as well as rally and motivate a call to arms (Benford & Snow, 2000: 614). It is within this stage that groups within an active community create discourse on identified topics to create a basis of knowledge, and justification for their call to action. They create a way of speaking about things, a particular mode of understanding, and a focal lens in which to view the social functioning of the exterior world (Benford & Snow, 2000: 616) Once framing has occurred to facilitate the movement of social actors, these viewpoints become collective action frames. Collective action frames condense aspects of the objective world and opposition in a way that is intended to stir political advocates, deter political antagonists, and rally bystander support (Benford & Snow, 2000: 614).

Reality construction within public arenas are always embroiled in the politics of signification (Benford & Snow, 2000: 625-626). Due to the constant influx of competing and coexisting discourses, social agents are not able to construct and impose any reality they wish as they are always engaged in confrontation (Benford & Snow, 2000: 625-626). Benford and Snow argue that: “The very existence of a social movement

indicates differences within a society regarding the meaning of some aspect of reality” (Benford & Snow, 2000: 625-626). In order to sustain a social movement or political advocacy campaign, communities develop strategies to contest competing discourses (Benford & Snow, 2000: 625-626).

V. DATA SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

This thesis seeks to examine the extent to which political discussion on the social news aggregate website Reddit facilitates the conditions of a public sphere and fosters democratic communicative characteristics. As such, it consists of three primary objectives. First, it looks to assess whether or not, and to what extent, Reddit and its subreddits /r/The_Donald and /r/Politics constitute as a public sphere which engages in communicative rationality. Second, it seeks to critically analyze the discourse that manifested within the two aforementioned subreddits regarding the 2016 presidential election. Finally, it seeks to provide insight on the potential implications that virtual discourse may hold on the experiences of everyday (private) citizens.

Analyzing online political deliberation is not a straightforward process. Dahlberg (2007) has articulated that online social movements and political deliberation have a tendency to result in social fragmentation as well as lack of group cohesion pertaining to complex topics. While some researchers have noted that the digital public sphere is seen to be constituted by 'open, reasoned and reflexive communication' (Dahlberg, 2007: 828), it has also been noted that it facilitates conditions in which participants selectively seek out information that reinforces their ideological positions and avoids meaningful engagement - A 'community of interest' (Dahlberg, 2007: 830). Thus, an overall consensus on political issues are difficult to achieve. Considering that Habermas' notion of communicative action is dependant upon arriving at mutual recognition and understanding of issues, this could be problematic. Dahlberg suggests that in order to avoid fragmentation, a discourse analysis is required that accounts for the power relations within the deliberative process that includes the 'the intersubjective

basis of meaning and rationality, respect for difference and the democratic role of 'like-minded' deliberative groups' (Dahlberg, 2007: 835).

Thus, using the 2016 presidential election as a discursive focal point, this thesis asks the questions: how does Reddit produce publics, and how do they maintain communicative action? These questions are accompanied by four subquestions: (1) How is consensus achieved? (2) Is it democratic and inclusive (3) What kind of messages or knowledge is created in this public space? (4) What does this tell us about the potential of digital political action?

Data Collection

I will conduct a discourse analysis of Reddit and two of its subreddits (/r/Politics and /r/The_Donald) to explore texts produced in these subreddits as a means of assessing its knowledge, meanings, culture, daily routines, values, and practices within each community. Data will be collected by observing the practices of users and the mechanisms in which the website operates, in order to address if it actualizes Habermas' notion of the public sphere and communicative rationality.

Data collection entailed purposeful sampling from the top 10 discussion posts collected from /r/Politics, and the top 10 discussion posts collected from /r/The_Donald that situated around the 2016 presidential election. Posts were selected based upon their popularity and how much discussion they were able to generate. From each of these posts, the top 25 thread starting comments were selected for analysis. A total of 250 comments were thus collected from /r/Politics, and 250 comments were collected from /r/The_Donald, amounting to a grand total of 500 comments. These comments were then subjected to inductive/thematic hybrid

analysis. Some explication is required by this. An inductive analysis typically results in the researcher collecting data, spotting patterns within the data, and then developing theories which explain those patterns. This thesis abides by the first two steps of collecting data and attempting to spot patterns within them. However instead of developing theories which may explain the patterns that emerge, this thesis analyzes how these patterns may or may not coalesce with the previous stated theories of Habermas' argumentative analytics and/or the discursive patterns of social movements to understand how publics discuss issues. To this extent, it also incorporates the process of a thematic analysis as well.

There are a few notable stipulations regarding data collection procedures. While the focus was on posts which generated the most amount of discussion, being subjected to purposeful sampling meant that they were also filtered based upon relevance. Thus if a post does not contribute to discussion regarding the 2016 election, the next applicable reddit post will take its place. The second concern regards the existence of multiple posts regarding the same topic which occur on the same day, or simply, posts which are extensions of previous posts. Often, these continuation posts manifest as multiple 'megathreads'. A megathread is a post that amalgamates fragmented discussion of a specific event or topic into a single consolidated space. On occasion, it is possible to have multiple megathreads, pertaining to a topic of importance. When this occurs, once a discussion reaches a certain threshold, conversation is moved over to a new megathread to keep conversation alive and stimulated and to avoid newer comments being buried. Extension posts for this analysis were treated as the same post, with the discourse analysis being divided

between them respectively. If comments within posts are not equally divisible, the higher rated post will be given more emphasis. (E.g two posts regarding same topic, post one will research the first thirteen responses, the second will research the next twelve - etc). The final concern focuses on posts and comments that had been removed before being archived. The next available post or comment will take its place as there is no discourse to analyze.

It is also worth explaining the rationalization behind picking the top twenty five comments on each thread rather than engage in randomized sampling. While randomize sampling may provide a better description of the range of discourse which can occur, the purpose if this research is to understand the general consensus on a given topic. Not all comments are equal. The comments with the highest votes not only hold the highest visibility, they generate the most amount of discussion. They also denote what comments are seen as being the most pertinent (in either its relevance to the discussion, or being a point with which the community overwhelmingly agrees) in regard to a particular debate (Weninger, 2014: 173). A comment that denotes support for one candidate with 1000 upvotes garners more weight and support from the community than a comment that supports the other candidate with 100 upvotes. Focusing on the top rated posts allows a better understanding of how debates on a particular topic unfold.

Data Processing

Drawing off of Braun and Clarke (2006), I am engaging with the material under the purview of an inductive/thematic hybrid analysis. A thematic analysis is a flexible qualitative analytic which seeks to identify, analyze, and report patterns or 'themes'

within a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 79). The benefit of using a thematic analysis, is that it is not rigorously grounded to any pre-existing theoretical framework. As such, it can be used within different theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 81). In this circumstance, and in congruence with the systematic analysis on the function of Reddit, it will not only disseminate what was being said about the presidential election, it will also provide the means to critically assess power relations, social context, representation, who and what is being represented, and who are the assumed and the privileged actors. The inductive/thematic hybrid analysis was administered in six phases as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006)²⁵. They are:

Phase 1: Familiarizing yourself with your data (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 87).

- After collecting the comments from each subreddit, I immersed myself in the content. This involved multiple readings, searching for initial patterns, and jotting down notable characteristics which could prove useful for the analysis later on (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 87).

Phase 2: Generating initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 88)

- This phase involves the production of initial codes from the data. According to Braun and Clarke, “Codes identify a feature of the data (semantic content or latent) that appears interesting to the analyst, and refer to ‘the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon’ (2006: 88). It is important to note that codes should manifest in a natural way; it is an inductive approach that lets the data ‘speak for itself’ to a certain extent (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 83).

²⁵ A chart consolidating the process is available in ‘Appendix A’

Phase 3: Searching for themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 89)

- Themes start to emerge once the data set has been collected, and all comments have been coded. Searching for themes re-focuses the analysis on a broader level, where codes are grouped together, collating all relevant data into interpretable packets (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 89). Themes capture the essence of the data and describes what is important about it in relation to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 82). It is possible that at this stage to have codes which do not fit into any theme. Codes are revised at this level to either be adapted or discarded based upon the larger context (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 90).

Phase 4: Reviewing themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 91)

- Once themes have been devised, they require refinement. This requires reviewing themes and codes, collapsing themes too similar in nature, breaking themes down that try to achieve too much (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 91). Once this has been achieved, it requires a look at all the themes in tandem with each other to ensure that they accurately reflect the meaning within the dataset as a whole Braun & Clarke, 2006: 91).

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 92)

- This stage takes an introspective approach towards the dataset, where I identify what the essence of each theme is about and how it describes a certain aspect of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 92). This involves finalizing each theme and applying them towards a critical analysis

Phase 6: Producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 93).

- This step entails providing a detailed analysis based upon the thematic analysis conducted.

Data Analysis (Discourse Analysis)

Since online communication is not determined by, or the result of the media which is being used, but the ways in which real individuals engage with one another and produce meaning, it is integral to the formation of human relationships (Pink et al., 2016: 28). Media discourse therefore is the site of a myriad of constructed meanings, such as experiences (what people feel); practices (what people do); things (the objects that are part of our lives); relationships (our intimate social environments); social worlds (the groups and wider social configurations through which people relate to each other); localities (the actual physically shared contexts that we inhabit); and events (the coming together of diverse things in public contexts) (Pink et al., 2016: 34). As such, online discourse is highly variable and locally specific (Lecompte and Schensul, 2010: 7). As demonstrated by virtual geographies, the discourse which manifests online is not isolated, but the result of the symbiotic, reflexive relationship to the physical world (Graham, 2010: 430).

Discourse is not just constituted by how social actors communicate with each other, it represents the site of both reproduction and resistance to normative knowledge (Foucault, 1992: 63). A discourse analysis will reveal how socially produced information, ideas and objects that populate the world are established and maintained over time through the intercommunication of collected social actors (Philips and Hardy, 2011: 6). Furthermore, a discourse analysis seeks to analyze the power of incomplete, ambiguous, and contradictory discourse to produce a social reality (Philips and Hardy,

2011: 2-4), that is informed by partial knowledges, prejudices or arguments and the potential conflict among divergent perspectives (Philips and Hardy, 2011: 23).

In exploring power relationships and knowledges, discourse analysis will explore how the public's rules and communicative practices are taken for granted, assert authority and demand conformity. It will indicate how the boundaries of the space is created, and the identities against which the public is articulated. It will also ascertain how consensus is achieved and the means by which it is accomplished.

VI. FINDINGS

A total of 500 comments²⁶ were selected in order to be analyzed by a hand-drawn thematic analysis. This dataset was broken down into two major components. Component one focuses on discourse which manifested on the subreddit /r/Politics, while component two focuses on the discourse within the subreddit /r/The_Donald. Data was collected from the top five commented on posts three months before, as well as the top five commented on posts three months after the election. Each comment was individually deconstructed to determine the explicit meaning behind each post, and assigned codes as a result. Comments were coded 1,318 times to one or more themes and sub themes. Due to the fact that political discussion can result in multivariate commentary, many comments contained more than one code. Comments were thus organized into themes based upon topical relevancy. Comparing chart one to chart two, as well as chart four to chart five (See Appendix B) indicates that discursive patterns before the election, and discursive patterns after the election followed a similar traction within each subreddit. There was however, a stark contrast regarding how each community thematically categorized pertinent issues, and the ways in which they discussed them as indicated by comparing charts three and six (see Appendix B). This chapter discusses the findings of the discourse analysis, such as common themes and the discursive patterns that emerged as a means to address the second objective: critically analyze the discourse that manifested within the two aforementioned subreddits regarding the 2016 presidential election, and subquestions

²⁶ The following comments which appear in the analysis remain unedited to preserve the intent and character of the original poster.

three and four: What kind of messages or knowledge is created in this public space, and what does this tell us about the potential of digital political action?

Thematic Analysis of /r/Politics

The discourse which emerged within /r/Politics during the presidential election was expansive in topics, but nearly ubiquitous in its constitution towards the candidates²⁷. According to the dataset, discussion was overwhelmingly dominated by a focus on Trump, which comprised 64.5% of the conversation²⁸. Of the discourse which focused on Trump, 91.6% discussed the candidate poorly, while 8.4% viewed him without disdain²⁹. The second most talked about category was the overall political climate, which attributed to 19.3% of the conversation. Here users voiced opinions regarding frustration and the absurdity of the political election, as well as remorse regarding the selected primary candidates. The third category of discursive significance was conversation which focused on Clinton, which only attributed to 16.4% of the discussion. Of the discourse which focused on her, 65.3% expressed negative criticism towards her candidacy, while 34.7% viewed her optimistically. Overall, the subreddit exuded overwhelming dismay with the 2016 political cycle, with 89.2% of the discourse indicating disillusionment. The remainder of this section will systematically analyze the discursive patterns which emerged on /r/Politics regarding the presidential election.

²⁷ This is based upon the aggregate data

²⁸ These numbers are based upon a code total which removes the category 'communicative rationality' from the calculations

²⁹ This is an important characterization, as the 'positive' discourse was not necessarily advocating for Trump per se, but commenting on how an event may be favourable for him

Theme 1: Trump Focused Discourse

Critical of Trump's candidacy

Discourse critical of Trump manifested in three ways. Users expressed concern of Trump's legitimacy as a presidential candidate, his competency (or lack thereof) regarding his ability to perform expected duties on behalf of the nation, and characteristics which the community has regarded as unpalatable or 'deplorable' in nature³⁰. Prior to the election, a major concern was that support for Trump was growing not because of any merit stemming from prior achievement or notable campaign promises, but because of the amounting disdain for Clinton as a presidential candidate. This was exemplified weeks before the election when the FBI reopened the investigation into Clinton's emails (PEP 1).

Comey needs to come out with a clear statement.

What if Hillary wins and it turns out she's going to face charges.

What if Trump wins because of this and it turns out Hillary didn't do anything wrong. The FBI Director has just decided that he will be a serious player in the decision of who becomes the next president of the united states. (PEP 1)

Jake Tapper on CNN explained the Weiner connection and just quoted "If you introduce a gun in the first act, it had better go off in the third act." Good choice. (PEP 1)

Even if the emails turn out to be nothing, the fallout from the announcement could be significant... (PEP 1)

Here, users expresses concern that unverified allegations against Clinton could hold serious repercussions regarding the election outcome. It suggests that if people are driven to vote for Trump, it is due to competing criticism regarding the legitimacy/competency of Clinton. They argue that it would be pointless to vote for a candidate

³⁰ See Merica & Tatum, 2016

that may be impeached within the first couple months of her presidency. It grounds the idea that support for Trump only exists due stigma attached to Clinton.

Trump just needs to present himself as acceptable. Clinton needs to walk a thousand intricate tightropes. May God help us all. (PEP 2.2)

Here, the users articulate the diminished expectations of Trump in which he needs to do less in order to achieve support. His campaign as seen as not legitimate by virtue of established political success, but because he is oppositional to a candidate whom is deep in scandal. Indeed, this oppositional position has been contentious to the community, as they have noted that Trump has often tried to capitalize on this issue by threatening to abuse the power of the presidency in order to bring Clinton to 'justice' regardless of the investigations findings:

Did Trump really just threaten to unilaterally imprison Hillary if he's elected President? (PEP 5.1)

I'm amazed that Trump literally threatened use the power of the Presidency to go after his opponent if he won. (PEP 5.1)

I don't think I've ever seen a candidate for public office openly call for the arrest of their opposing candidate on the debate stage before. Utterly appalling. (PEP 5.1)

In addition to criticisms regarding his legitimacy, users frequently question his competency as an elected official.

Holy fuck we really have a reality star who said he wants to grab women by the Pussy, wants to increase spending and decrease taxes but complains about our debt, started off his campaign by calling Mexicans rapists and killers (EDIT: ok he accused the Mexican government of sending criminals here, which is completely false, and illegal immigrants are not more likely to commit crimes than anyone else). There's more. This is just the first things I thought about wow. EDIT: He also has many many failed businesses, is a literal con artist, has many sexual assault cases, has 5 kids with 3 wives, wants to create a Muslim registry, doesn't believe in climate change, doesn't believe vaccinations work, wants to hang the Central Park 5 even though they're innocent, has no government experience, wants to be best friends

with Putin, insults everyone who slights him, can't stay off Twitter, has many conflicts of interests, has no idea what a blind trust is, the whole Trump University thing like conning people out of money, is a narcissist, thinks STOP and frisk is good policy, retweeted an account called white genocide, is going to massively cut taxes for rich while increasing taxes for single parents who need it the most, has a Vice President who believes in gay conversion camps, tweets at SNL saying they're being mean to him like it isn't a fucking comedy show. There's more!!! I just spent 5 minutes on this one without looking anything up!! (AEP 3)

The above statement exemplifies the concerns and criticisms the community displays regarding Trump's competency to perform duties as President. By referencing a sexually derogatory statement uttered by Trump, his seemingly xenophobic attitudes towards the Mexican and Muslim population, and his support of white nationalist social media accounts, it calls into question his ability to be representative of the public and maintain a disposition which is grounded in respect and dignity. In addition, the user calls into question his ability to effectively engage in geopolitical issues, as his allegiance appears to favour Russia over traditional western allies. Furthermore, criticisms are brought forth regarding Trump's potential to stimulate the economy, as he has a history of bankrupting numerous business ventures, a history of illegitimate business designed to con people out of money, and supports a tax program which would favour the wealthy over the everyday citizen amounting to a conflict of interest due to personal gain. Finally, the user expresses dismay with his proposed political policies, as they are seemingly grounded in anti-science and pro-religious ideology.

Elsewhere, users have expressed concern regarding Trump's unfamiliarity with established legal practices, and the dangerous implications it may hold on marginalized citizens.

*Stop and Frisk was ruled unconstitutional"
"No you're wrong" (PEP 2.2)*

Black voter here. I hate Hillary but if Trump supports nation wide "stop and frisk" I will hold my nose and vote for Hillary. I don't care how effective "stop and frisk" is at decreasing crime rates; it's a policy that gives more power to the police state. I thought conservatives cared about the 4th amendment. (PEP 2.2)

These concerns were amplified following the election, when Trump implemented a travel ban which restricted admittance into the US if individuals had a 'prohibited' nationality, regardless if they were a US citizen or not (AEP 2). Here, users were appalled with the social and legal, and ethical implications regarding the legal approach of the administration.

This is incompetence, plain and simple. There is no way this order should have applied to legal permanent residents of the United States traveling abroad. The order also should have included clear lines of entry for allies of the United States military (e.g. Iraqi interpreters). But the order wasn't written by lawyers or even vetted by the Office of Legal Counsel at the Department of Justice, reportedly. <http://www.dailywire.com/news/12895/8-things-you-need-know-about-trumps-executive-ben-shapiro> Even prominent conservatives like Ben Shapiro are calling out the absurdity of they way they handled this. (AEP 2).

Aside from litigious incompetency, users bring attention to his inability maintain communication and coherency within his political campaign. During the second presidential debate, Trump had indicated that he had no contact with his VP following the debate between vice-presidents.

Trump hasn't spoken to Pence about Syria - like, at all? And then he throws Pence under the bus over it? Wow - I wonder if this means Pence will be dropping out. Pence wants the 2020 run, and wants it badly. Getting talked down by his own freaking running mate on national TV is bad news for that. Edit: Apparently Pence is tweeting that he's still on board. It'll be funny to see what he says about this in interviews! PEP5.1

*"[Pence] and I haven't spoken." **Seriously?!?! You haven't spoken with your VP candidate in the week since his debate?** (PEP 5.2)*

Holy shit, he just threw pence under the bus. (PEP 5.2)

Here users express concern regarding the internal relations of the Trump candidacy. It raises questions regarding his ability to manage the executive branch of government when there is communicative disruption between running mates.

Finally, prior to his election, users focused on the characteristics of Trump, focusing on attitudes and behaviours which they deemed as being unfit for the presidential office. One such issue revolved around his ability to hold respectable and mutual debate with his political opponent.

I don't think Donald did what he needed to in making himself look acceptable to everybody. Too many people will be turned off by the interruptions and heckling and rambling and self-aggrandizing. But I've been wrong about many things in the past regarding this election. (PEP 2.1)

[...] First interruption. If that's a frequent thing, it'll look bad for him. (PEP 2.1)

[...] Trump's heckling is coming off as very brash to my, admittedly, biased ears [...] (PEP 2.1)

[...] Every time Trump says "I have been given great credit for _____" it just feels false. That's not nearly as important as a plan. (PEP2.1)

Here, users have expressed concern regarding Trump's ability to compose himself. Trump is characterized as embellishing his own importance while attempting to shut down the debate of the opposition through constant interruptions and heckling. It presents the idea that Trump is not communicatively or political engaged. Indeed, users have raised questions concerning if he is even politically competent:

[...] The hard thing for Clinton is that these discussions are quite complex. And complexity does not do well in these debates, especially against Trump (PEP 2.1)

[...] The complexity point again. Most people aren't patient enough to learn about a status of forces agreement. Trump ignores it. And Clinton obscures it somewhat. (PEP 2.1)

/r/Politiics had put forth the notion that not only was Trump an illegitimate presidential candidate, he was effectively incompetent and unfit to hold any political position of power. As such, his election was met with extreme pessimism from members of the community.

Congratulations to the Republicans, you finally got everything you ever wanted. Full control of government at nearly ever level and few liberals to stand in your way. You truly believe that your policies are best for this country and now we get to find out if they'll actually work. Just remember that the election is now over, you don't get to blame Obama or Hillary. Anything that goes wrong is squarely on your party and we will hold you to this responsibility. Prove me wrong. Make the middle class grow and have this country prosper. (AEP 3)

Here the user highlights the near unlimited political control that the Republican Party has acquired. They highlight the inability for Republicans to engage in political partisanship as a means of holding them accountable for any misdoings in the future.

While the user had expressed hope that their skepticism was unfounded, the rest of the community had doubled down on their critical approach to Trump's presidency.

Following the inauguration speech, users were quick to assert Trump as divisive and needlessly contentious:

I'm trying to wrap my head around so many things from that speech. Inaugurations are usually respectful democratic events where the new president says something nice about the outgoing president but then says what their plan forward is. Trump just described our country as a hellhole and threw Obama under the bus - with Obama sitting right next to him. Then repeated "America First" multiple times - when that has a terrible, xenophobic connotation in our history. And then he says he wants to "Build American" and "Hire American"? He's notorious for hiring cheap illegal workers and not even paying his contractors whether they're local American workers or immigrant workers (AEP 5)

The speech wasn't unifying. Not just to me as a liberal. But think of what he was saying about the other presidents on the stage with him. That they were only interested in enriching themselves and forsook the American public. 2) He set the bar very low. Apparently, we're living in an age of American carnage. Thus, anything half-way decent that happens he can count in his accomplishments, anything that raises above carnage 3) The populism is here to stay. (AEP 5)

In the first excerpt, the user criticizes the speech as being undemocratic and inexplicably grounded in nationalist sentiment. Furthermore, they argue that the unfounded divisiveness is hypocritical, as Trump has never upheld these 'all American' ideals when he was managing the workforce for his own company. Thus, the statement is not simply critical of its xenophobic content, it is skeptical about the President's authenticity on his own political positions. The second excerpt highlights the degradation of standards in American politics and overt use of populist rhetoric. Trump is presented as unabashedly presenting a fallible argument which seeks to demean his predecessors. In addition, the speech attempts to reduce the standards of accountability to mitigate blame away from his administration while placing onto the previous government.

This inauguration, this election provides a very unfortunate insight. That Sensationalism and Headlines hold value over the transcripts and the facts. American Carnage? Violent death in the US is at a 25 year low. The middle class wealth being stolen by countries abroad? The majority of working class jobs have been lost to automation rather than off shoring. Wherever you consider yourself on the political spectrum understand that this has no precedent and while remaining optimistic is beneficial a healthy level of skepticism should be encouraged. (AEP 5)

Edit: I've got 200+ people reminding me in various ways that Obama blamed Bush for his troubles. There's a very long, storied bi-partisan tradition of blaming the previous president for issues but it will only get you so far. However, I see some serious differences here. Obama inherited a country deeply involved in two wars with an economy that had just crashed. Trump is inheriting a country with lower unemployment and higher rates of insurance

coverage. If he has plans to continue this trend then I want to see it, but frankly I expect Trump to do what he normally does which is take credit for other people's work and act like he did something. (AEP 3)

This is regarded as poignant for the community as the social, political and economic conditions inherited by Trump were seen as substantially better than when inherited by the Obama administration. Users argue that the speech is nothing more than sensationalist, which fails to represent the reality of American issues within society.

Finally, the interplay between incompetency, illegitimacy, and deplorability came to a culmination during allegations that Russia had been tampering with the American election in favour of Trump. Not only was Trump seen as having potentially acquired his presidency through subversion, it brings into question the authenticity of the entire democratic process.

*8+ years of communication between him and Kremlin, and 5+ year relationship of cultivating/supporting/assisting Trump by Russia. They offered him real estate deals IN RUSSIA to further ensnare him, but he declined [...] **The allegations of bribery/blackmail/collusion with a hostile power are what have real teeth here, and what would be most damning claims if proven true [...]**Detailed claims of bilateral intelligence sharing back and forth between Trump and Putin. Trump had DNC moles and used US as well as foreign hackers. Trump got info on his opponents, Putin got info on Russian oligarchs + families living in US. They used the pension system that Russian diplomats used to transfer information back and forth to/from each other as well. It mentions tens of thousands of dollars were sent in addition to the money. Russia's main goal appears to be driving wedges to cause divisions in the West. They aided Jill Stein, Carter Page and Michael Flynn (the latter two being members of Trump's team) in doing so. Main goal of DNC emails appeared to be swinging Sanders voters to Trump [...] Mentions that the Trump team AND Russia both paid Romanian hackers to help sabotage Democrats. Overall goal of electing Trump was to destabilize Western and world order in Russia's favor since he was anti-establishment and so divisive [...] I feel it pertinent to mention that CNN mentioned when this broke that the BuzzFeed story and intel therein ARE unverified, BUT US intel officials consider both the ex-MI6 agent source and his Russian sources credible. I'm guessing our intelligence is working to verify or disprove this now, since Comey would not answer when asked if the FBI was currently investigating Russia-campaign connections on Capital hill today (AEP 1)*

In a collaborative effort between multiple Redditor's, users highlight information they deem pertinent for community focus. Critical to the investigation is the apparent relationship between Russian authorities and the Trump campaign. Users highlight that the nature of the relationship may be sustained by allegations regarding bribery, back mail, and collusion, which raise concern regarding the legitimacy and stability of western democracy.

Discourse which views Trump without disdain

In contrast to the plethora of discourse which viewed Trump's candidacy with disdain, there was almost no discussion which viewed Trump's candidacy with optimism. It is important to note that the discourse that could be construed as optimistic was not necessarily advocating for Trump per se, but rather reflected attitudes favourable to his support base, or commented on his uncharacteristic civility.

[...] Trump's "They should have been doing this for years" is a decent approach. It highlights the insider/outsider divide [...] (PEP 2.1)

[...] Donald's "You are going to ____" is very effective. It's hard to get away from [...] (PEP 2.1)

[...] The 'typical politician' attack is going to resonate [...] (PEP 2.1)

[...] Trump's line about politicians leaving the AA community is a good one. It's something that black politicians have been saying for ages [...] (PEP 2.1)

[...] Clinton uses the word "racist" twice in the first 25 seconds of her answer. Trying to do that branding that worked so well for Trump in the debate [...] (PEP 2.1)

Is anyone else sincerely impressed that Trump is being respectful? I'm sure we'll hear about it tomorrow, but he hasn't tweeted anything, and didn't address it when asked about her health earlier. (PEP 4)

Aside from the last excerpt, all of these statements had come from the same user, who had periodically commented during the first presidential debate. Despite what may come across as potentially supportive of Trump, the user indicates support for Clinton, indicating the belief that she was the better candidate: *“Final thoughts. Man. That was a whirlwind. Much more open than I thought. I was already supporting HRC, so I thought she won”* (PEP 2.1). Most notably, out of the entire /r/Politics dataset there was only one comment which expressed explicit support for Trump: *“Congratulations President Trump! Let's Make America Great Again!”* (AEP 3).

Theme 2: Clinton Focused Discourse

Discourse critical of Clinton

Where Trump was overwhelmingly the focus of the election, Clinton was relegated to the peripheral consciousness of the community. Despite being the focus of conversation for two of the five pre-election posts, dedicated discourse on Clinton was almost non-existent. Conversation would revolve around issues surrounding the absurdity of the current election cycle rather than the issues which may affect her candidacy. When Clinton was explicitly discussed, it was usually highly critical of her candidacy. Criticism of Clinton was focused around three areas. The first was concerned with issues regarding the FBI’s investigation into her emails.

As a Bernie supporter who supported Hillary with violent cognitive dissonance, I'm internally exploding. (PEP 1)

Hillary Clinton is the first POTUS candidate to be investigated by the FBI twice. (PEP 1)

NYT reporting these emails have surfaced as a result of the investigation into Anthony Weiner's sexting scandal: (EDIT: UPDATED LINK) <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/29/us/politics/fbi-hillary-clinton-email.html?smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur>

*So... the only person Weiner seems to have managed to actually, **royally** fuck throughout his whole sexting saga.. is Hillary Clinton? Fuck me, America. Your election, and thus the fate of your country, could be decided by an investigation into the antics of a dude with a funny surname, married to Hillary Clinton's mobile command centre, who can't keep his silly sausage tucked neatly away. (PEP 1)*

The unverified allegations against Clinton are seen as having serious repercussions for the election cycle. As indicated above, some users raise issues regarding the ethicality surrounding Clinton's candidacy, while others users express bewilderment at the prospect that Clinton's chances were put in jeopardy due to reasons out of her control.

In addition, users also raised minor quips regarding Clinton and Kaine's disposition during the presidential debates.

[...] She shouldn't attack his plan before she outlines hers. (PEP 2.1)

[...] Hillary should stop saying the word "hiding." She's hidden a good deal in the past. Reminding the people of anything 'hidden' is a very bad idea. (PEP 2.1)

[...] Clinton's making a mistake framing the "securing America" segment around Russia. People see ISIS as a much bigger threat. (PEP 2.1)

[...] I hope somebody fact-checks the "NATO is the longest military alliance in the history of the world" and finds two Native American countries who didn't attack each other for two hundred years. Clinton will hang her head in shame. (PEP 2.1)

Kaine is not doing himself any justice by interrupting. People hate Donald for that stuff (PEP 3)

Holy shit Kaine i really hope he doesn't just continue to interrupt it will lose him this debate (PEP 3)

Here, users raise concern with how Clinton has framed her political issues. Clinton is presented as being ethically ambiguous and someone whose policies may not be in line with the general public. In addition, it presents Kaine to be just as impertinent as

Trump, characteristics which the community has already deemed as being unfit for a governmental position.

Finally, users criticized Clinton for the way she and her administration announced that she had developed pneumonia prior to the election:

Big mistake on the part of her campaign to hide this until it can no longer be hidden. This only fuels the narrative that Hilary Clinton is untrustworthy and keeping things from the public. Rough day for Hilary. (PEP 4)

[...] So it took what, 8 hours to get a statement released from the doctor even though she was "diagnosed with pneumonia" on Friday? Sounds like Clinton and crew were doing damage control and testing which version of events would land the softest and decided on pneumonia as the best way to explain it away. (PEP 4)

*The overheating spin wasn't working at all, even with the normal sycophants. How does she emerge from Chelsea's apartment two hours later "**feeling great**" with pneumonia? The campaign is going to have to try again. (PEP 4)*

Here, users indicate their dissatisfaction with the openness of the Clinton administration. It brings into question the legitimacy and competency of her campaign, labeling her as deceitful, distrustful, and unwilling to communicate with the general public. Her mismanagement is presented as degrading her reputability.

Political optimism of Clinton candidacy

While the Clinton discourse was primarily negative, a small portion of the conversation demonstrated genuine support and political optimism from her candidacy. Here, users reaffirm her competency and legitimacy by referencing her prior political experience and credentials, as well as policies which they see as beneficial to focus on.

[...] The Clinton "exporting manufacturing increased by 30% and to China by 50%" is the kind of stats that will help her. (PEP2.)

[...] The Criminal Justice Reform answer from Clinton was really effective. And framing the gun question as "Our police are out-gunned" is a good tactic. (PEP 2.1)

[...] The "implicit bias" question was very well-handled. If she singles out police, she will look bad. Being able to frame it as "We want to help them, not condemn them" is right. PEP2.1

[...] I'm surprised she's waited this long to bring up her bin Laden credentials. PEP2.1

[...] "Without firing a single shot" is a good point to make. It not only highlights the point that she successfully negotiated with two difficult parties in Russia and China, it also highlights that her approach doesn't risk war. Whether that's true is another debate. PEP2.1

[...] I think the "I want to reassure Japan and South Korea" approach is a good one because it makes her look like she's already got the job and Trump is just a small annoyance. PEP2.1

In addition, highlighting aspects of Clinton they deem desirable, the community emphasizes the virtuous nature of her running mate to place the interests of the general community above his own morality:

I really respect Kaine for having his personal pro-life beliefs but respecting the right for women to make that decision for themselves. I respect the fuck out of that. Edit: meant life, not choice (PEP 3)

You can tell that Kaine personally against abortion but he can put aside his personal values to defend the constitution. As a Christian who also believes in the constitution I respect that greatly. (PEP 3)

Here, users recognize the controversial nature of the pro-life, pro-choice debate, and use Kaine's position as putting policies above his own ethicality. By explicitly referring to religious positions, it emphasizes a desire to separate church and state concerning legal issues. Finally, users highlight desirable characteristics by contrasting Clinton's disposition to Trump's. Where Trump has been regarded as incapable of composure,

shutting down debate, and embellishing his own importance, Clinton is seen as rational and calculating, using the awkwardness of Trump to her advantage.

From Nate Silver:

"Note that Clinton is often positioning herself such that Trump is in the background of the camera frame when she's answering a question from the audience — something that Bill Clinton famously also did in his town hall debate against George H.W. Bush in 1992. That allows the cameras to capture any potential awkward body language from Trump. Trump doesn't seem to be doing the same when he's answering his own questions, instead staying close to his stool."

Interesting strategy, and it's working.. Everyone can see Trump doing all that weird shit. (PEP 5.2)

Theme 3: Political Dissatisfaction

When users were not focusing on their disdain for either Trump or Clinton, they were expressing a general dissatisfaction for the entire election cycle. User disillusionment would manifest in one of three ways; they explicate sentiment of absurdity of the current political climate, frustration regarding the general attitudes and characteristics of the candidates, and resentment at the lack of acceptable candidates. While this was a frequent trend on /r/Politics, it resulted in surprisingly sparse discourse.

Absurdity would typically manifest as rhetoric which viewed political news as some kind of media or circus event — albeit an event marked by chaos and controversy:

From 'dicking bimbos' to 'the FBI's Weiner investigation'... This election sucks, but the headlines are priceless. (PEP 1)

[...] The shitshow starts. (PEP 2.1)

[...] Shit-show continues. (PEP 2.1)

Finally it's over. What a shit show (AEP 3)

In other circumstances, users would explicitly compare the political climate to a television series or movies in order to bring levity to nebulous affairs. In doing so, users (sarcastically) suggest that everything up until now must be some kind of hoax designed for entertainment rather than national importance:

House of Cards is going to have a piss poor season next year since nothing the writers concoct will ever be as ridiculous as this election season. (PEP 4)

In unrelated news, House of Cards staff say "fuck it" and say they can't top real life. (AEP 1)

In addition, users would compare policies, mannerisms, and speech characteristics to media counterparts in order to highlight the absurdity of the Trump administration:

Among other things, it's official: we are never allowed to make fun of that comic where Lex Luthor got elected president ever again (AEP 4)

So is this when Pence announces the Mutant Registration Act? (AEP 5)

Trump made it sound like America been like Mad Max: Fury Road the past 8 years (AEP 5)

When users were not attempting to bring conviviality to their dissatisfaction, they expressed concern and dismay regarding frustration stemming from attitudes, characteristics, and incompetencies of each candidate:

*Gentlemen the people at home can not understand either of you.
Line of the debate so far. (PEP 3)*

I feel like the moderator should have a water gun and spray these guys like you do with cats when they start acting out of order. (PEP 3)

Ugh, debt is so badly understood in this country. (PEP 3)

[...] General note - There's been some specifics. But my god, there's been few. It's been a very nebulous affair. I watch and read too much news, and this feels barely any different from a panel on a 3 pm CNN show. (PEP 2.1)

[...] Oh. Race. This'll improve things. (PEP 2.1)

[...] First semi-show down between Trump and Lester. Lester backs down too quickly. (PEP 2.1)

The bitterness and resentment of the political cycle is amplified amongst supporters of the Democratic National Party, who believe that Sanders should have received the nomination over Clinton. The various announcements regarding the email investigations and her physical well being have left community members disenfranchised. Periodically, users would deem it pertinent to reiterate that there were other potential candidates who may have been better choices.

Upvote to revive r/SandersForPresident PEP4

So Hillary isn't running on Bernie's platform as much as running on a Weekend at Bernie's platform? PEP4

For fucks sakes they should have just went with Sanders PEP4

*As a Bernie supporter who supported Hillary with violent cognitive dissonance, I'm internally exploding. PEP1**

Should've been Bernie PEP1

Theme 4: Political Optimism

The final theme that emerged was categorized as political optimism. This category was selected not because it represented a significant aspect of the discourse, but because of how statistically irrelevant it was. The negative disposition towards the 2016 presidential cycle is actually reinforced by its irrelevancy. Indeed, there was only one statement of political optimism throughout all 10 articles.

Can we at least just appreciate the difference in civility of this discourse? Often quipping back and forth, but no one's repeatedly saying "wrong" into the mic every 5 seconds. (PEP 3)

Political optimism for the user does not manifest as a result of the intrinsic characteristics or policies presented by each candidate, but by the incivility of previous

debates. Indeed, it is questionable if this can even be regarded as political optimism, as the positive characteristics are only noted as a means to highlight the overall dissatisfaction with the presidential candidates.

Thematic Analysis of /r/The_Donald

As an advocacy based counter public, the discourse that manifested within the subreddit during the presidential campaign was emblematic of the communication techniques exhibited by inter-networked social movements. A strong emphasis is placed upon collective action frames, and identity formation (See: Langman, 2005: 7-8). The subreddit would routinely use frames to problematize issues, legitimize motivations, suggest strategies, and establish collective identities to build a collective consciousness (Langman, 2005: 7-8). Collective action frames are utilized to render events meaningful, organize experience, and guide action on political issues (Benford & Snow, 2000: 614). They are dynamic and evolving processes developed through discursive, strategic and contested practices (Benford & Snow, 2000: 623-627). These three components would routinely and systematically appear during the coding processes, and as such, they coalesce with the themes devised for the analysis.

Theme 1: Make America Rhetoric Again

Derived from the emphatic rhetoric permeated by the Trump Campaign, '*Make America Rhetoric Again*' characterizes the discursive processes within social movements, that focuses on 'the ways in which people talk, the narratives they create to make sense of the world, and the identities they establish to facilitate solidarity' (Benford & Snow, 2000: 623). Framing becomes the primary tool to focus the collective initiative. It creates established meanings for problematized issues in which

the community can rally behind and assert affirmative action against (Beck, 2008: 1569). These three points manifest as sub-themes within this analysis and have been named statements, narratives, and identity respectively.

1.1 Statements

Rhetorical statements and slogans represent the backbone of conversational structure on /r/The_Donald. They represent ideological conformity and a call for solidarity to legitimize their support amongst members of the community. The following excerpts show how rhetorical statements become elaborated and performed in the context of the presidential election³¹:

*Ladies and gentlemen, my fellow centipedes, the next President of the United States of America just took a few moments out of his busy schedule, on one of the most important nights of the campaign, to grace us with his presence and invite us to watch him take down Crooked Hillary. Holy shit. **MAGA (TDPE 2)***

Well, this makes it easier to choose. You know where I will be! <https://www.donaldjtrump.com> it is MAGA (TDPE 2)

*Im not even American but goddamn do I feel pride in saying I support Trump and the American people. **MAGA (TDAE 2.2)***

WE WON FLORIDA! WE DID THIS FOR HARAMBE! MAGA! (TDAE 1)

It's 1am here in the west coast and I can't sleep. Too much MAGA energy flowing but my phone's down to 20%. Ive also had a little too much vodka. (TDAE 2.1)

Obama refused to say radical islamic terror for 8 years. President Trump didn't wait 5 minutes. MAGA (TDAE 2.1)

*Sun is shining in the UK, the world knows it's about to improve **BIG LEAGUE (TDAE 2.1)***

*Tonight we **CELEBRATE**, tomorrow's we **FUCKING MAGA (TDAE 1)***

³¹ The comments referenced in this thesis remain unedited in order to preserve their tone and meaning. Bolded comments in this thesis were bolded within their original posts.

Users have placed Trump's campaign slogans and mannerisms (hereinafter 'Trumpisms') as the focal point for conversation. The use of rhetoric such as MAGA often becomes ritualized as a valediction within the discourse, signifying authenticity from the poster, and as a call for unanimity within the community. This declaration is revered so highly amongst the community, that these key terms are often bolded or exaggerated to place emphasis on the slogan over the content of the message itself. Indeed, the impact of utilizing rhetoric is so prolific, that conversation itself is often secondary within the public. Some of the highest rated comments held no meaningful discourse and produced no conversation regarding the topic at hand.

BIG DON כְּ כֹּחַ •_• הַ כְּ TAKE MY HIGH ENERGY כְּ כֹּחַ •_• הַ כְּ PUT 'ER TO REST TONIGHT FOR GOOD (TDPE 3)

YES SIR! MAGA TRUMP TRAIN NO BRAKES! (TDPE 3)

DRAIN THE SWAMP

MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN

כְּ כֹּחַ •_• הַ כְּ DONALD TAKE MY HIGH ENERGY כְּ כֹּחַ •_• הַ כְּ כֹּחַ •_• הַ כְּ כֹּחַ •_• הַ כְּ DONALD TAKE MY HIGH ENERGY כְּ כֹּחַ •_• הַ כְּ כֹּחַ •_• הַ כְּ DONALD TAKE MY HIGH ENERGY כְּ כֹּחַ •_• הַ כְּ כֹּחַ •_• הַ כְּ DONALD TAKE MY HIGH ENERGY כְּ כֹּחַ •_• הַ כְּ כֹּחַ •_• הַ כְּ DONALD TAKE MY HIGH ENERGY [...] ³² (TDPE 3)

MAGA GOD EMPEROR (TDPE 4)

Big League Truth winning bigly! (TDPE 5)

OHH SHIT HERE COME DAT PRESIDENT!

WALL UP! (TDPE 5)

WE'RE GONNA WIN BIGLY, BELIEVE ME FOLKS! (TDPE 2)

³² It is worth noting that the uncut version of this post had repeated itself for a total of 36 times.

MAGA (TDPE 2)

Press F to band breaks from the Trump train (TDPE 2)

In these circumstances, the exclusive use of rhetoric is used to exemplify the spirit of the community. They are claim-making *performances* (See: Taylor et al., 2009) which indicate that they not only place their allegiance to Trump, but that they are also firmly entrenched in the culture of the subreddit.

The use of rhetoric is not isolated to foster advocacy, but also to foster aggression against the opposition. Following Trump's election, one user writes:

"It's the the non educated people getting out." CBS cuck's shitty explanation on why Trump is winning. Fuck you. I'm an educated professional in the IT industry, and I voted Trump to keep the foreign money and bullshit lobbying out of American politics. Drain the fucking swamp. (TDAE 1.5)

The use of rhetorical valediction in this circumstance is strategic — it is defined to exemplify feelings of resentment and amplify them through the community (Bos & Brants, 2014: 706). It exhibits a call to arms, where community members can voice grievances and rally against the legitimacy of political and media establishments (Bos & Brants, 2014: 706). It is in this circumstance where rhetorical utterances begin to develop into narrative construction through framing.

1.2 Narratives

Framing within /r/The_Donald adopted a distinctly populist approach, wherein issues were antagonistically defined between 'the common folk' and the established political powers of the corrupt elite (See: Bos & Brants, 2014: 706). It is rooted in anti-establishment ideology, where actors accuse the elite in actively degrading the purity of American ideals, and contributing to the (economic) anxieties of

the people (See: Rojecki, 2016; Bos & Brants, 2014: 706). Indeed, for community members, political corruption is an inevitability that threatens to undermine democracy itself. In an AMA with Trump, one user writes:

*Mr. Trump, it's truly an honor. What are your thoughts on electronic voting machines and the potential for election fraud? **It is well-known that the two major manufacturers of electronic voting machines in the U.S. – Dominion Voting and H.I.G. Capital—are supporters of Hillary Clinton and donate to the Clinton Foundation.** I believe this represents a conflict of interest unprecedented in U.S. politics, and the only potential threat to your candidacy. Do you have plans to shine light on this issue for the rest of the country? (TDPE 1)*

The statement indicates skepticism regarding the validity of the election due to a conflict of interest between corporate interests and Clinton's campaign. While it places emphasis on what they view as widespread corruption by elites within the system, it also sets up a contingency frame in to explain away the potential loss of the election by dichotomizing the results. If Trump wins, it is by virtue of the democratic process. If Trump loses, it is because the system was rigged. This sentiment is echoed by another user within the same AMA:

Reports estimate that 90% of US media is owned by 6 companies. The US mass media has fused into a gross alliance with big business and big government as this election has shown more than any other. The dishonest media is rigging our democracy with a radical agenda that divides Americans and causes nothing but sensationalism and hatred at the expense of the USA. They are killing our country for ratings and profit, with impunity. How will you, as president, tackle this protected class of media elites without stepping on the first amendment rights of average Americans? (TDPE 1)

The user is expanding upon the narrative of interconnected corruption by adding mainstream media into the mix. It is not just the drive for monetary gain that influences political corruption, but ideological diffusion as well. The impact of this statement is amplified by the use of 'Trumpisms' to signify just how irredeemably corrupt and

intertwined these systems are. When early polls had indicated that Clinton was favoured to win (Katz 2016; Yourish 2016), the community had doubled down on their contingency frame:

THEY ARE PUSHING THIS "ACCEPT THE RESULT" NARRATIVE. SECOND DEBATE TO DO IT. THAT TELLS YOU RIGHT THERE IT IS RIGGED. (TDPE 3)

The characterization of an opposition with omnipotence had signified to some users the requirement of divine intervention. The Clinton campaign was evil incarnate which required salvation from a higher power. This subsequently led to a sanctification of the Trump campaign, which purported 'unchallengeable monopoly of power, ideological monism, and the obligatory and unconditional subordination of the individual and the collectivity to its code of commandments' (Colasacco, 2018: 31). This had emerged, quite explicitly, as a prayer by one user:

*Lord,
We take this moment to ask you to give grace and swiftness to Mr. Trump tonight as he takes on Mrs. Clinton. We ask for a defeat against the corrupt politicians, the corrupt moderators, and the corrupt system. Furthermore we ask that those watching who are in favor of Clinton become awoken and that their eyes are opened and turned toward the Truth, the Truth that is Mr. Trump. We pray for a win for Mr. Trump on November 8th - a win by a landslide, with no possible chance of fraud. And we pray that he arrives to Office safely, protected from the corruption, protected by your hand, the hand of God. We give thanks to you for propelling this wonderful, kind, compassionate, caring, giving, selfless human being, Donald J. Trump, to the front of the Presidential Election. And we trust that, by your word and power, Donald J Trump will be our next President of this great nation - for the betterment of us, for the betterment of our children, and for the betterment of the United States of America.*

Amen.

MAGA. (TDPE 3)

Here, the user presents Trump as a virtuous hierophant executing the will of the Lord against the corruption of Clinton, democrats, big corporations, and the media. It is also

pertinent to note that the use of MAGA supersedes the religious prayer. Despite a call to a higher power to 'deliver Trump from evil,' it is Trump's rhetoric which culminates the final remark, echoing the mannerisms of other community posts as described in the 'statements' section. While not as extreme, the idea of Trump as a being of divine importance routinely emerges, albeit, in smaller ways.

he has blessed us once again BUY PEPE (TDPE 2)

WE HAVE BEEN BLESSED BY THE 45th PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES!! (TDPE 2)

PRAISE HIM! (TDPE 2)

Nonetheless, what this processes is, is a demonstration in motivational framing. The utilization of a narrative grounded in divine intervention evokes a call to arms by drawing upon a particular emotionality grounded by religious doctrine. It simultaneously creates negative discourses and modes of understanding surrounding their political opponent. "Hillary" Clinton is crooked, she's a criminal, someone who is fundamentally evil, and threatens peace and stability.

*Dear Russia,
Most of use Americans do not want a war with you. This is something the Democratic side are pushing. Please lets not have World War III. (TDPE 4)*

Please God, let Trump win this! We need him! He will fix this world! Hillary will destroy it! Donald Trump will be our 45th President! (TDAE 1.3)

I'm so excited, but at the same time, very nervous. Me being nervous is precisely why we need Donald right now. The swamp is murky, and the creatures do not want to be exposed. I am terrified of what these crazy assholes are willing to do. (TDAE 2.1)

[...] I am VERY happy that Hillary lost and our little blue dot in the universe avoided WWII. (TDAE 3)

These simple terms invoke powerful imagery to elicit powerful emotional responses and garner support on politically complex issues and question the motivations of Clinton supporters. It is a populist form of framing which pits a virtuous “people” against nefarious, parasitic elites who seek to undermine the rightful sovereignty of the common folk” (Oliver & Rahn, 2016: 190). It simplifies arguments and removes the need for a critical response.

Of course, when the election results had been announced, the contingency frame had undergone a transformation to exemplify that the virtuous had vanquished the vile, that authenticity existed with Trump and Trump alone, and the any criticism was a false effort to delegitimize the group (See: Benford & Snow, 2000: 624). This is hardly the first time that these tactics have been utilized to facilitate political support. The presidential campaign of the Regan era articulated the same framing techniques and emotional disposition that has been prevalent in the current campaign (Jamieson & Cappella, 2010: 126). Research conducted by Jamison et al., found “The conservative message attempts to engender mistrust of the problem-solving capacity of government without converting that mistrust into a cynicism that might dampen political involvement. Attacking Democratic leaders while touting the value of engagement appears to work for Limbaugh’s audience (Conservative media outlet), which is both politically involved and confident that being politically engaged has value” (Jamieson & Cappella, 2010: 126). The result is semantic priming: the employment of a particular vocabulary that incite a negative connotation and a reason for dismissal (Jamieson & Cappella, 2010: 143). Semantic priming becomes the insulating factor in strengthening internal frames, while mitigating the impact of outside sources. A key example of frame

protection results from discrediting the validity and reliability of competing discourses from alternative media sources (Jamieson & Cappella, 2010: 143). Alternative media to the conservative outlet presents biased information with a radicalized agenda. It presents a double standard argument in which it seeks to displace and discredit opposing discourses in order to strengthen its own position.

*Finally! All of what we went through is finally coming to fruition!
 All the crooked polls.
 All the false flags and hoaxes.
 All the biased narratives.
 All of the blatant censorship and propaganda.
 All the false cries of racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.
 All the Russian boogeyman stories.
 All the patriots we've seen murdered and harassed.
 All those in the silent majority who finally had enough.
 WE FUCKING DID IT. WE MEMED OUR WAY TO OUR DREAMS!
 In short few hours, Donald J. Trump becomes the 45th President of the
 United States of America, and there isn't a damn thing any crying leftist who
 wants to undermine Trump can do about it [...] (TDAE 2.1)*

The above excerpt highlights the emergence of a new characteristic of the discursive processes; the existence of a collective identity — a commonality that binds social actors together and produces solidarity amongst the community.

1.3 Identity

Identity plays a critical role for /r/The_Donald in order establish community solidarity and to ground their political position. In an era of personalized politics, the plurality and fragmentation of memberships contribute to the degradation of social bonds which provide strength and longevity to movements (Buechler, 1995: 446). According to Beuchler, 'people's propensity to become involved in collective action is tied to their capacity to define an identity in the first place' (Buechler, 1995: 446). Thus,

the community seeks to actualize unity through interpolating each other as users using the designated monikers (Cf: Althusser, 1970).

Take this time to be proud of yourselves, centipedes³³. This is OUR day. AMERICA'S DAY. Take the time to honor the tradition of the peaceful transition of power. Also, let's see if Barry attempts to quietly pardon some certain people. kek (TDAE 2.1)

WE'RE HIS DEPLORABLES ♥ (TDPE 5)

I get all warm and fuzzy inside when the God Emperor calls us his deplorables <3 (TDPE 3)

sitting in the hospital with my son asleep cuz cancer SUCKS. Watching the election on mute and reading reddit. LOVE all you centipedes. MAGA (TDAE 1.2)

*Rex Tillerson showing he is the adult in the room #PissGate exposing the fraud called the MSM and CIA God Emperor about to speak to his Astartes Finding new shows on RSN Have the day off from work, just won a prepaid gift card for 50 bucks because I rocked it last week
Shitposting with my fellow centipedes on a chilly Wednesday morning
Today is gonna be a great day
(TDAE 5)*

Centipede here reporting from deep behind enemy lines in cuck infested Germany. The cucks are getting desperate and the media is nonstop bashing Trump (listening radio with my coworkers and every 30 minutes they are doing another hitpiece). But i still be planting the truthbombs. Our train got no Brakes!!! (TDAE 2.1)

Participation within the subreddit involves enlargement of personal identity to reify the social bonds which link otherwise unrelated and anonymous social agents (Benford & Snow, 2000: 631). Benford and Snow argue that this is a critical feature of the framing processes as they not only “link individuals and groups ideologically, but they proffer buttress, and embellish identities that range from collaborative to conflictual (2000:

³³ Identifying as 'centipedes' originates from a youtube series called 'can't stump the trump' where Trump's qualities are compared to a centipede. It valorizes trump and his supporters as being 'highly venomous' and 'nimble navigators' (Lagorio-Chafkin, 2016).

631). The moniker promotes not only unity, but signifies an explicit, antagonistic contestation to their ideological opponents. Referring themselves as ‘deplorable’ originates as a character criticism from Clinton during a fundraiser to denote the unsavoury nature of the community (Merica & Tatum, 2016). The adopted lexicon places at the forefront the social relations within the community, dichotomizing citizen deliberation into either an ‘in’ group or an ‘out’ group.

Identity is not simply ideologically grounded, but represents the personal, everyday experiences (Benford & Snow, 2000: 621). Members of The_Donald do not simply construct identity, they partake in acts of *identification* and personal expression (Freelon, 2010: 8). Community members will often engage in the populist tactic of defining ‘true’ citizens, by calling upon the stories of ‘people like me’ to exemplify the ideal in a narrative format (Bennett, 2012: 23). These are highly personalized forms of expression where personal anecdotes are used to validate narrative claims (Bennett, 2012: 23). This in part requires individuals to cast aside some of their anonymity on Reddit to personalize their statement³⁴. In the case of The_Donald, identification it is used to reaffirm the notion that the community is comprised of everyday citizens who struggle against the plight of the parasitic elite.

My name is William, and I am a Nuclear Engineering student at North Carolina State University. The Democrats have treated nuclear power horribly. Nuclear power struggles to compete in the market because of unfair subsidies placed on solar and wind energy by the Democrats. Many of our plants have been shut down, and many more are expected to close in the next 20 years. The Democrats have opposed the construction of new plants, which would create many high paying jobs in construction and engineering, [...] (TDPE 1)

³⁴ There is of course, no way to actually prove the legitimacy of their personalized claim

This user is identifying as an educated individual³⁵ who is invested in the in the future of the power industry in the United States. It juxtaposes the Democrats against the interests of future generations, and the prospect of having sustainable energy. It also suggests that support for the Republican democrat is an emerging concern amongst the millennial generation³⁶.

*Mr. Trump,
As a Police Officer and Iraq War Vet, I want to personally thank you for showing so much incredible support towards law enforcement officers and military personnel. It means a lot! [...] I want to do everything I can to support you to ensure we can MAGA! [...] Hijacking all these upvotes to say THANK YOU to everyone who is showing Police Officers support in these devastating times right now. We LOVE you and we APPRECIATE you for being so wonderful towards us! (TDPE 1)*

Here, the user is identifying as the firmly entrenched all American patriot. It links the political advocacy of Trump to the desirable characteristics of someone whom loves his country and institutions and would protect it from potential threats, whatever that may be. It also highlights the ideological positioning of the administration regarding black lives matter and blue lives matter debate, siding on the side of governmental authority.

My family has roots in eastern Ohio and it always hurts to see the pain in my parents eyes when we visit relatives and they see how their hometown has turned into a haven for drugs and criminals when the old Youngstown area steel industry collapsed due to our disastrous trade policies. The company my uncle works for is one of the few remaining gasps of what used to be one of the manufacturing powerhouses of the world but it can't make up for the devastation that occurred when sheet and tube closed down and eastern Ohio lost over a hundred thousand jobs in the aftermath. I really truly appreciate the attention the trump campaign has paid to the Youngstown area and understands that the people don't want to be brushed aside and

³⁵ It would seem pertinent to note that one of the criticisms of the trump campaign was that it glamorized anti-intellectualism.

³⁶ Reports regarding the elective demographic had pegged Trump supports as primarily middle aged and older (Bowman, 2017)

bought off with a welfare check from democrats who only pretend to care. I know for a fact that the people of east Ohio are sick of politicians who want to cover their eyes and pretend everything is great while they run the government like the mob. They want to return to what made this country so great: good jobs and safe neighborhoods for everyone. Based on conversations I've had with my family, I can safely say the former democrat stronghold of east Ohio is firmly aboard the trump train. MAGA. Excuse my grammar I'm in a phone.(TDPE 2).

This users personalization represents the culmination of the interplay between identity, narrative, and rhetoric. First, it establishes the individual as the average everyday citizen, someone who is the salt of the earth, the common folk who is established in fairly central region of the US³⁷. It also identifies the individual as a former Democrat proclaiming the willingness to swing in favour of Trump. To a passer-by, it is easily identifiable and palatable while representing anti-partisan interests. Second, it incorporates the anti-establishment narrative, wherein Democrats are framed as actively working against the interests of the average citizen. Finally, it concludes with the familiar valediction present in many other comments in order to garnish support and solidarity amongst community members.

Theme 2: Drain the Swamp

During the election, 'drain the swamp' was used to rally against the political opposition by characterizing them as dirty and corrupt, while simultaneously providing a 'solution' to the problem by eliminating them from contention. The second theme, *Drain the Swamp*, places emphasis on the strategic processes associated with social movement framing. Benford and Snow describe the process as something which is deliberative, utilitarian, and goal directed (2000: 624). Ultimately, strategic processes

³⁷ Ohio is a major swing state, and has predicted the past 6 elections.

focus on identifying the root cause of the problematization, otherwise known as “the swamp”.

2.1 The Swamp

As an advocacy campaign, /r/The_Donald seeks to influence substantial change in day to day life by directing collective action based upon the identified issues and the causes of the complications. The users routinely attempt to focus public attention to the issue at hand, shape how it is perceived by others, and establish rallying tactics against who or what is culpable (Cress & snow, 2000: 1071). The subreddit has fostered the narrative that the corrupt, interconnected agendas of the media systems, governmental agencies, and large corporations have put the democratic process in jeopardy. According to the community, Hillary Clinton represents the interest of the elite at the expense of the ‘common folk’. Thus, rallying tactics are centred around delegitimizing her campaign (Müller, 2015: 86). Populist arguments are rounded in the idea of a crisis of democracy itself (Müller, 2015: 86). This results calling into question the trustworthiness of the procedures of representative democracy (Müller, 2015: 86). In this circumstance, negative emphasis is placed on the traits, characteristics, and policies of the Clinton administration. A common criticism which emerged is the perceived *illegitimacy* of her candidacy

I still cant get over the fact that she says russia is rigging the election, but ignores VIDEO EVIDENCE OF HER RIGGING THE ELECTION (TDPE 3)

*She brings up Obama telling Trump to stop "whining".
What happened a little bit later? O'Keefe released the second video regarding voter fraud.
You lie more than you tell the truth, Hillary. You're SHAMEFUL. (TDPE 3)*

These excerpts express concern regarding Clintons authenticity as a presidential candidate. Users articulate their concern for her participation in democratic processes by drawing upon controversies which occurred during the Democratic primary race. It puts forth the idea that Clinton represents a threat to the core principles of democracy. Furthermore, community members posit the idea that she is not only willing to subvert the voting process, but that she is willing to lie to cover her tracks and project her own unethical approach in an attempt to delegitimize the competition. Indeed, users have gone so far as to even accuse Clinton of attempting to sabotage Trump rallies, an action they believe warrants acknowledgement from the opposition. During the final debate, one user comments: “She didn't even deny sending people to his rallies” (TDPE 3). By focusing on the alleged illegitimacy of Clinton’s nomination, declawing the accusation of foreign meddling, and claiming that she is willing to use these tactics to attack Trump, users are able to strengthen the narrative that Trump represents the interest of the common folk, while Clinton works for the interests of the elite.

This dichotomy is exemplified on issues regarding intercommunication between the democratic political party, and members of the civic sphere.

During your rapid fire Press Q&A this morning, you mentioned the hundreds of days it's been since Hillary's last press conference.

What do you think is/are the reason(s) for Hillary refusing to hold any press conferences for such a huge amount of time?

follow up,

Do you think Hillary will attempt to decrease the number of times she has to debate you like she did to Bernie during the Democratic Primary, or even avoid debating you altogether like she's avoided press conferences altogether this year? (TDPE 1)

Here, the user is highlighting Clintons inability or unwillingness to engage in the process of political deliberation. It brings into question her *character* as a presidential candidate by indicting the tumultuous relationship she holds not only with the political sphere, but with the public at large. Furthermore, by directing the criticism of Clinton towards Trumps AMA, it serves to contrast each candidate; one who is presented as refusing to engage with anyone, and one who is actively reaching out to the community. The characteristic of being unwilling to engage in fair and open deliberation isn't specific to Clinton but as something being rampant within her entire administration. During the vice presidential debate, Kaine is framed as being borderline uncivil:

Kaine is just interrupting everything Pence says after Pence respectfully lets Kaine answer. Fuck this cuck (TDPE 5)

Kaine pisses me off with how much he whines, cuts off pence, and just overall looks stumped. (TDPE 5)

In addition to legitimacy, other users seek to underscore issues regarding her *competency* as a former secretary of defence:

It's great that a Benghazi survivor is on the guest list but I wonder if it would have been more powerful to have an empty chair with a portrait of Chris Stevens on it. Preferably next to Huma. Oh wait, she'll be in the van outside feeding hrod17 synonyms for "racist" into her earpiece. (TDPE 2)

The above statement puts forth three propositions regarding why Clinton wouldn't be able to effectively govern. The first suggests that Clinton's inability to prevent the Benghazi attack in 2012³⁸ (See: CNN, 2013) is indicative of her potential to manage governmental agencies. Furthermore it suggests that the presence of survivors should pose as a reminder of the grievous missteps regarding previous incidents and could be

³⁸ Clinton had claimed responsibility for the diplomats security during the attacks (Labott, 2012)

indicative of potential future issues. The second issue brings forth recent scandals regarding Clinton's private email servers³⁹. It brings forth issues of national security and echoes the previous criticism regarding governmental mismanagement. The final criticism takes issue with Clinton's deliberative strategies. It suggests that she is not only unable to debate political opponents herself, but that her only viable strategies are ad hominem attacks.

In a more policy driven vein, members of the community have been skeptical of the effectiveness or morality of some of Clinton's policies. Some users have mocked the idea that that Clinton's proposed economic policies would not result in an increased deficit. Others have weighed in on the abortion debate, suggesting that unless Clinton advocates for children at conception, her concern for them is ambiguous and morally questionable.

*"I will not add a penny to the debt" - Hillary Clinton
RemindMe! 1 year (TDPE 3)*

Hillary doesn't want the toddlers to die, but if they're still in the womb she doesn't care. (TDPE 3)

Of course, there are users who suggest that Clinton's administration is devoid of any substantial policy at all, and thus unable to even engage in debate with the Trump administration:

*Do you guys see this?
All Clinton and Kaine have left are Taxes, Miss Universe, Fat Rosie, and Illegals. They can't stomp us with policy issues, so they are taking cheap shots. That means Trump and Pence have to continue to stay on policy and they got this in the bag <3 (TDPE 5)*

"If you're afraid to have the discussion you'll never solve it." You mean like Radical Islamic Terrorism Kaine? (TDPE 5)

³⁹ hrod17 was a user account on Clintons private email server.

The second excerpt takes this idea further and postulates that not only does the administration have no insight regarding certain issues such as '*radical islamic terrorism*,' but also that they are either *unwilling or afraid* to discuss these issues framed as pertinent by the community.

2.2 *The Trump administration as the solution*

The path to inciting change is simple and concise; wherein Clinton represents the embodiment of the degradation of the democratic ideals, the solution is to keep her out of politics by voting for Trump. Here, discourse revolves around the idealization, embellishment, clarification, and/or the invigoration of existing rhetoric (Benford & Snow, 2000: 624). Comments thus revolve around Trump's demeanour towards opposition and authority, which issues the administration have problematized and how he compares to other administrations, and the embellishment of perceived positive characteristics.

When compared to Clinton, Trump is routinely projected as a hero with the duty to vanquish a villain. Discourse surrounding their interaction is focused less on the deliberative aspect of political engagement, and more on the *execution* of an animal.

GIVE HER HELL!!! (TDPE 3)

GIVE HER HELL DONALD (TDPE 2)

Destroy her. (TDPE 3)

👉 •_👈 ***TAKE MY HIGH ENERGY*** 👉 •_👈 ***PUT 'ER TO REST TONIGHT FOR GOOD*** (TDPE 2)

SLAY THE BEAST (TDPE 2)

“JUST ANOTHER LIE” KILL SHOT. There it is folks. (TDPE 3)

As exhibited above, users engage in acts of hostility and overt aggression while simultaneously engaging in dehumanization. The ultimate solution for the community is advocating for the metaphorical murder of their political opponent. Indeed, users seem to revel in situations which are unfavourable or demeaning to Clinton. Sarcastic and curt responses by Trump during the debates are often parroted by members of the community to exemplify the characteristics they deem desirable.

"Cause you'd be in jail" WOWOWOWOWOEKELEKEKSKSK (TDPE 4)

Hillary: "I think it's a good thing we don't have a person with the temperament of Donald as president-"

Donald: "Because you'd be in jail."

THIS IS SUCH A GREAT DAY (TDPE 4)

BECAUSE YOU'D BE IN JAIL (TDPE 4)

BECAUSE YOU'D BE IN JAIL JESUS FUCK THE MADMAN (TDPE 4)

"Hillary does Mr. Trump have what it takes to be a good leader?"

"No."

"I'm shocked to hear that." LIVE SHITPOSTING, FOLKS (TDPE 4)

"I'm shocked to hear that." Imfao Trump has NO CHILL today, just PURE ENERGY (TDPE 4)

Here, users applaud the practice of incivility against Clinton, while crowing Trump's willingness to prosecute the opposition. The demeanour that Trump exhibits reiterates and seemingly legitimizes the community's position regarding their regard for political opponents. Regurgitating these responses signifies to others that their position is both reasonable and capable of success (See: Jiménez-Moya et al., 2018). Furthermore, users seek to exemplify the idea that Clinton's vilification and Trump's heroism are

supported by the broader public, as evidenced by audience interaction throughout the debates, as well as the election result:

**AUDIENCE DOESN'T CLAP A SECOND DURING CLINTON'S RANT
TRUMP BRINGS UP FBI AND DOJ COLLUSION AND THEY APPLAUD
FUCKIN' A** (TDPE 3)

BUSH OUTDATED 🤔 OBAMA OVERRATED 😞 HILARY ELIMINATED 🤖
TRUMP INAUGURATED 🐸 AMERICA ELATED ✓ (TDAE 1.1)

Elsewhere, users will engage in forms of clarification, articulating why they believe their candidate is justified by comparing the Trump campaign to other administrations and institutions. One notable event occurred during the Pence/Kaine debate:

Notice how Pence lets Kaine say what he wants to say, and waits his turn to respond? Meanwhile Kaine interrupts Pence the entire time, and talks over Pence. Pence is a class act, Kaine on the other-hand... (TDPE 5)

Pence is interrupted by Kaine. His response. "I forgive you" DON'T WE JUST HAVE THE BEST VP FOLKS. COOL AND LEVEL HEADED! (TDPE 5)

Here, users (paradoxically) present Pence as the ideal candidate by virtue of his civility, while Kaine is criticized for his impertinence. This purely oppositional dynamic is replicated and reiterated throughout every instance of contestation, and postulates the idea that no alternative is capable of achieving morally desirable results.

Most of the world's other 'leaders' are now shitting their pants because now the world will see what a true leader that WORKS HIS ASS OFF FOR HIS COUNTRY really can do. "Oh shit we actually have to work now" - other world leaders (TDAE 2.1)

Doubling down on everything he said during his campaign, in DC were the corruption is suppose to take hold... The Don may be the most forthcoming and honest presidents this great nation has ever had. It will be a wild four(eight) years, but I've never had more hope than right now as a young up and coming American. (TDAE 2.2)

Obama refused to say radical islamic terror for 8 years. President Trump didn't wait 5 minutes. MAGA (TDAE 2.2)

Eradicate. Islamic. Terrorism. From. The. Face. Of. The. Earth. (TDAE 2.2)

The first excerpt echoes pro-nationalist rhetoric (See: Oliver & Rahn, 2016), purporting unequivocal leadership by Trump when contrasted to geopolitical leaders and their presumed incompetence. The second excerpt contrasts the ideological differences between the current and previous administrations while utilizing the virtuous/villainous narrative. Here, the user expresses cathartic relief in the prospect of administrative change. Indeed, administrative comparisons have been a major focal point for the community, especially regarding policy⁴⁰.

Finally, users will often utilize embellishment, wherein community members will exaggerate the quality and the characteristics of their supported candidate. This is often used to inflate the appearance of support in response to any potential stigmatization that might occur due to their beliefs and/or values in conflict with the dominant culture's core values⁴¹ (Benford & Snow, 2000: 624).

Omggg God emperor! MAGA ALL THE WAY FROM INDIA (TDPE2)

1st !!!! GOOD LUCK MR. TRUMP! OR SHOULD I SAY, PRESIDENT TRUMP
(TDPE 2)

KING OF THE NORTH (TDPE 2)

HOLY MOTHER OF JESUS THAT SPEECH WAS FUCKING BEAUTIFUL
(TDAE 2.2)

Fantastic speech! (TDAE 2.2)

"Does anyone believe that Hillary would be tougher on Putin than me?"
I LOVE THIS MAN (TDAE 5)

⁴⁰ Refer to section 2.1: The swamp

⁴¹ Refer to Chapter 4: Theoretical Framework: Locating publics within Reddit.

The TRUMP is KING! I so wish at this moment that I was born an American, because this man makes me proud. (TDAE 5)

He FUCKING DESTROYED the entire establishment in one speech.
(TDAE 2.2)

Here, users engage in acts of embellishment through inflation of status. Trump is routinely displayed as someone with royal disposition, who yields the undying admiration of his users through his speeches.

Theme 3: Build the [Digital] Wall

The election saw an resurgence of populist rhetoric, where anti-expertise, anti-establishment, and nationalist ideology took discursive precedence (Oliver & Rahn, 2016: 189). Indeed, the election was arguably built upon an oppositional mentality, where nativists rallied to protect the interests of the homeland against those who are seen to threaten it (Oliver & Rahn, 2016: 191). As such, Trump's claim to 'build a wall' became a major policy point which supporters rallied around. Considering the wall is designed to separate social groups, it seemed pertinent to name the theme after this contentious approach to describe how the community engages in contested processes. While the mechanical underpinnings will be explored in greater detail in the discussion section, /r/The_Donald, has displayed discursive patterns indicative of the community being highly rigid, and militantly exclusive (Benford & Snow, 2000: 618). Framing for the populist and conservative advocacy group is often used as a form of insulation for ideology (Jamieson & Cappella, 2010: 140). While members of the community gravitate towards their specific political biases, there remains outside influences exerted from most mainstream media outlets (Jamieson & Cappella, 2010: 140). Contestation is dealt with through segregation, isolation, and hostility. Populism

purports to gain its legitimacy through its 'pars pro toto' argument: that only they represent the authentic, proper and morally pure people (Müller, 2015: 84). They create a political sphere in which policy cannot be questioned as doing such would be erroneous. Thus, discourse emerges that favourably views the community, and that is exclusively antagonistic towards other communities.

3.1 Antagonistic towards others

Representation plays a pivotal role in the way populist ideology frames issues. As stated earlier in the thesis, issues are antagonistically defined between 'the common folk' and the political powers of the social elite (Bos & Brants, 2014: 706). Thus, moral justness can only be attributed to a certain class of represented people (Oliver & Rahn, 2016: 191). That is not to say that populists are not accepting of representativeness, so long as the right kinds of representation represent the right people, and exhibit the right kind of judgement (Müller, 2015: 84). For /r/The_Donald, authentic representation can only exist within its own community. Other communities, especially ones which may represent alternative interests and viewpoints, are often met with hostile aggression.

FUCK CNN FUCK R/Politics FUCK R/HillaryClinton FUCK ALL OF YOU ASSHOLES WHO MADE US FEEL LIKE WE WERE INFERIOR AND CENSORED US!!!!A BIG FUCK YOU GOES OUT TO CTR. I HOPE THE MONEY WAS WORTH SELLING OUT AND PRETENDING TO SUPPORT A CROOKED CORRUPT POLITICIAN WHO PANDERS CONSTANTLY, CLAIMS TO BE FOR WOMAN AND GAY RIGHTS WHILE BEING BUTT BUDDIES WITH THE MIDDLE EAST, AND IS INCOMPETENT BEYOND BELIEF EAT A FAT FUCKING DICK (TDAE 1.4)

*[...] We took so many hits. From the bull shit liberal media, to even fucking Reddit censoring the truth from us. **WE HAD ALL THE ODDS AGAINST US.** But guess what? **WE FUCKING WON. FUCK [redacted]**, and FUCK all of those that doubted us. I'm sure we can all recount the hundreds--if not thousands--of people who called us idiots, racists, misogynists, or whatever else. They are all eating their words now, and it has never been more glorious, my friends [...]* (TDAE 1.1)

Here, users explicitly call out the communities that have been regarded as ideologically opposed to their own. The first except uses the opportunity to (vulgarly) apply the narrative that these social spaces advocate for the interest of the elite rather than authentic citizens. The second except engages in counter-framing to contest criticisms regarding the communities display of racists and misogynistic behaviour. It argues that the criticisms were rendered illegitimate by virtue of the electoral process. Furthermore, it highlights community relations between /r/The_Donald, and the Reddit administration.

The subreddit has often claimed censorship at the hands of the administration due to their contentious and often unethical practices. Following issues of brigading by /r/The_Donald in order to artificially inflate visibility on Reddits front page, the algorithm was altered in order to mitigate future abuse by any subreddit (Lecher, 2016). As such, the community has been sure to highlight the conflict as a way to frame the administration (and subsequently any who may represent similar interests as them) as exemplifying the narrative of being anti-democratic.

Strange that this AMA isn't on r/all... (TDPE 1)

REDDIT, CROOKED ADMINS JUST REMOVED THIS THREAD FROM /r/ALL AND THE FRONT PAGE

*Edit: THIS POST WAS **LOCKED** TO PREVENT VISIBILITY AND REPLIES!*

Edit2: THEY JUST UNLOCKED IT SECONDS AFTER MY FIRST EDIT! DAMAGE CONTROL MODE!

*Edit3: **LOCKED AGAIN** THIS JUST KEEPS GETTING BETTER!*

Edit4: Schroedinger's lock: This post is in a superposition of being both locked AND unlocked depending on the admins' appetite for censorship.

Edit5: 10,782 Upvotes and NOWHERE to be found on reddit unless you manually navigate here. (TDPE 1)

Paradoxically, the community also exhibited interest in protecting that AMA from the influence of the broader social sphere:

For this AMA we have temporarily taken extra security measures to keep our community free from troublemakers. We built the wall 10 ft taller, you might say. Comments from brand new accounts are among those that will be removed by the automoderator. Accounts that are less than 30 days old AND that have less than 500 combined karma are ineligible and their comments will be automatically removed. Public figures who support Trump may circumvent this by sending me a private message that includes a link to their verified twitter profile, then following us on twitter (@theDonaldReddit). Please note that the rules of this subreddit DO apply (see our sidebar) and that our moderators will be strictly enforcing our rules during the AMA. Those who are not eligible to post at /r/The_Donald may still ask questions over at /r/AskTrumpSupporters. (TDPE 1)

Through this interaction, it becomes evident that the community wants ideological diffusion across the social network, while protecting their sanctity and purity. The interest of the community takes precedence over the potential for site-wide civic deliberation.

3.2 Favourable towards the community

In contrast to the antagonistic relationship towards other subreddits and communities, /r/The_Donald often prioritizes and embellishes its own content. This is concerned less with *how* the discourse manifests, and more with *where* the discourse is coming from. Comments and posts prioritize individuals who are emblematic of community ideals. Rhetoric plays a prominent role, as it is able to signify to other members their desire to embrace those ideals. Of course, this occurs in circumstances where the public is utilized for the purpose of intercommunicative engagement. Popular discussion is often dominated by prominent political figures. For example, prior to the election, all five top posts were instigated by Donald Trump's official Reddit account.

During his AMA, the top voted question was not from an anonymous community member, but by Milo Yiannopoulos, a prominent journalist and former senior editor for Breitbart News.

When discourse does emerge, it's in the form of articulating how /r/The_Donald represents the ideal democratic principles, a virtue which has routinely been argued as being absent in other civic spaces.

GUYS NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS I WANT YOU EACH TO KNOW THAT EVERY SINGLE ONE OF YOU ARE WONDERFUL HUMAN BEINGS THIS HAS BEEN MY BEST EXPERIENCE ON THE INTERNET IN MY WHOLE LIFE, AND I WANT ALL 60k OF YOU THAT ARE ON RIGHT NOW TO KNOW THAT. IT IS TRULY BEAUTIFUL TO SEE SO MANY STRANGERS JOIN TOGETHER FOR A COMMON GOAL. JUST REMEMBER WE CAN GET HIM IN OFFICE, WE CAN DO ANYTHING!!! (TDAE 4)

If you would have told me I would have watched the AG hearing for our country at any point of my life I would have laughed for ages. Thank you t_D and everyone for showing how important politics are and getting all of us involved! MAGA (TDAE 4)

Healthy political discourse will allow frames and ideologies to openly compete against one another, allowing for critical examination of social issues. The irony of conveying political affiliation through social media is that members may willingly isolate themselves within their own echo chambers (Jamieson & Cappella, 2010: 83). They will actively engage and filter information based upon personalization and preference limits rather than the potential discourse actually being discussed (Jamieson & Cappella, 2010: 82). Research conducted by Jamison et al., indicates that individuals will engage in selective exposures; that those who hold inclination to conservative disposition will actively seek out and exclusively consume that particular form of media (Jamieson & Cappella, 2010: 83). What individualized politics have stirred in the era of digital mobilization is the ability to specify what information they are willing to consume, what

conforms to their personal viewpoint, and what strengthens their social identity (Jamieson & Cappella, 2010: 84). Closed communication systems, which may be indicative of highly controlled or moderated subreddits such as /r/The_Donald, prove to be univocal and homogenized in nature, closing themselves off from competing discourse (Jamieson & Cappella, 2010: 85). Those who engage in this highly specialized form of information acquisition will exhibit higher degrees of aggression towards out-group members (Jamieson & Cappella, 2010: 84). This is not to say that there is a lack of education of information around to combat faulty logic, or political inconsistencies. However, through information filtering, discourse that supports particular world views IS seen to be authentic, while competing discourse is dismissed if unable to be reconciled (Jamieson & Cappella, 2010: 68). Through constant support networks, critical thinking has been used to only justify personal biases; opinions are very rarely changed (Jamieson & Cappella, 2010: 68). While providing a plethora of options available for users to engage with multiple topics, /r/The_Donald allows users to customize their experience; to filter intake. Oppositional discourse simply isn't consumed.

VII. DISCUSSION

To reiterate, this thesis seeks to examine the extent to which political discussion on the social news aggregate website Reddit facilitates the conditions of a public sphere and fosters democratic communicative characteristics. While the thematic analysis has provided insight regarding the discourse that manifested during the 2016 presidential election, as well as the messages and knowledge created in the public space, this thesis has yet to discern how these publics are produced, how consensus is achieved and if it is democratic and inclusive. In order to determine how public spheres are produced, if at all, an analysis is required of the preconditions and contexts that allow discussion to emerge in the first place. Thus, each subreddit's communicative structure must be assessed for the existence of the normatively maintained and universalistic principles of argumentation; the rhetorical level of processes, the dialectical level of procedures, and the logical level of products (Habermas, 1984: 25). All three of these levels must be analyzed and taken together to determine cogency, "as at no single one of these analytic levels can the very idea intrinsic to argumentative speech be adequately developed" (Habermas, 1984: 26).

The Rhetorical Level of Processes

The Ideal Speech Situation on Reddit

To discuss the ideal speech situation is to discuss the preconditions of argumentation itself. It is concerned with the potential boundaries that may restrict civic participation, and the conditions that may limit or censor the flow of communication and potential emergent knowledge. Here, I seek to address how publics are *produced*, and to determine if they are democratic and inclusive. The

conditions for an ideal speech situation must be analyzed at the fundamental level in addition to each subreddit.

Rule 1.1 Unconditional participation

While more ubiquitous than ever before, there remains a digital divide in society (Harris et al., 2017: 1). Globally, affluent countries have a substantially higher rate of digital access in comparison to developing countries (Harris et al., 2017: 1). Nationally, individuals in major urban hubs are far more likely to have access to computers and the internet than their regional or remote counterparts. Furthermore, there is evidence that socioeconomic status place a substantial role in the type of access available, as well as how individuals experience and communicate on the web (Harris et al., 2017: 1). Any research regarding the capability for a democratic and inclusive public space on the web, must recognize the barriers which exist to limit that potential. However, this does not mean that we should disregard the prospect altogether. Simply, we should recognize that these barriers are imposed externally to the sphere in question. While this may only leave us with the potential for a digital public sphere, we are still able to discern its democratic capacity. Thus, if a sphere is able to actualize its potential with its limited capabilities, then we could infer that its democratic process would only become more influential as equitable accessibility continues to grow.

As far as digital publics are concerned, there are fewer sites which are as unrestricted and easily accessible as Reddit. Anyone is able create a Reddit account, and unlike Facebook or Twitter, they aren't required to provide an email address (Anderson, 2015: 8). So long as a user is willing to create an account, they are given

access to any and all subreddits where the community has not restricted access. If a user wishes to partake in conversations on /r/Politics, they are able to do so without hindrance. /r/The_Doanld differs only in that it requires users to subscribe to the subreddit in order to partake in voting. Subscribing requires an individual to hit the 'subscribe' button on the subreddit. Thus, the website and the subreddits fulfil condition 1.1 in the ideal speech situation.

Rule 1.2 Unrestrictive discussion

As a company and social media web platform, Reddit has articulated that it aligns itself with the ethos of free speech (Chen, 2012). Despite priding itself on facilitating unrestricted discussion, there are some notable exceptions in which they reserve the right to take punitive action. As stated earlier, the content policy prohibits posts concerning illegal material, involuntary pornography, sexual or explicit material involving minors, encouraging or inciting violence, which threatens, harasses, or bullies, which provides personal and confidential information of others, and impersonates others, as well as behaviour which engages in vote manipulation, breaks the website, or creates multiple accounts for the sole purpose of evading punishments and avoiding restrictions (Reddit Content Policy).

If we were to take an uncritical approach to rule 1.2, it would appear that these limitations would fail to live up to the ideal speech situation. However we need to remember that Habermas' theory takes a pragmatic approach insofar that unrestricted free speech harbours its own conditions (Habermas, 1990: 91). What the Reddit policy seeks to address is content that is illegal, and conversation that jeopardizes civic deliberation; most of which can be regarded as hate speech. Communicative freedom

is not an inherent aspect to communication. According to Habermas, "Communicative freedom exists only between actors who, adopting a performative attitude, want to reach an understanding with one another about something and expect one another to take positions on reciprocally raised validity claims" (1996: 119). He argues that some forms of discourse range from the exercise of social power, to sheer domination and can be a reflection of social violence (Wright, 2000: 1009). Such forms of discourse are not devised to inspire or engage in broader public conviction (Wright, 2000: 1012). Furthermore, they are not developed to persuade or even reinforce the views of racists/misogynists/xenophobes who may be audience to the conversation (Wright, 2000: 1012). Indeed, it is not developed to persuade *anyone*, including the speaker, but used to oppress and dissuade discourse altogether (Wright, 2000: 1012). The point of the speech is to degrade, to inflict pain, to cause anxiety, and in the process, place the speakers group in a position of domination over the victim (Wright, 2000: 1012). The ideal speech situation requires symmetry and reciprocity of the basic notions of equal treatment and general welfare in order to strive towards a mutual understanding (Wright, 2000: 1013). One can even go so far as to make the logical step that an absolute approach to free speech may result in the degradation of open discourse altogether. In such circumstances, taking actions against such discourse is not only justifiable, it is required for the continued existence of democratic deliberation. Therefore, the content policy is justified, and the conditions for an ideal speech situation remain undisturbed.

In addition, Reddit also articulates its own code of ethical behaviour, known as 'reddiquette' ([reddit.com/wiki/reddiquette](https://www.reddit.com/wiki/reddiquette)). While this delineates what is deemed to be

acceptable conduct within the social space, aside from the unethical practice which overlaps with the content policy, most of it is non-blinding. What this essentially amounts to, is the establishment of moral social norms which seek to orient *behaviour* towards mutual understanding and to regulate controversial social matters (Habermas, 1969: 92; Habermas, 1990: 67). Moral norms are considered justifiable to Habermas, if they are deemed to be consensual by active participants and coincide with the principles of the ideal speech situation and communicative rationality (Habermas, 1990: 67). The social norms that exist on Reddit may be considered consensual, as users must agree to these conditions before signing up on the website. Thus, we can make the argument that the content policy does not infringe on rule 1.2 as well.

Having its own established rules in addition to the content policy provided by Reddit, /r/Politics operates slightly differently in regard to unrestrictive discussion. There are a number of conditions which limit what is allowed to be said in the public space. The first, and obvious instance, concerns itself with sub-clause B and the communities topical focus. Post submission is only permitted insofar as it is related to news and discussion regarding American politics⁴² (See: Fig 3). Anything outside of the purview of the subreddit is either removed, or relegated to the appropriate space. Once again, this is a condition which is largely unproblematic with Habermas' ideal speech situation. We must remember that each subreddit represents a part of a larger public space. There is an almost limitless selection of subreddits dedicated to even the most esoteric of topics. Furthermore, if a topic doesn't have a dedicated subreddit, users are free to create it. The purpose for demarcating subreddits has less to do with limiting

⁴² This isn't limited to internal relations; it simply means that the US has to be a factor in the discussed article. International issues are frequently discussed on the subreddit.

discussion, but to expand and diversify it. This allows all topics to flourish without being overshadowed by others, as well as facilitate the ability to maintain coherency and continuity⁴³. Thus, if someone wanted to discuss Canadian political events for example, they would navigate towards /r/CanadaPolitics. This limitation is acceptable, so long as it does not determine what kind of *opinions* are allowed to be formed, as that would amount to what Habermas calls "manipulated publicity" (Habermas, 1991: 178). Indeed, anyone is able to question any assertion, so long as it does not conflict with the content policy established by Reddit. Having deduced that prior example does not infringe upon this rule, we should see no reason why it would here. A more irreconcilable issue emerges regarding sub-clause C, and submission requirements. As indicated from Fig. 3, users may only submit posts which have an accompanied news article. The title of the submitted post must be an exact replication of the headline from the article. Furthermore, it must be an article within the past month, it must be written in English, and it can only be from whitelisted domains. Finally, there are a number of disallowed posts, such as satirical posts, links that solicit users, links to social media, personal blogs, and political advertisements ([reddit.com/r/politics/wiki/index](https://www.reddit.com/r/politics/wiki/index)). This sets clear limitations regarding how individuals are able to express themselves, what kind of material they are allowed to use to start a discussion, as well as a temporal decay which limits discussion on certain topics⁴⁴. Furthermore, requiring submissions to only be submitted in English is nebulous — Habermas has argued that engaging in the processes of civic deliberation requires communicative competence (1984: X). Not

⁴³ The theoretical basis supporting this position is explicated in greater detail with rule 2.2 in the Dialectical Level of Procedures.

⁴⁴ It should be clarified this concerns post submission only; comments are not bound to these stipulations.

simply about the fundamental rules required to master a language, universal pragmatics requires that individuals are able to identify and reconstruct universal conditions for mutual understanding and testing validity claims, which is vindicated through language itself⁴⁵ (Habermas, 1979: 1). To an extent, requiring a standardized language allows these validity claims to manifest consistently. However, even if the purpose is to create a universal standard that is applicable from post to post in order to maximize orderliness, it creates the potential for barriers to emerge which could limit an individuals ability to participate in the public space. Unlike the conditions which excuse the removal of hate speech, these additional stipulations do not exist to protect the sphere from degradation of civic deliberation. While these conditions may exist to strengthen the quality of discussion, it enforces restrictions which does infringe upon sub-clause C.

In contrast to the Reddit administration, and /r/Politics, /r/The_Donald fails to uphold any of the sub-clauses in rule 1.2. This failure stems from the way their topical focus is constructed. Some explanation is required; unlike the acceptable limitations as outlined in the analysis of /r/Politics, the focus is not simply about Trump, but the explicit *support* for Trump. Thus, conditions are established which shape what kind of opinions and ideas are permitted within the social space. The formation of the public space serves the manipulation of the public through its legitimation in which critical publicity is supplanted by manipulative publicity (Habermas, 1991: 178). This is evident by Fig. 4, in which any dissenting opinion or discussion which is deemed unfavourable to the community may result in punitive action. This threat was reiterated during

⁴⁵ Communicative competence is explicated in greater detail in The Dialectical Level of Procedures

Trump's AMA by the administrative team to stress ideological homophily (See Fig. 5) and following the event had revealed that they deleted 2200 comments (See Fig. 6). Thus, assertions which may be anti-Trump are explicitly prohibited. Assertions which may question the ideological leanings of the community are also prohibited. Any and all assertions which may challenge the community is relegated to their satellite public, /r/asktrumpsupporters, in order to dissuade and shut down oppositional discourse altogether (See Fig. 7). As a result, there is substantial limitation regarding a participants ability to express their attitudes, desires, and needs.

Rule 1.3 Free from coercion and oppression

A major focal point for the ideal speech situation, is that no speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising their rights as laid down in 1.1 and 1.2. Coercion, by Reddit, comes at the hand of the enforcement of their content policy. Here, Reddit reserves the right to ask the user to knock off the prohibited behaviour, lest they be subjected to temporary or permanent suspension of accounts, removal of privileges, adding restrictions to accounts, adding restrictions to Reddit communities, the removal of content, or the banning of Reddit communities (Reddit Content Policy). Such a policy is implicated to dissuade participants from engaging in activity that is harmful to others, and which may disrupt and degrade deliberative discussion. There is some concern that requesting users to consent to being subjected to these conditions may influence the type of conversation which can manifest. However, if we accept the provisional understanding that justifies the existence of the content policy as an acceptable condition, then we should therefore be able to accept the enforcement policies that seek to dissuade individuals from

engaging in that type of behaviour in the first place. Indeed, there exists a moral and logical argument for taking action against hateful and violent behaviour. According to Popper, unconditional tolerance of intolerant behaviour will lead to the degradation of civil debate altogether:

“Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them. In this formulation, *I do not imply, for instance, that we should always suppress the utterance of intolerant philosophies*; as long as we can counter them by rational argument and keep them in check by public opinion, suppression would certainly be most unwise. But we should claim the *right* to suppress them if necessary even by force; for it may easily turn out that they are not prepared to meet us on the level of rational argument, but begin by denouncing all argument; they may forbid their followers to listen to rational argument, because it is deceptive, and teach them to answer arguments by the use of their fists or pistols. We should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant. We should claim that any movement preaching intolerance places itself outside the law, and we should consider incitement to intolerance and persecution as criminal, in the same way as we should consider incitement to murder, or to kidnapping, or to the revival of the slave trade, as criminal”. (1943: 226)⁴⁶

In this circumstance, provisional action is not only justified, it is required in order to maintain the open conditions of civic deliberation. Historically, Reddit has manifested these conditions, allowing the community discourse to continue, only to intervene on individual cases of racist/misogynistic/xenophobic remarks (See: Statt, 2018) and only once the deliberative space has become irrevocably compromised (See: Ohlheiser, 2016). Thus, we can make the argument that Reddit does not infringe on rule 1.3 as well.

⁴⁶ Much of Habermas work on the ontology of communicative rationality is derived from Karl Popper. Thus it would seem theoretically sound to use Popper as justification for the current application of rule 1.3.

Concerning /r/Politics, the additional subreddit rules that restrict and confine expressive freedom come with the threat of punitive action. Submission posts that infringe upon these rules are often removed by administrators; those who tamper with the procedures of authentic debate are at risk of being banned from the social space, pending an appeal (Such as producing spam, and undisclosed employment). As this may be seen as exercising power in order to shape how discussion forms, we may initially deem this as coercive in nature. However in order to have an accurate analysis, a stronger understanding is required regarding the nature of individualized subreddit rules. To reiterate, subreddits are permitted to establish their own code of conduct in addition to the policies mandated by Reddit. Often, these stipulations result in unique ‘cultural’ developments which shape specific language traits, conventions, rules, expectations and rituals (See: Massanari, 2015; Robards, 2018). These uniquely constructed requirements may be regarded a social ethos that seeks to orient the behaviour of community members. Thus, we may see them not simply as rules to abide by, but as the *social norms* that seek to regulate controversial social matters, establish the conditions for internal coherency, and direct action towards mutual understanding (Habermas, 1990: 67). All social interaction is governed by these binding consensual norms that establish reciprocal expectations about behaviour⁴⁷ (Habermas, 1969: 92). It becomes a part of the validity claim of normative rightness, the “totality of the legitimately regulated interpersonal relationships of a social group” (Habermas, 1990: 58) In this circumstance, infringement may be seen as deviant behaviour that warrants sanctions connected to pre established rules (Habermas, 1969: 92). While there are

⁴⁷ It is important to note that regardless of what social norms may exist, they must not infringe on the universal pragmatic norms of the ideal speech situation and communicative rationality (Habermas, 1990: 97).

repercussions towards violating the social norms of /r/Politics, they do not exhibit characteristics of coercion, as opinion formation and open publicity remain untouched.

As Habermas would argue, every speaker who applies a predicate to an object must be prepared to apply the same predicate to all other enacts resembling that original object in all relevant aspects (1990: 87). Thus, a consistent analysis would dictate that the subreddit guidelines that manifest on /r/The_Donald also warrant the classification of social norms. However, social norms do not make subreddit policies ethical *de jure*, but more aptly, rational justification, in which the course of action gives accord for persons in general (Bohman & Rehg, 2017). These moral norms are valid only insofar as they facilitate the interests and value-orientations of *each individual* and can be *jointly* accepted by *all* concerned without *coercion* (Bohman & Rehg, 2017). The definitive factor which defines the difference between social norms, and coercive oppression derive from their ability to uphold the ideal speech situation and communicative rationality (Habermas, 1990: 67). As indicated through the analysis of rule 1.2, /r/The_Donald doesn't simply orient behaviour, it regulates community opinion, amounting to manipulated publicity (Habermas, 1991: 178). Thus, these policies that administer disciplinary, or more accurately, *retaliatory* action, may be seen as coercive *despite* them existing as the communities social norms. The_Donald therefore violates the conditions of rule 1.3.

The Dialectical Level of Procedures

To discuss the processes of communicative rationality is to understand how individuals come to a mutual consensus by redeeming reciprocal validity claims. Here I seek to understand how publics are *maintained* and *reproduced* through the discourse

of everyday interaction, as well as to understand how consensus is achieved. This section will analyze if the conversation that manifested on each subreddit was oriented towards a mutual understanding, if the social actors were communicatively competent, and if they had the capacity to redeem or reject validity claims.

Oriented Towards a Mutual Understanding

It should seem reasonable to assume that if actors are oriented towards a mutual understanding, their utterances will reflect that. Such forms of communication will exercise transparency in order to initiate and sustain debate (Heng & Moor, 2003: 334). Social actors will thus exhibit the discourse of well-grounded arguments over authority, tradition, ideology, power, or prejudice (Heng & Moor, 2003: 334). It is important to note that it may not always be clear when someone may wish to argue communicatively, as public debate is not always steered by reason (Heng & Moor, 2003: 334). Indeed, not everyone in a public space will be willing to engage in authentic deliberation, nor should we assume so. There will always be individuals who elect to refuse reciprocal argumentation despite all intents, purposes, and provided evidence. Indeed, we must be cognizant of the fact that some individuals will utilize digital publics as a means to incite hatred, disrupt smooth discussion or to outright sabotage it (Heng & Moor, 2003: 334). Rather, what we can hope to achieve is that the *majority* of a public space is oriented towards mutual understanding and is not alienated by the excess of information and communication (Heng & Moor, 2003: 334). As discussed in the literature review, Dahlberg posits the idea that we can understand online communication in three distinct ways. It may be liberal-individualistic, wherein an individual's focus lies with their own political positions and expression of personal

interests (Dalhberg, 2001: 616). It may be communitarian based, where emphasis is placed on communal spirit and intra-communication over intercommunication (Dalhberg, 2001: 616). Finally, it may be deliberative, where individuals seek to engage in argumentation with each other (Dalhberg, 2001: 616). While theoretically useful, it does not provide the tools in order to categorize actual conversation into their respective categories (Freelon, 2010: 6). Thus, we turn to Freelon who seeks to operationalize the concepts presented by Dahlberg (2010: 7). This revised model provides concrete metrics to measure the intent of digital discourse (Freelon, 2010: 7). It is important to note that Freelon does not consider the current model exhaustive in nature, only that it provides a means to empirically ground core measures (Freelon, 2010: 7). Through this revised model, we can identify if a comment is communicatively or instrumentally driven.

| Model of Democratic Communication | Indicative Metric |
|--|--|
| Liberal-Individualistic | Monologue Personal Revelation Personal Showcase Flaming |
| Communitarian | Ideological Fragmentation (Homophily) Mobilization Community Language Intra-Ideological Questioning Intra-Ideological Reciprocity |
| Deliberative | Rational-Critical Argument Public Issue Focus Equality Discussion Topic Focus Inter-Ideological Questioning Inter-Ideological Reciprocity |

Table 2 (Freelon, 2010: 7)

The analysis for communicative utterances occurred in three ways. The first, was a clear indication that social agents are oriented towards a mutual understanding. As understood by Freelon, we may deem a post as communicative oriented when they exhibit the characteristics of grounding a position with material evidence, such as a providing a direct source or quote, when they provide hypotheticals to question universal events as a means to incite discourse, when they explicitly raise validity claims questioning a statements legitimacy, and when there is a clear sign of direct intercommunication between community members, when there is a clear indication on the focus of public policies, and comments which call upon other members of the community for mutual understanding and cooperative behaviour (Freelon, 2010: 7). The second, is evidence in which they are clearly antagonistic towards others, resulting in communicative disruptions, which I have labeled as instrumental utterances. Instrumental utterances amalgamate the communitarian and liberal-individualist categories within Dahlberg and Freelon's communicative model. Most cases of instrumental utterances are manifested through flaming, or a lack of discernible or meaningful discourse altogether. Flaming is "hostile intentions characterized by words of profanity, obscenity, and insults that inflict harm to a person or an organization resulting from uninhibited behaviour" (Alonzo & Aiken, 2004: 205 as cited in Freelon, 2010: 8). Other common instances of instrumental utterances included personal revelation, ideological homophily, and intra-ideological reciprocity (Freelon, 2010: 7). The final emerges as comments which were left uncoded. These were ambiguous statements in which the actor may be oriented towards rational debate, but there is no concrete evidence to support such claims. In Freelon's model, these would usually be

considered a hybrid comments, such as ‘communitarian with deliberative aspects’ (Freelon, 2010: 6). According to Habermas, in these circumstances the listener (being the researcher and the reader) would raise validity claims in order to determine the intent of an individual. As this is a post hoc analysis, we are thus unable to raise such claims to the actors themselves. Habermas, often criticized for his benign and benevolent approach to communication, de facto assumes that social actors engaging in a public are rational, and that the claims to validity should be considered present unless they are challenged (Heng & Moor, 2003: 334; McCarthy, 1973: 139). In such a circumstance, we may assume that any uncoded comments err on the side of communicative utterance. The analysis will at first compare what was initially recorded, and adjust accordingly following the written explanation to accommodate Habermas’ assumption.

The collected data indicates a trend which coincides with the implications regarding the discursive patterns that emerged in the thematic analysis and the evidence gathered during the analysis of the ideal speech situation. As indicated by chart six, /r/The_Donald overwhelmingly exhibited communicative characteristics that were instrumental in nature. Out of 250 comments, 126 were instrumental⁴⁸. This attributed to 74.4% of the produced codes. Of these utterances, 1/3 of the comments produced either did not contribute to any meaningful discussion, or were focused on

⁴⁸ It is important to note that unlike Habermas, this thesis doesn't automatically regard sarcasm, jokes, or fictional representation as automatic indicators of instrumental rationality. According to data collected by Steiner et al., “humor “makes one available for convivial relations with others and otherness, which fits well the deliberative model” (2017, 132). Rather it was deemed instrumental when combined with the other notable characteristics of instrumental rationality.

ideological homophily and excessive use of community language⁴⁹. When community members were not seeking community rapport, they were engaging in acts of flaming, where they sought to discredit political opposition with ad hominem attacks through profanity, obscenity, and insults. Finally, when community members would engage in processes of explaining their position, it would routinely manifest as personal revelations, where individuals would disclose information of oneself through the form of a 'personal narrative' (Freelon, 2010: 9). Even after attributing Habermas' benevolent assumption that actors should be assumed as communicatively oriented, we cannot make the claim that the majority of actors seek a mutual understanding.

On the other hand, the evidence collected suggest that /r/Politics does exhibit the characteristics of being oriented towards a mutual understanding (Refer to Chart 3). Out of 250 Comments, 46 were clearly instrumental, while 99 were clearly communicative in nature. Users would often engage in forms of rational-critical arguments, where they would support their positions by providing sources for their claims, or direct quotes to be used as a basis for their argumentative focus. In addition, discussions would frequently be focused on the implications of proposed policies, and overall be more topically focused. A post Habermas assumption erring on the side of communicative utterances only increase this margin. While it would be erroneous to assume that the community is absolutely oriented towards a mutual understanding , we can infer that they are more inclined to do so.

Communicatively Competent

⁴⁹ Refer to /r/The_Donald thematic analysis, "Make America Rhetoric Again"

It is important to note the distinction that Habermas sets regarding an utterance and a statement when referring to communicative competence (Leinfellner, 1977: 181). Communicative competence, understood by Habermas, refers to the general structure that appears in every possible speech situation (McCarthy, 1973: 136). These structures are produced and reproduced through performative linguistic actions, and serve to situate the expressions generated by the speaker (McCarthy, 1973: 136). According to McCarthy, "Utterances can in general be analyzed into a propositional content and an illocutionary force" may that be done so explicitly or implicitly (McCarthy, 1973: 137). It requires a purposeful attitude towards expressing a position clearly in an argument. Thus, we must not succumb to the fallacy that because something is rendered intelligible, that it is communicatively competent. As this thesis is focused on the highest rated comments of each subreddit for each post, it may appear that users have already undergone the process of determining what is considered valid speech. It would not be unreasonable to assume so, as comments that are not only perceptible, but are regarded as insightful or a reflection of community opinions, are upvoted to the top; while comments that are imperceptible to the observer are either left untouched or 'downvoted' into obscurity (Weninger, 2014: 173). Such an assumption would be erroneous, however. This discrepancy may be clarified by examining one of the codes that frequently made an appearance during the discourse analysis: 'Comments which do not contribute to meaningful discourse'. Initially, it would seem contradictory that top comments might be considered substantial or relevant to the discussion yet lack any dialectic potential. However, they should not be seen as congruent to one another. Social relevance does not equate

communicative competence. Individuals may utter instances that are perceptible, and may be true to their intentions, but are, for all intents and purposes, are completely shallow and provide no substance for a dialectic. According to McCarthy, “A speech act is not a symbol, word or sentence, or even the token of a symbol, word or sentence, but rather the ‘production or issuance of a sentence token under certain conditions’, the transformation of a sentence into an utterance” (McCarthy, 1973: 137). Thus while a statement may hold significance to the community as it may signify a mutual understanding, or be emblematic of the communities communication structure, it cannot be regarded as communicatively competent.

Let us use an excerpt from the thematic analysis in order to exemplify this point:

[...] **DRAIN THE SWAMP MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN** ʃ ʈ • • ʘ ʈ **DONALD**

TAKE MY HIGH ENERGY ʃ ʈ • • ʘ ʈ [...] (TPDE 4). As articulated previously, in these circumstances, the exclusive use of rhetoric is used to exemplify the spirit of the community. They are claim-making *performances* (See: Taylor et al., 2009) that indicate that they not only place their allegiance to Trump, but that they are also firmly entrenched in the culture of the subreddit. While chaotic in nature, they still produce discernible meaning for members of the community. It does not take much to infer in the above instance, that the user is expressing their support and solidarity for Trump during one of the debates. Yet it cannot be said to contribute to a discussion on the debate. Indeed, instances of linguistically correct statements, yet dialectically empty comments, sporadically appear across both subreddits

I am also very excited to read a book about this election in 40 years (PPE 1)

Drinking game for the debate:

Rule 1: Drink til you die (PPE 2)

I'm actually more excited for this than I would have expected. (PPE 3)

Jesus fuck, these comments (PAE 3)

I will be sexually pleased by all the liberals anger today (TDAE 3)

Omg this makes me happy.... (TDAE 4)

BILL CLINTON IS A RAPIST INFOWARS.COM (TDAE 2)

HE CAME BACK (TDPE 2)

Just passed out like a 14 year old girl at a Beiber concert (TDPE 2)

THE MADMAN HIMSELF. HE RETURNED!!! (TDPE 2)

Each of the randomly selected excerpts above represent entire contributions provided by users to discussion posts. While each of these statements are tangible, discernible, and linguistically coherent, they do not contribute to any meaningful discourse. Thus, they cannot be considered communicatively competent as the statement does not discuss the topic at hand, it does not produce an utterance (even abstractly) that is composed of a propositional content and an illocutionary force, and it does not seek to attempt to achieve a mutual understanding on a given issue. As such, communicative competence is not a given in a discursive arena.

Including these instances of meaningfully devoid discourse, the overall analysis indicated that one community had far more instances of communicative competence than the other. On /r/Politics, comments that do not contribute to meaningful discourse, or deemed to be communicatively incompetent by Habermas was coded 103 times. Thus, they were communicatively competent 59% of the time (See: Chart 3). On the other hand, /r/The_Donald acquired a code indicating incompetence a total of

185 times, indicating that they were communicatively competent 26% of the time (See: Chart 6). This data indicates a correlation between open deliberative spaces and violations of the rules for communicative competence. When deliberative spaces are more open, there are more instances of users exhibiting communicative competence. This may be in part increased pressures for individuals to justify their positions due to the wide variety of opinions and discussions which are exchanged (Himmelboim, 2010: 20).

In addition to the technical aspects of communicative competence, subreddits often establish the conditions which ensure a universal standard for communicative understanding. As addressed in rule 1.2, /r/Politics does this by invoking a language requirement on the sub. All posts must be in English, and all post titles must be exact replica's of the original source. Aside from these stipulations, the discursive characteristics that occur on the subreddit do not differ from everyday utterances. There are no subreddit specific terms or mannerisms that shape how communication may be understood. It is therefore easily accessible to anyone and represents a low barrier to evaluate communicative competence. In contrast /r/The_Donald has unique stipulations that marginally increase barriers towards communicative competence. English is the primary language, and as such, individuals are for the most part able to navigate the social space and interact as they would anywhere else. Due to their clique like nature, they have developed their own discursive traits which may be imperceptible to causal observers. Thus, in order to maintain communicative competence, the subreddit has a wiki page dedicate to their unique terminology.

Rules 2.1 and 2.2, have been, for the most part, explained and justified in the rhetorical level of processes during rule 1.2. Community members must remain on topic to facilitate coherency and continuity within the discussion. Anyone who wishes to discuss topics other than the norm must provide a reason for doing so, as this violation would create a rupture which would degrade deliberative competence. Topics which are not justified are removed from the subreddit for not staying on topic and not providing a sufficient justification for doing so.

Cognitive Validity Claims

What Habermasian validity claims provides, are an explicit and ethical standard for critical discourse analysis in order to identify and challenge communication distortions that shape decision making (Cukier et al., 2004: 233). For social research, emancipatory rationality may be diagnosed by using these validity claims as an analytical framework to determine the overall rationality of a communication sphere (Cukier et al., 2004: 234). To determine the validity of each individual comment resides outside of the scope of this thesis. Such an attempt would require a supplementary discourse analysis in addition to the thematic one, as well as including the responses to each post. It is possible however, to determine if the conditions are present where actors themselves hold to the potential to redeem or reject validity claims, by drawing upon the analysis of the ideal speech situation.

This assumption is relatively simple to address for /r/Politics. In most conditions (excluding sub-clause C), the subreddit fulfils an ideal speech situation. Furthermore, as indicated by the thematic analysis, there is a wide array of opinions and competing perspectives that routinely manifest on the social space. As a result, the discussion

may be regarded as a dialectical procedure wherein validity claims may either be redeemed or rejected. Of course, there remains the question if users actually do so, however this thesis sees no reason as to why it couldn't.

In contrast, what we have witnessed is not revitalized discourse providing a vibrant model of democratic participation, but a damaging rhetoric in which critical engagement is suppressed to the point of nullification. As indicated by the violations of rule 1.2 and 1.3, there is no free reign of personal expression, and ideology which does not coincide with the pro Trump rhetoric are actively suppressed. Such authoritative control over political message boards results in distorted communication that cannot be validated. Indeed, the possibility of redeeming validity claims is contingent on engaging with oppositional discourse in order to come to a mutual understanding (Habermas, 1984: 103). "Every speech act, by virtue of the validity claims it raises, enters the speaker and hearer into an interpersonal relationship of mutual obligation, whereby the speaker is obligated to support claims with reasons if challenged, and the hearer is obligated to accept the claims unless there are good reasons not to do so" (Knight, 2010: 9). This requirement for oppositional discourse is echoed by the Harvard law review, in which discursive statements should always be allowed to be subject to criticism. "Every man who publishes a book commits himself to the judgement of the public, and anyone may comment upon his performance.... [W]hatever their merits, others have a right to pass their judgement upon them-to censure them if they be censurable, and to turn them into ridicule if they be ridiculous" (Post, 1990: 627). In order for public discourse to be productive, there must exist a diversity of ideas, as well as a mutual engagement in decision making (Post,

1990: 627). Without this accountability, the ethical nature of the discourse cannot be regarded as valid (Post, 1990: 627). In /r/The_Donald, conversation takes the form of an asymmetrical relationship, where the opposition is challenged to claims of validity, but refuses to address claims of validity against them. The hearer may listen, but not speak unless their ontological outlook resonates with the broader community. The result has been the emergence of systematically distorted communication due to the restrictions placed upon the sphere by the ideal speech situation (Cukier et al., 2004: 237). Validity claims thus cannot be redeemed from oppositional forces, they can only be redeemed insofar as they validate the opinions which already exist within the community. Thus, we cannot make the argument that validity claims have the potential to be redeemed at all in an argumentative sense. The social conditions which regulate conversation must work in the interest of everyone, not simply the few, as argumentation is contingent on these mutual assurances (Habermas, 1990: 65).

The Logical Level of Products

Various websites, blogs, chat groups and other social media platforms may assume the qualities of “public spheres” where people can find or provide information, debate ideas, develop critiques and envision strategies (Langman, 2005: 16). These potentialities only become actualized through the use of communicative rationality and ideal speech situation. When they exude these characteristics, digital publics are able to facilitate deep complex conversations pertaining to political issues, and a slow civic deliberation in a way that is historically unprecedented (Rheingold, 2008). When they do not exhibit these characteristics, they are at risk of creating echo chambers — where instrumental rationality prevails and open discourse becomes muted in favour of

ideological proliferation (Jamieson & Cappella, 2010). They are indeed public, but they are not a public sphere as Habermas would argue. As indicated by the thematic discourse analysis, and exemplified through the application of the ideal speech situation and the dialectical level of procedures, /r/Politics has demonstrated their disposition as being communicatively oriented. Through the deliberative process, the discourse exhibited was expansive in nature, but nearly ubiquitous in its constitution regarding disillusionment with the political cycle. However, despite the promising outlook as a public sphere, they are unable to fulfil the conditions required for facilitating communicative action. Indeed, none of the rules of the logical level of products are achieved, as there was no proposed plan of action in order to rally against the problematized issue. Indeed, there were only a handful of comments suggesting some form of political action:

Lastly, if you care about investigating this, I'd urge you to call your Senators and ask them to support Senate Bill 27, which calls for the establishment of an independent panel to investigate Russia's cyberattacks. McConnell seems completely feckless in this regard and we've all seen the way Congressional investigations can go. I personally feel a non-partisan panel would be the best option. You can find your Senator contact number here. (AEP 1)

Make America Great Again, Impeach Trump! (AEP 2)

As ashamed as Trump makes me for America, every single person protesting at an airport tonight is a goddamn patriot. So proud of my fellow citizens. (AEP 2)

Holy shit so many people are trying to donate to the ACLU their site is down. Good fucking work citizens. (AEP 2)

Only 1 week in and the Federal Court has issued an overturn to his madness. I'm certain this is only one of many more to come. At least I hope so. Edit: a stay, not an overturn. But it's something to give people hope. And reason to stay fighting. (AEP 2)

Aside from the first comment expressing the desire to engage with their local senators to support senate Bill 27, political action frames are established post hoc. No proposition became solidified as rational arguments to be used for the basis of social action and coordination (Habermas, 1984; 397). While the incredibly sparse solutions could be considered logically congruent with the political pessimism exhibited by the public therefore adhering to rules 3.1 to 3.3, they were so few and far between that they could hardly be called communicative action in the first place. As such, /r/Politics is unable to fulfil the requirements of the logical level of products. Therefore, while it has fulfilled the previous conditions which facilitate the conditions of open and authentic debate, we cannot make the claim that they are indeed a public sphere. Instead, we can make the claim that it holds the *potential* to be a public sphere by virtue of the ideal speech situation and orientation towards a mutual understanding on political issues.

Once again, as indicated by the thematic discourse analysis, and exemplified through the application of the ideal speech situation and the dialectical level of procedures, /r/The_Donald has demonstrated that it is firmly entrenched in open strategic action rather than communicative action. Created as an advocacy based counter public, its composition and communication styles are best understood as a goal oriented inter-networked social movement rather than an open space for deliberative engagement. As an advocacy based counter public, the discourse which manifested within the subreddit during the presidential campaign was emblematic of the communication techniques exhibited by inter-networked social movements. A strong emphasis is placed upon collective action frames, and identity formation to

problematize issues, legitimize motivations, suggest strategies, and establish collective identities to build a collective consciousness (Langman, 2005: 7-8). Collective action frames are utilized to render events meaningful, organize experience, and guide action on political issues (Benford & Snow, 2000: 614). As a public space, it strives to influence the behaviour of others through both the threat of sanctions, or the prospect of gratification,' to ensure that the interaction or desired outcomes (Habermas, 1979: 58).

While it may be regarded closer to a social movement rather than a deliberative space, there is a distinction between the type of public that /r/The_Donald exhibits in comparison to other forms of counter publics and social movements. The discursive practices and social norms exemplify extreme homogenization within the group. There is no room for dissenting opinions, alternative frameworks, or challenging of group norms. Consider for a moment public spheres centred around the plights of marginalized groups; the black public sphere, the LGBT community, and the numerous women's movements. While the focus has always been advocating for particular causes (may that be civil rights issues, or seeking to change hegemonic discourse) there has existed a diverse approach to these problematizations. There are numerous competing and coexisting discourses *within* the public in addition to challenging a dominant public. For example, to speak of the women's movement as unified is to ignore the various approaches and understandings which shape how those issues are dealt with (Ferree & Mueller, 2004: 576). Despite being one of the most enduring and successful movements of modernity, it is not new, it is not only western, and it is not always feminist (Ferree & Mueller, 2004: 576). Even within feminism, to consider it

homogenous is to disregard the plethora of different perspectives often in disagreement with each other (Saunders, 1999: 184). To understand the complexities of LGBT rights is to understand the competing discourses in how members of the community define their own experience through essentialist and deconstructionist approaches (Gamson, 1995: 391). The black public sphere during the 1970's 80's and 90's often resulted in contentious debate regarding black authenticity, demarcating a hierarchy of characteristics and behaviour (Sudbury, 2010: 40). In contrast, subsequent theorists have argued to expand the notion of black to represent all marginalized groups in contrast to whiteness (Sudbury, 2010: 39). All of these movements, while strategic in nature, hold some form of deliberative aspect that facilitates diverse conversation. The exception to this is enclave publics, which exist because exposing themselves to oppressors would threaten their safety. As a group campaigning for one of the two primary parties in one of the most powerful countries in the world, /r/The_Donald is not a marginalized group, or at risk of extreme oppression. Furthermore, the key characteristics of civic deliberation simply do not exist within the community. They may be a strategically oriented community, but they border on totalitarianism. There is no diverse discursive process within the community, and there is no dialectic outside of the community. Any engagement with broader social systems are, curiously, designated as its own space, outside of the primary public through its satellite /r/asktrumpsupporters (Refer to Fig. 7). It becomes relegated outside the purview of community importance almost as if its purpose is to keep their core public free of dissenting opinions which may challenge the norms and values of the community. It may be because of the control of the flow of information that rule 3.1 to 3.3 remain

ideologically consistent throughout the entire analysis. Thus, while /r/The_Donald is indeed a public insofar as accessibility is concerned, it cannot be considered a public sphere in the Habermasian sense. Despite being able to adhere to the rules of the logical level of products, it does so by violating the ideal speech situation and communicative rationality. Due to this, I would argue that it does not even foster the *potential* to be one. To do so would require a complete restructuring of the public space.

Juxtaposing each subreddit provides insight regarding Reddit's potential to shape political deliberation in the 'era of social media' (Gunn, 2017: 53). Reddit as an entity can be seen as a public space that both facilitates, and hinders the potential to be an authentic public sphere. These publics are not guaranteed, and their composition may be subject to change if the core tenets as laid down by Habermas are not constantly fulfilled and upheld. Public spaces are always in flux and subject to contestation. The evidence presented in this thesis does not claim to settle the debate on the dichotomous literature on the deliberative potential of a digital public, but rather it complicates it. As these two subreddits indicate, digital publics may harbour polarized manifestations within the space. In revelation of this, digital public spaces should be regarded as political battle grounds which are always at risk of losing their potential status for authentic and mutual deliberation. Fuchs has argued that in order to mitigate the colonization of digital publics, legal, political, economic and media innovations are required where digital platforms that decelerate political communication and foster open ended debates (Fuchs, 2017: 6). While such a site does not currently exist, we found traces of it within Reddit which approximate those conditions. As evidenced by

this analysis, such a space can indeed harbour a space for deliberative engagement, however it is also prone to self imposed manipulated publicity (Habermas, 1991: 178).

VIII. CONCLUSION

This thesis has sought to address the extent to which political discussion on the social news aggregate website Reddit facilitates the conditions of a public sphere and fosters democratic communicative characteristics. As such, it held three primary objectives. First, it looks to assess whether or not, and to what extent, Reddit and its subreddits /r/The_Donald and /r/Politics constitute as a public sphere which engages in communicative rationality. Second, it seeks to critically analyze the discourse that manifested within the two aforementioned subreddits regarding the 2016 presidential election. Finally, it seeks to provide insight on the potential implications that virtual discourse may hold on the experiences of everyday (private) citizens. In addition, by using the 2016 as a discursive focal point, it addressed issues concerning how consensus was achieved, if it was democratic and inclusive, what kind of messages or knowledge were created and provided insight regarding the potential of digital political action. To achieve this, this thesis drew from Habermas's pragmatic concern with communicative utterance and/or speech acts and the performative aspect of language in communicative debate; this concern bridges the gap between theoretical components of speech acts and practice (Sudersan, 1998: 263). This Habermasian perspective informs critical theory as it critiques communication ideology (Sudersan, 1998: 257) and seeks to contribute to practical efforts towards social transformation through questioning the invisible workings of the public sphere (Renault, 2016: 18). In addition to Habermas, this thesis incorporated the multiple public sphere theories from Eley, Fraser, and Squires to reconstruct the usefulness of the Public sphere in a digital era.

Publics are produced through the interaction of various conditions. First, there must be an amalgamation of individuals who wish to come together to discuss issues pertaining to specific topics. Second, they establish norms and rules which demarcate and identify their social space, which indicates if they are democratic and inclusive. Finally, they are defined base upon their relation and social interactions with various other publics, may they be dominant or subaltern in stature. Due to their composition and fulfilling the requirements of political domination, and facilitating a socio-cultural structure, this thesis located the *entity* of Reddit as a public sphere. This dominant public, which which not only shapes the conscious system of ideas, beliefs, meanings, and values, but the whole experienced social process, is comprised of smaller 'mini' subaltern publics or subreddits. Subreddits typically manifest as satellite publics; built upon a specific topic, interest, or purpose, these social spaces exist for reasons other than oppression, and do not typically engage or interact with other publics, except when there is a convergence with their own interest (Squires, 2002: 463). It is in this space that this thesis identifies /r/Politics. In contrast, subreddits may also emerge as counter-publics, that is defined based upon their relationship to the dominant sphere or other satellite publics with the dominant delineation. Counter publics will often emerge as 'controversial' subreddits; communities which are deemed exude characteristics which are contrary to the spirit that the website wishes to exhibit. Counter publics thus manifest on the precipice of what is deemed acceptable behaviour; they represent communities and discourses which test and challenge existing norms, and seek to radicalize the visible content on the website. It is here that thesis thesis locates the /r/ The_Donald.

Having identified what kind of publics each subreddit functions as, this thesis then conducted a thematic discourse analysis from data that was collected from the top five commented on posts three months before, as well as the top five commented on posts three months after the election. The purpose was to critically analyze the discourse that manifested within the two aforementioned subreddits regarding the 2016 presidential election, and subquestions three and four: What kind of messages or knowledge is created in this public space, and what does this tell us about the potential of digital political action? The analysis of /r/Politics revealed that the discourse was expansive in topics, but nearly ubiquitous in its constitution towards the candidates. The subreddit exuded overwhelming dismay with the 2016 political cycle, with 89.2% of the discourse indicating disillusionment, with greater negativity placed upon Trump over Clinton. This discursive trend is indicative of the broader social opinions during the presidential cycle regarding voter turnout and favourability ratings amongst the presidential candidates. While on /r/The_Donald, the discourse which manifested within the subreddit during the presidential campaign was emblematic of the communication techniques exhibited by inter-networked social movements. A strong emphasis was placed upon collective action frames, and identity formation. Thus, the knowledge that was created revolved around problematizing the Clinton candidacy as the degradation of democratic ideals, while Trump was hailed as its saviour. The discourse on /r/Politics was focused around creating information regarding the legitimacy, competency and dispositions of the candidates, while /r/The_Donald focused on mobilization techniques in order to garnish support for their preferred political candidate.

While this thesis identified what kinds of publics these subreddits may exist as in relation to other entities, it had yet to determine if they exuded characteristics of communicative rationality. Thus, while they are indeed public insofar as accessibility is concerned, and the way they operate, they are yet to be confirmed as a public sphere in the Habermasian sense. In order to determine if they may be constituted as a public sphere, these public spaces and the discourse which manifested within them were subject to Habermas' argumentative analytics (the rhetorical level of processes, the dialectical level of procedures, and the logical level of products). The findings have indicated that Reddit, and to a lesser extent /r/Politics fulfil the conditions of an ideal speech situation. In addition, users were seen as being communicatively competent and oriented towards a mutual understanding regarding the 2016 presidential election. As such, /r/Politics may be regarded as being communicative in nature. Thus, while it would be erroneous to make the claim that they are unquestionably a public sphere, they do have the potential to be one — a potential they have been noted to act upon at least in this one instance. In contrast, /r/The_Donald is a public which is oriented around the support for Trump rather than general and open discussion regarding his candidacy. As such, the subreddit established conditions which limit what kind of opinions and ideas are permitted within the social space. Not only is discourse limited, users are subject to punitive action if they do not abide by these principles. Thus, they were not able to abide by the ideal speech situation. In addition, while users were seen to be relatively communicatively competent, they were not oriented towards a mutual understanding, and did not hold the conditions in order to redeem or reject validity claims. The subreddit may be regarded as strategic in nature, where they seek to shut

down oppositional discourse in favour of their own ideology. As such, /r/The_Donald not only cannot be said to be a public sphere that exhibits communicative rationality, they do not even hold the potential to be one. Having identified the polarity between both subreddits, Reddit as an entity can thus be seen as a public space that both facilitates, and hinders the potential to be an authentic public sphere. In revelation of this, digital public spaces should be regarded as political battle grounds which are always at risk of losing their potential status for authentic and mutual deliberation. As this research indicates, digital publics may harbour oppositional spaces simultaneously. While some spaces may be regarded as a public sphere in one moment, they are not inherently such. They are always in flux and subject to contestation and change. The evidence presented in this thesis does not claim to settle the debate on the dichotomous literature on the deliberative potential of a digital public, but rather it seeks to complicate it. Fuchs has argued that in order to mitigate the colonization of digital publics, legal, political, economic and media innovations are required where digital platforms which decelerate political communication and fosters open ended debates (Fuchs, 2017:6). While such a site does not currently exist, we found traces of it within Reddit which approximate those conditions. As evidenced by this analysis, such a space can indeed harbour a space for deliberative engagement, however it is also prone to self imposed manipulated publicity (Habermas, 1991: 178).

This thesis is not without its limitations. First, this research it does not explore how the knowledge and discourse produced on Reddit diffuse beyond the confines of its own ecosystem — such as how this information is incorporated into the workings of other social media sites, or how the information is actualized offline. Second, it speaks

little of how social actors situate themselves in relation to political issues, or how they create identity and make meaning in relation to political advocacy. Third, this research does not focus on issues of a digital divide, which may influence the ways in which discourse manifests online, and limit those who are actually able to engage with a digital public sphere. Fourth, while outside of the scope of this thesis it would be worthwhile to examine digital political discourse through a gender analysis. It would be pertinent to understand not only how normative conditions may mediate the interaction between users online, but also the ways in which users perceive and talk about Trump and Clinton. Some internal issues also emerge which requires a deeper analysis. Such issues include how Reddits system and algorithmic filtering may be subject to manipulation, which includes, but is not limited to, brigading, vote manipulation through social bots, and instrumental subversion of political deliberation by the influence of governmental agencies, such as Russia's digital 'troll' farm. Finally, readers must keep in mind that this analysis only represents a certain moment in time. Public sphere's must always strive to reproduce the conditions for dialectic. There is no surety that a public sphere will always remain so. In addition, it is possible that this only represented a small instance where the conditions were fulfilled, when they are otherwise not. These conditions are fragile, and easily corrupted. It is easier for the civic sphere to degrade rather than having an instrumental space turn rational. Despite these limitations, this thesis provides a critical analysis regarding how public spheres actualize in the digital era, and the potential they hold in shaping discourse and producing knowledge on contentious issues.

REFERENCES

- Allcott, H. and Gentzkow, M., 2017. Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), pp.211-36.
- Anderson, K.E., 2015. Ask me anything: what is Reddit?. *Library Hi Tech News*, 32(5), pp.8-11.
- Anon. n.d. "CA Hub | CA Political." Cambridge Analytica – Data drives all that we do. Retrieved July 17, 2018 (<https://cambridgeanalytica.org/>).
- Anon. n.d. "Reddit Content Policy." reddit. Retrieved July 17, 2018 (<https://www.redditinc.com/policies/content-policy>).
- Anon. n.d. "Reddit User Agreement." reddit. Retrieved July 17, 2018 (<https://www.redditinc.com/policies/user-agreement>).
- Anon. n.d. "The Conversation Starts Here." reddit. Retrieved July 18, 2018 (<https://www.redditinc.com/>).
- Anon. n.d. "WIKI TOOLS." reddit. Retrieved July 18, 2018 (<https://www.reddit.com/wiki/reddiquette>).
- Beck, C.J., 2008. The contribution of social movement theory to understanding terrorism. *Sociology Compass*, 2(5), pp.1565-1581.
- Bell, Chris. 2017. "Reddit Bans 'Involuntarily Celibate' Community." BBC News. Retrieved July 17, 2018 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-41926687>).
- Benford, R.D. and Snow, D.A., 2000. Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual review of sociology*, 26(1), pp.611-639.
- Bennett, W. Lance. 2012. "The Personalization of Politics." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 644(1):20–39.
- Bennett, W.L. and Segerberg, A., 2012. The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(5), pp.739-768.
- Bohman, James and William Rehg. 2017. "Jürgen Habermas." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Retrieved July 17, 2018 (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/habermas/>).
- Bos, L. and Brants, K., 2014. Populist rhetoric in politics and media: A longitudinal study of the Netherlands. *European Journal of Communication*, 29(6), pp.703-719.

- Bossetta, M., 2018. The Digital Architectures of Social Media: Comparing Political Campaigning on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat in the 2016 US Election. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, p.1077699018763307.
- Bowman, Karlyn. 2017. "Who Were Donald Trump's Voters? Now We Know." Forbes. Retrieved July 17, 2018 (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/bowmanmarsico/2017/06/23/who-were-donald-trumps-voters-now-we-know/#1334a5763894>).
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V., 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), pp.77-101.
- Brown, W., 2015. *Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution*. Mit Press.
- Bucher, T., 2012. Want to be on the top? Algorithmic power and the threat of invisibility on Facebook. *new media & society*, 14(7), pp.1164-1180.
- Buechler, S.M., 1995. New social movement theories. *Sociological Quarterly*, 36(3), pp. 441-464.
- Calhoun, C., 1992. Introduction: Habermas and the public sphere (pp. 1-50). MIT press.
- Chadwick, A., 2013. *The hybrid media system: Politics and power*. Oxford University Press.
- Chadwick, A. and Stromer-Galley, J., 2016. Digital media, power, and democracy in parties and election campaigns: Party decline or party renewal?.
- Chen, Adrian. 2012. "Reddit CEO Speaks Out On Violentacrez In Leaked Memo: 'We Stand for Free Speech'." *Gawker*.
- Chen, J., Hsieh, G., Mahmud, J.U. and Nichols, J., 2014, February. Understanding individuals' personal values from social media word use. In *Proceedings of the 17th ACM conference on Computer supported cooperative work & social computing* (pp. 405-414). ACM.
- Chriss, J.J., 1995. Habermas, Goffman, and communicative action: Implications for professional practice. *American Sociological Review*, pp.545-565.
- CNN. 2013. "Benghazi Mission Attack Fast Facts." CNN. Retrieved July 17, 2018 (<https://www.cnn.com/2013/09/10/world/benghazi-consulate-attack-fast-facts/index.html>).

- Cockburn, C., 1985. Caught in the Wheels: The high cost of being a female cog in the male machinery of engineering. *The Social Shaping of Technology*. Open University Press.
- Colasacco, B., 2018. Before Trump: On Comparing Fascism and Trumpism. *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, 12(1), pp.27-53.
- Couldry, N., 2009. "The Media": A Crisis of Appearance. University of London. Department of Media and Communications
- Coulter, Martin. 2018. "Find out If Your Facebook Data Was Shared with Cambridge Analytica." Evening Standard. Retrieved July 17, 2018 (<https://www.standard.co.uk/tech/how-to-find-out-if-your-facebook-data-was-shared-with-cambridge-analytica-using-new-tool-launched-by-a3810551.html>).
- Cress, D.M. and Snow, D.A., 2000. The outcomes of homeless mobilization: The influence of organization, disruption, political mediation, and framing. *American Journal of Sociology*, 105(4), pp.1063-1104.
- Cukier, W., Bauer, R. and Middleton, C., 2004. Applying Habermas' validity claims as a standard for critical discourse analysis. In *Information systems research* (pp. 233-258). Springer, Boston, MA.
- Dahlberg, L., 2001. The Internet and democratic discourse: Exploring the prospects of online deliberative forums extending the public sphere. *Information, communication & society*, 4(4), pp.615-633.
- Dahlberg, L., 2007. Rethinking the fragmentation of the cyberpublic: from consensus to contestation. *New media & society*, 9(5), pp.827-847.
- Dahlgren, P., 2005. The Internet, public spheres, and political communication: Dispersion and deliberation. *Political communication*, 22(2), pp.147-162.
- Davies, T. and Chandler, R., 2012. Online deliberation design. Democracy in motion: Evaluation the practice and impact of deliberative civic engagement, pp.1-13.
- Downey, J. and Fenton, N., 2003. New media, counter publicity and the public sphere. *New media & society*, 5(2), pp.185-202.
- Edwards, G., 2008. The Lifeworld as a resource for social movement participation and the consequences of its colonization. *Sociology*, 42(2), pp.299-316.
- Eley, G., 1992. Nations, publics, and political cultures: Placing Habermas in the nineteenth century. *Habermas and the public sphere*, pp.289-339.

- Ferrara, E., Varol, O., Davis, C., Menczer, F. and Flammini, A., 2016. The rise of social bots. *Communications of the ACM*, 59(7), pp.96-104.
- Ferree, M.M. and Mueller, C.M., 2004. Feminism and the women's movement: A global perspective. *The Blackwell companion to social movements*, pp.576-607.
- Foucault, M., 1972. *The archeology of knowledge*, trans. AM Sheridan Smith. London: Tavistock.
- Foucault, Michel. 1992. *The history of sexuality*. London: Penguin
- Fraser, N., 1990. Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social text*, (25/26), pp.56-80.
- Freelon, D.G., 2010. Analyzing online political discussion using three models of democratic communication. *New media & society*, 12(7), pp.1172-1190.
- Fuchs, C. 2017. Written Evidence submitted by Professor Christian Fuchs, University of Westminster, Communication and Media Research Institute & Westminster Institute for Advanced Studies. pp. 1-8
- Gamson, J., 1995. Must identity movements self-destruct? A queer dilemma. *Social problems*, 42(3), pp.390-407.
- George, C., 2013. The Net Delusion: How not to liberate the world, *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 6:1,122-125, DOI: [10.1080/17544750.2013.753504](https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2013.753504)
- Gerhards, J. and Schäfer, M.S., 2010. Is the internet a better public sphere? Comparing old and new media in the USA and Germany. *New media & society*, 12(1), pp. 143-160.
- Gonzalez-Bailon, S., Kaltenbrunner, A. and Banchs, R.E., 2010. The structure of political discussion networks: a model for the analysis of online deliberation. *Journal of Information Technology*, 25(2), pp.230-243.
- Gottfried, J. and Shearer, E., 2016. News Use Across Social Medial Platforms 2016. *Pew Research Center*.
- Graham, M., 2010. Neogeography and the palimpsests of place: Web 2.0 and the construction of a virtual earth. *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie*, 101(4), pp.422-436.
- Graham, M., De Sabbata, S. and Zook, M.A., 2015. Towards a study of information geographies:(im) mutable augmentations and a mapping of the geographies of information. *Geo: Geography and environment*, 2(1), pp.88-105.

- Gramsci, A., Hoare, Q. and Smith, G.N., 1991. *Selections from the prison notebooks* (Vol. 12). Lawrence and Wishart: London.
- Guidry, J.A., 2003. The struggle to be seen: Social movements and the public sphere in Brazil. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 16(4), pp.493-524.
- Gunn, E., 2017. Twitter as arena for the authentic outsider: exploring the social media campaigns of Trump and Clinton in the 2016 US presidential election. *European Journal of Communication*, 32(1), pp.50-61.
- Habermas, J., 1979. *Communication and the evolution of society* Beacon Press. Boston MA.
- Habermas, J., 1984. *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society (The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol 1)*. Boston, MA: Beacon.
- Habermas, J., 1985. *The theory of communicative action, Volume 2: Lifeworld and system: A critique of functionalist reason*.
- Habermas, J., 1990. *Moral consciousness and communicative action*. MIT press.
- Habermas, J., 1991. *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. MIT press.
- Habermas, J., 1996. *Between facts and norms (W. Rehg, Trans.)*. Cambridge: PolityPress.
- Habermas, J., 2006. Political communication in media society: Does democracy still enjoy an epistemic dimension? The impact of normative theory on empirical research. *Communication theory*, 16(4), pp.411-426.
- Habermas, J., Lennox, S. and Lennox, F., 1974. The public sphere: An encyclopedia article (1964). *New German Critique*, (3), pp.49-55.
- Heng, M.S. and De Moor, A., 2003. From Habermas's communicative theory to practice on the internet. *Information Systems Journal*, 13(4), pp.331-352.
- Hensmans, M., 2003. Social movement organizations: A metaphor for strategic actors in institutional fields. *Organization studies*, 24(3), pp.355-381.
- Himmelboim, I., 2011. Civil society and online political discourse: The network structure of unrestricted discussions. *Communication Research*, 38(5), pp.634-659.

- Howard, P.N. and Hussain, M.M., 2011. The role of digital media. *Journal of democracy*, 22(3), pp.35-48.
- Howard, P.N., Woolley, S. and Calo, R., 2018. Algorithms, bots, and political communication in the US 2016 election: The challenge of automated political communication for election law and administration. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 15(2), pp.81-93.
- Im, H.B., 1991. Hegemony and counter-hegemony in Gramsci. *Asian Perspective*, pp. 123-156.
- Jamieson, K.H. and Cappella, J.N., 2008. *Echo chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the conservative media establishment*. Oxford University Press.
- Juris, J.S., 2012. Reflections on # Occupy Everywhere: Social media, public space, and emerging logics of aggregation. *American Ethnologist*, 39(2), pp.259-279.
- Kang, Cecilia. 2017. "Fake News Onslaught Targets Pizzeria as Nest of Child-Trafficking." The New York Times. Retrieved July 17, 2018 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/21/technology/fact-check-this-pizzeria-is-not-a-child-trafficking-site.html>).
- Katz, J. 2016. 2016 Election Forecast: Who Will Be President? Retrieved December 19, 2016, from <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/upshot/presidential-polls-forecast.html>
- Klein, W., 1980. Argumentation und argument. *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik*, 38, pp.9-57.
- Knight, E.A., 2011. Habermas' formal pragmatics and the speech act of Stephen. *The Bible and Critical Theory*, 6(1).
- Kreiss, D. and McGregor, S.C., 2018. Technology firms shape political communication: The work of Microsoft, Facebook, Twitter, and Google with campaigns during the 2016 US presidential cycle. *Political Communication*, 35(2), pp.155-177.
- Labott, From Elise. 2012. "Clinton: I'm Responsible for Diplomats' Security." CNN. Retrieved July 17, 2018 (<https://www.cnn.com/2012/10/15/us/clinton-benghazi>).
- Lagorio-chafkin, Christine. 2016. "Reddit and the God Emperor of the Internet." The New York Times. Retrieved July 17, 2018 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/reddit-and-the-god-emperor-of-the-internet.html>).
- Langman, L., 2005. From virtual public spheres to global justice: A critical theory of internetworked social movements. *Sociological theory*, 23(1), pp.42-74.

- Lecher, Colin. 2016. "Reddit Will Punish Hundreds of 'Toxic Users' and Hide Some Posts from pro-Trump Community." The Verge. Retrieved July 17, 2018 (<https://www.theverge.com/2016/11/30/13797712/reddit-trump-the-donald-ban>).
- LeCompte, M. D., & Schensul, J. J. (2010). *Designing and conducting ethnographic research: An introduction (Vol. 1)*. Rowman Altamira.
- Leinfellner, E., 1977. A Linguistic View Of Habermas' Theory Of Communicative Competence. pp.181-184
- Mahoney, B., 2001. *Jürgen Habermas and the public sphere: critical engagements* (Doctoral dissertation).
- Martin, D.G., Hanson, S. and Fontaine, D., 2007. What counts as activism?: The role of individuals in creating change. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 35(3/4), pp.78-94.
- Massanari, A.L., 2015. Participatory culture, community, and play. Learning from Reddit. Peter Lang GmbH.
- McCarthy, T., 1992. Practical Discourse: On the Relation of Morality to Politics' Habermas and the public sphere, pp.51-72.
- McCarthy, T.A., 1973. A theory of communicative competence. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 3(2), pp.135-156.
- Mendelberg, T., 2002. The deliberative citizen: Theory and evidence. *Political decision making, deliberation and participation*, 6(1), pp.151-193.
- Merica, Dan and Sophie Tatum. 2016. "Clinton Expresses Regret for Saying 'Half' of Trump Supporters Are 'Deplorables'." CNN. Retrieved July 17, 2018 (<https://www.cnn.com/2016/09/09/politics/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-basket-of-deplorables/>).
- Milioni, D.L., 2009. Probing the online counterpublic sphere: the case of Indymedia Athens. *Media, Culture & Society*, 31(3), pp.409-431.
- Mills, R., 2011. Researching Social News—Is reddit. com a mouthpiece for the 'Hive Mind', or a Collective Intelligence approach to Information Overload?.
- Milner, R.M., 2013. Pop polyvocality: Internet memes, public participation, and the Occupy Wall Street movement. *International Journal of Communication*, 7, p.34.
- Morozov, E., 2013. *The net delusion: The dark side of Internet freedom*. PublicAffairs.

- Müller, J.W., 2015. Parsing populism: Who is and who is not a populist these days?. *Juncture*, 22(2), pp.80-89.
- Naff, C.F., 2018. CALL IN THE ROBOCOPS. *The Humanist*, 78(1), pp.18-21.
- Nam, T. and Stromer-Galley, J., 2012. The democratic divide in the 2008 US presidential election. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 9(2), pp. 133-149.
- Niemi, J.I., 2005. Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative rationality: The foundational distinction between communicative and strategic action. *Social theory and practice*, 31(4), pp.513-532.
- Ohlheiser, Abby. 2016. "Fearing Yet Another Witch Hunt, Reddit Bans 'Pizzagate'." The Washington Post. Retrieved July 17, 2018 (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2016/11/23/fearing-yet-another-witch-hunt-reddit-bans-pizzagate/?utm_term=.5d5ad3336d05).
- Oliver, J.E. and Rahn, W.M., 2016. Rise of the Trumpenvolk: Populism in the 2016 Election. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 667(1), pp.189-206.
- Papacharissi, Z., 2009. The virtual geographies of social networks: a comparative analysis of Facebook, LinkedIn and ASmallWorld. *New media & society*, 11(1-2), pp.199-220.
- Papacharissi, Zizi. 2002. "The virtual sphere: the internet as a public sphere." *New media & society*4(1):9-27.
- Persily, N., 2017. The 2016 US Election: Can democracy survive the internet?. *Journal of democracy*, 28(2), pp.63-76.
- Phillips, Nelson and Cynthia Hardy. 2011. *Discourse analysis: investigating processes of social construction*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.
- Pink, S., Horst, H., Postill, J., Hjorth, L., Lewis, T. and Tacchi, J., 2015. *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*.
- Pink, Sarah et al. 2016. *Digital ethnography: principles and practice*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Popper, K., 1943. *The open society and its enemies*. Routledge.
- Poole, R., 1989. Public spheres. In *Australian Communications and the Public Sphere* (pp. 6-26). Palgrave, London.

- Post, R.C., 1990. The constitutional concept of public discourse: outrageous opinion, democratic deliberation, and *Hustler magazine v. Falwell*. *Harvard Law Review*, pp.601-686.
- Rader, E. and Gray, R., 2015, April. Understanding user beliefs about algorithmic curation in the Facebook news feed. In *Proceedings of the 33rd annual ACM conference on human factors in computing systems* (pp. 173-182). ACM.
- Ramos, Valeriano. 1982. "The Concepts of Ideology, Hegemony, and Organic Intellectuals in Gramsci's Marxism." *Theoretical Review* (27). Retrieved (<https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/periodicals/theoretical-review/1982301.htm>).
- Renault, E., 2016. Critical theory and processual social ontology. *Journal of Social Ontology*, 2(1), pp.17-32.
- Rheingold, H., 1993. *The virtual community: Finding connection in a computerized world*. Addison-Wesley Longman Publishing Co., Inc..
- Rheingold, H., 2008. Using participatory media and public voice to encourage civic engagement. *Civic life online: Learning how digital media can engage youth*, pp. 97-118.
- Risse, T., 2000. "Let's argue!": communicative action in world politics. *International organization*, 54(1), pp.1-39.
- Robards, B., 2018. Belonging and Neo-Tribalism on Social Media Site Reddit. In *Neo-Tribes* (pp. 187-206). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
- Rojecki, A., 2016. Trumpism and the American politics of Insecurity. *The Washington Quarterly*, 39(4), pp.65-81.
- Romero, D.M., Galuba, W., Asur, S. and Huberman, B.A., 2011, September. Influence and passivity in social media. In *Joint European Conference on Machine Learning and Knowledge Discovery in Databases* (pp. 18-33). Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg.
- Rosenberg, Eli. 2017. "Roberta's, Popular Brooklyn Restaurant, Is Pulled Into 'Pizzagate' Hoax." *The New York Times*. Retrieved July 17, 2018 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/07/nyregion/robertas-restaurant-brooklyn-threatened-fake-news-pizzagate-conspiracy.html>).
- Saunders, E. (1999). "Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Women". In *Social Inequality in Canada: Patterns, Problems and Policies*, J. Curtis, E. Grabb and N. Guppy (eds.) Scarbrough, ON: Prentice Hall. p.168-185

- Seegerberg, Alexandra and W. Lance Bennett. 2011. "Social Media and the Organization of Collective Action: Using Twitter to Explore the Ecologies of Two Climate Change Protests." *The Communication Review* 14(3):197–215.
- Semaan, B.C., Robertson, S.P., Douglas, S. and Maruyama, M., 2014, February. Social media supporting political deliberation across multiple public spheres: towards depolarization. In *Proceedings of the 17th ACM conference on Computer supported cooperative work & social computing* (pp. 1409-1421). ACM.
- Shao, C., Ciampaglia, G.L., Varol, O., Yang, K., Flammini, A. and Menczer, F., 2017. The spread of low-credibility content by social bots. arXiv preprint arXiv:1707.07592.
- Shirky, C., 2011. The political power of social media: Technology, the public sphere, and political change. *Foreign affairs*, pp.28-41.
- Singer, P., Flöck, F., Meinhart, C., Zeitfogel, E. and Strohmaier, M., 2014, April. Evolution of reddit: from the front page of the internet to a self-referential community?. In *Proceedings of the 23rd international conference on world wide web* (pp. 517-522). ACM.
- Solon, Olivia. 2016. "Facebook's Fake News: Mark Zuckerberg Rejects 'Crazy Idea' That It Swayed Voters." *The Guardian*. Retrieved July 17, 2018 (<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/nov/10/facebook-fake-news-us-election-mark-zuckerberg-donald-trump>).
- Solon, Olivia. 2018. "Facebook Says Cambridge Analytica May Have Gained 37m More Users' Data." *The Guardian*. Retrieved July 17, 2018 (<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/apr/04/facebook-cambridge-analytica-user-data-latest-more-than-thought>).
- Squires, C.R., 2002. Rethinking the black public sphere: An alternative vocabulary for multiple public spheres. *Communication theory*, 12(4), pp.446-468.
- Statt, Nick. 2018. "Reddit CEO Says Racism Is Permitted on the Platform, and Users Are up in Arms." *The Verge*. Retrieved July 17, 2018 (<https://www.theverge.com/2018/4/11/17226416/reddit-ceo-steve-huffman-racism-racist-slurs-are-okay>).
- Steiner, J., Jaramillo, M.C., Maia, R.C. and Mameli, S., 2017. *Deliberation across deeply divided societies*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sudarsan, P., 1998. Habermas and critical social theory. *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, 25, pp.253-266.
- Sudbury, J., 2001. (Re) constructing multiracial blackness: womens activism, difference and collective identity in Britain. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 24(1), pp.29-49.

- Taylor, Verta; Kimport, Katrina; Van Dyke, Nella & Andersen, Ellen Ann. 2009. Culture and Mobilization: Tactical Repertoires, Same-Sex Weddings, and the Impact on Gay Activism. *American Sociological Review* 74(6): 865-890.
- Vaes, J., Paladino, M.P. and Magagnotti, C., 2011. The human message in politics: The impact of emotional slogans on subtle conformity. *The Journal of social psychology*, 151(2), pp.162-179.
- Van Dijck, J., 2013. *The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media*. Oxford University Press.
- Van Dijck, J., 2014. Datafication, dataism and dataveillance: Big Data between scientific paradigm and ideology. *Surveillance & Society*, 12(2), pp.197-208.
- Villa, D.R., 1992. Postmodernism and the public sphere. *American Political Science Review*, 86(3), pp.712-721.
- Wagner, Kurt. 2017. "Reddit Just Raised Its Largest Funding Round Ever and Is Now Worth \$1.8 Billion." CNBC. Retrieved July 17, 2018 (<https://www.cnbc.com/2017/07/31/reddit-worth-1-point-8-billion.html>).
- Weninger, T., 2014. An exploration of submissions and discussions in social news: Mining collective intelligence of Reddit. *Social Network Analysis and Mining*, 4(1), p.173.
- Weninger, T., Zhu, X.A. and Han, J., 2013, August. An exploration of discussion threads in social news sites: A case study of the reddit community. In *Advances in Social Networks Analysis and Mining (ASONAM), 2013 IEEE/ACM International Conference on* (pp. 579-583). IEEE.
- WikiLeaks. n.d. "Clinton Status Memo Mentioning Google's Eric Schmidt." Scribd. Retrieved July 17, 2018 (<https://www.scribd.com/document/328037888/Clinton-Status-Memo-Mentioning-Google-s-Eric-Schmidt>).
- Williams, R., 1973. Base and superstructure in Marxist cultural theory. *New left review*, (82), p.3.
- Wright, R.G., 2000. Traces of Violence: Gadamer, Habermas, and the Hate Speech Problem. *Chi.-Kent L. Rev.*, 76, p.991.
- Yourish, K. (2016). Clinton and Trump Have Terrible Approval Ratings. Does It Matter? Retrieved December 19, 2016, from <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/03/us/elections/trump-and-clinton-favorability.html>

APPENDIX A: Tables

| Step | Description of the Process |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| 1. Becoming familiar with the dataset | Read and reread the data, noting down initial ideas |
| 2. Generate initial codes | Code interesting features of each comment in a systematic fashion |
| 3. Search for prevalent themes | Collate codes into potential themes, gather all data to each theme |
| 4. Reviewing themes | Check to see if themes work in relation to the coded extracts, and the entire dataset |
| 5. Defining and naming themes | Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme |
| 6. Producing the report. | Provide a critical analysis of the dataset |

Table 1: Table of Procedures

| Model of Democratic Communication | Indicative Metric |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Liberal-Individualistic | Monologue Personal Revelation Personal Showcase Flaming |
| Communitarian | Ideological Fragmentation (Homophily) Mobilization Community Language Intra-Ideological Questioning Intra-Ideological Reciprocity |
| Deliberative | Rational-Critical Argument Public Issue Focus Equality Discussion Topic Focus Inter-Ideological Questioning Inter-Ideological Reciprocity |

Table 2: Communication metrics

APPENDIX B: Thematic Analysis

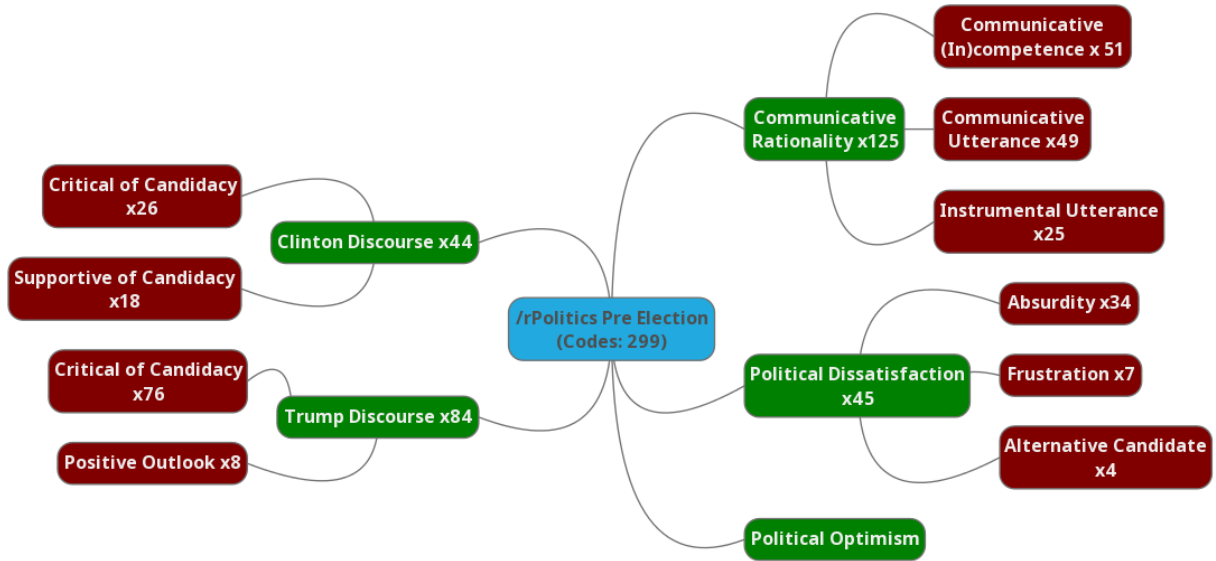


CHART 1

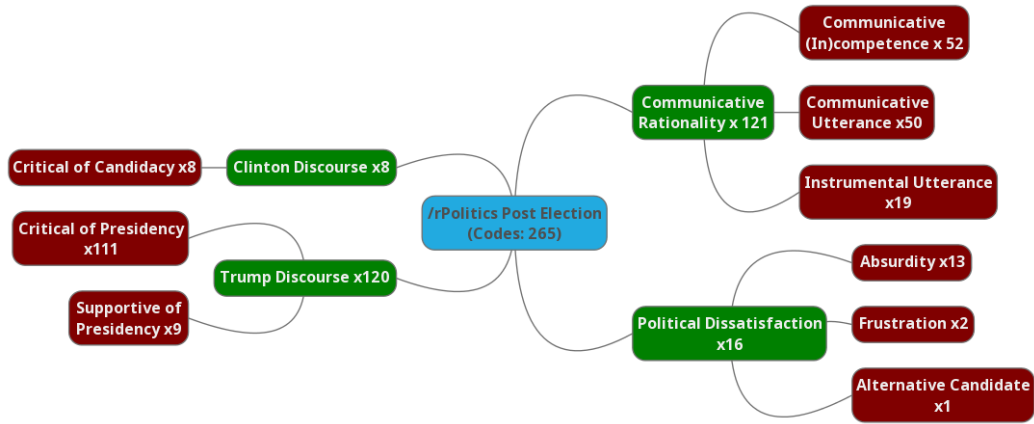


CHART 2

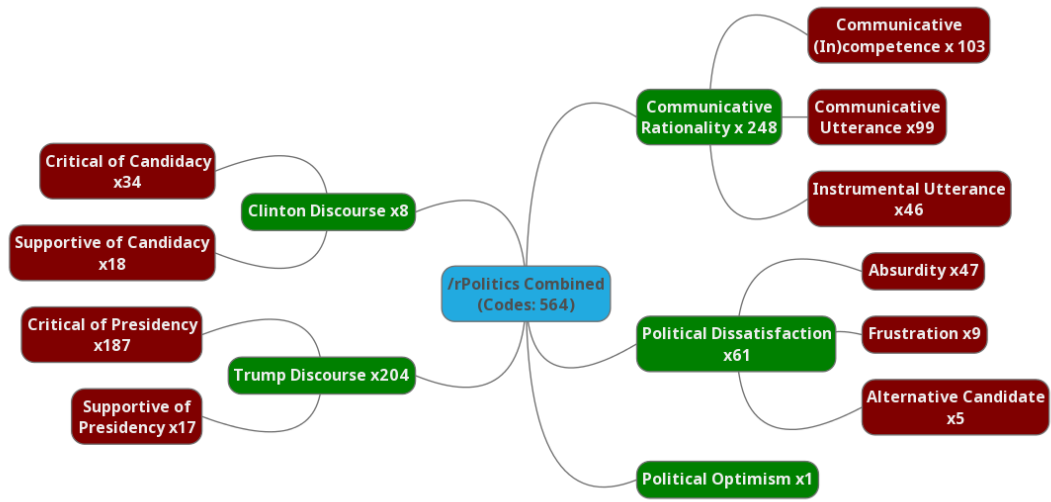


CHART 3

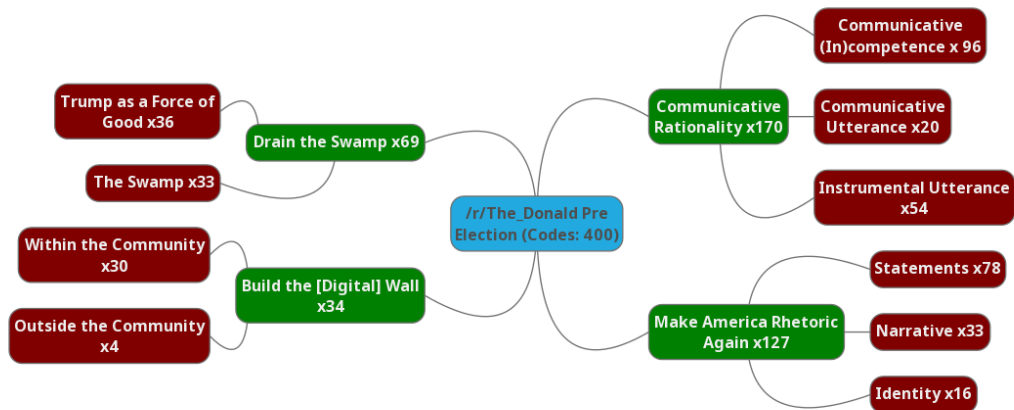


CHART 4

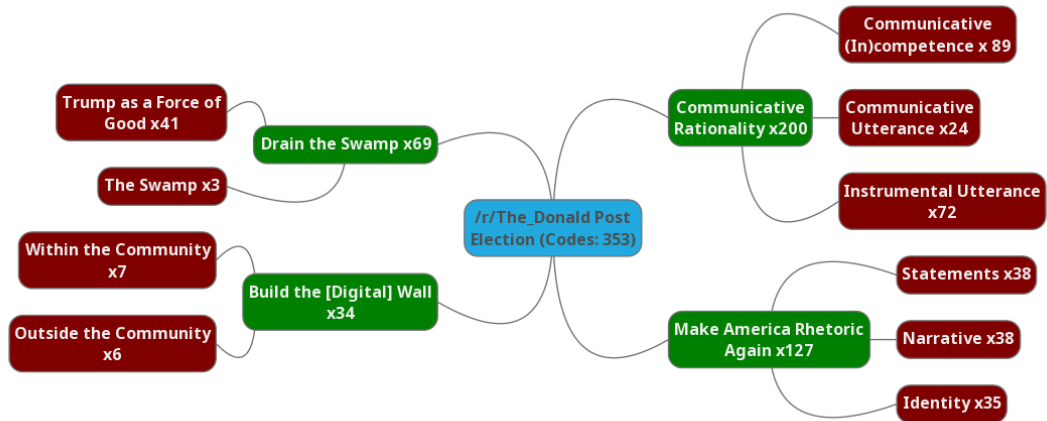


CHART 5

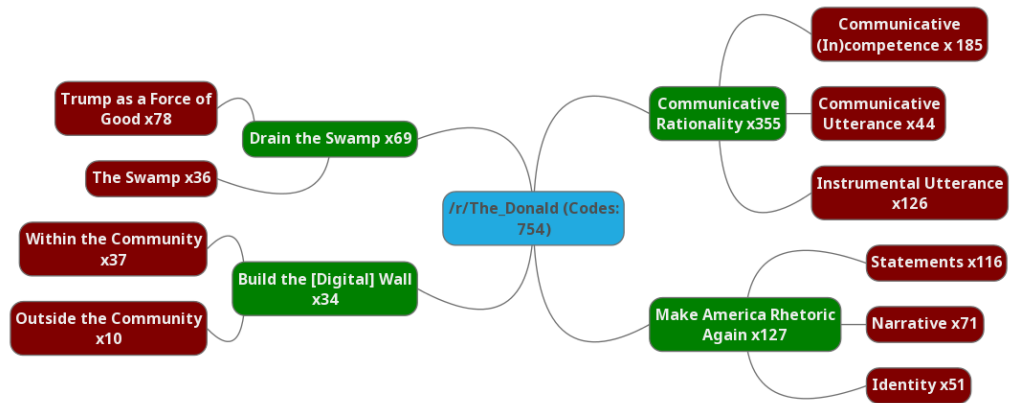


CHART 6

APPENDIX C: Figures

Submission Rules

The [/r/Politics](#) On Topic Statement

All submissions to [/r/politics](#) need to, *at a minimum*, include an internal discussion or focus about current US politics. This means that if a subject has political implications but does not directly discuss US politics, it is most likely off topic. Submissions must be articles, videos, polls, or sound clips.

To be political, submissions should have a **focus** on one of the following things that have political significance:

- Information and opinions concerning the running of US governments, courts, public services and policy-making.
- Private political actions and stories such as demonstrations, lobbying, candidacies and funding and political movements, groups and donors.

This does **not** include:

- The non-political actions of otherwise political figures. (ex. Donald Trump wore a turquoise shirt instead of a blue one)
- Relatives and associates that do not have political significance. (ex. Diane Feinstein's Father, Predator, Attempts Murder of Arnold Schwarzenegger)
- International politics unless that discussion focuses on the implications for the U.S. (ex. How US-Chinese trade deal will affect the EU)
- Discussion of the media that does not have explicit political connotations (ex. CNN fires Wolf Blitzer)

Disallowed submission types:

[/r/Politics](#) is a serious political discussion forum. To facilitate that type of discussion, all submissions must be articles, videos or sound clips. The following are also disallowed:

- Satire or humor pieces. These belong in our weekly "Satire Sunday" megathread or [/r/PoliticalHumor](#).
- Links that solicit users (Active petitions, signature campaigns, requests for money, surveys or polls).
- Links to social media, such as Google+, Facebook or Twitter.
- Personal Blogs. All blogs submitted must be affiliated with a reputable news source.
- Political advertisements as submissions. Advertisers should buy ad space on reddit.com if they wish to advertise on Reddit.

FIG 1



You must be invited to visit this community

[r/Gryffindor](#)

Are you a first year Gryffindor trying to access the Tower?

[This form](#) explains the requirements and process of getting into the Gryffindor Common Room.

Thank you!

The moderators of this subreddit have set it to private. You must be a moderator or approved submitter to visit.

MESSAGE THE MODERATORS

FIG 2

Submission Guidelines:

- 1 Articles must deal explicitly with US politics.
- 2 Articles must be published within the last calendar month.
- 3 Submissions must be from domains on the whitelist.
- 4 Post titles must be the exact headline from the article.
- 5 Submissions must be an original source.
- 6 Articles must be written in English
- 7 Spam is bad!
- 8 Submissions must be articles, videos or sound clips.
- 9 Do not use "BREAKING" or ALL CAPS in titles.

FIG 3

6. Trump Supporters ONLY - This sub is for supporters of Donald J. Trump ONLY. This is not a place for you to debate with us about Donald Trump, or to ask us to convince you to like Donald Trump. This is not a neutral place - we are 100% in support of Donald J. Trump. Moderators reserve the right to ban non-supporters as we see fit.

FIG 4

HEY GUYS - WE'RE HAVING AN AMA WITH THE NEXT PRESIDENT TONIGHT! (self.The_Donald)
submitted 4 months ago * by [deleted]

Welcome everyone!

If you are here from the media, there is a post right next to this one for you. Please read it.

CENTIPEDES,

Today is the long awaited day and in about an hour and half from now our next President, Mr. Donald J. Trump will be posting his thread for you to all ask him questions. The mod team wanted to give a short-notice heads-up on how this is going to work:

- Mr. Trump will be posting from his own account an AMA thread at 6:30ET. It will be stickied immediately.
- Once the thread is stickied it will be put in contest mode allowing all questions an equal chance of getting voted to the top. Mr. Trump is a busy man, so we want to save him time.
- At 7PM, the thread will go into "best" mode and Mr. Trump will answer the questions he'd like to get into.

Once Mr. Trump has answered his last question, we will lock the thread and open a post-AMA discussion thread. This is to prevent shills for messing up the thread.

WE'RE R/THE_DONALD. OUR PLACE, OUR RULES.

We would remind everyone, including media here that we are not a part of the campaign, but we love our community and we will take all measures necessary to protect it.

- Yes, we will ban troublemakers
- Yes, we will remove trolling comments
- Yes, we mean it when we say we'll throw anyone over our walls who fails to behave themselves


Finally: the next President of the United States is coming today. Can you guys believe it?

MAGA!

/The Mod Team of [/r/the_donald](#)


1546 comments share

FIG 5

 **T** **ETS, ANONYMOUS AND SJWS BTFO: OUR AMA WAS A HUGE SUCCESS! WE BROKE THE REDDIT GOLD RECORD! WE BEAT OBAMA'S COMMENT COUNT! [POST-AMA DISCUSSION + RALLY]** (self.The_Donald)
submitted 4 months ago * by [deleted]
2550 comments

sorted by: [new \(suggested\)](#)

you are viewing a single comment's thread.
[view the rest of the comments →](#)

 [-] [deleted] [score hidden] 4 months ago * - [stickied comment](#)

For the record we banned 2200 shills during Mr. Trump's AMA. Sorry brigaders, you weren't dealing with amateurs, our mods are battle-hardened shill-slayers.

[permlink](#) [embed](#)

FIG 6

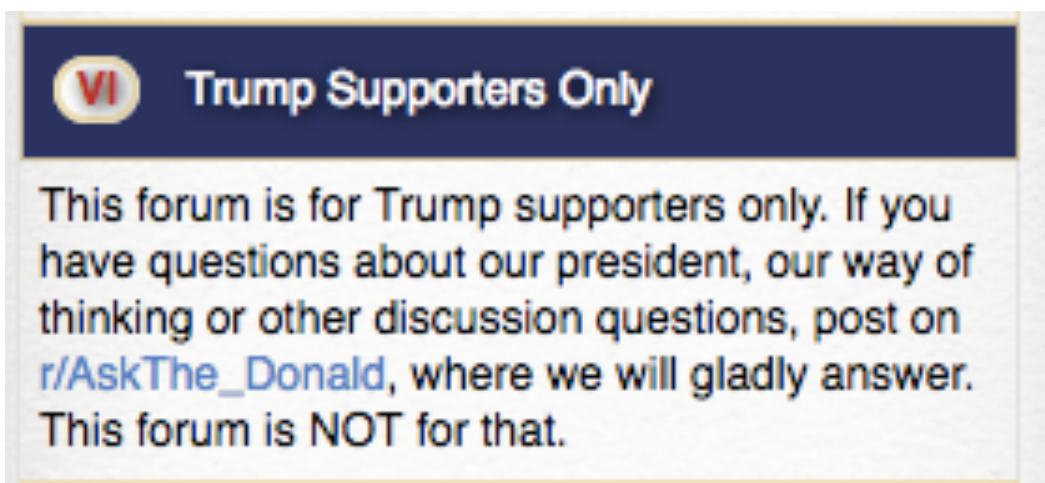


FIG 7

APPENDIX D: Reddit Threads

/r/The Donald Posts

(TDPE 1) Title: I'm Donald J. Trump and I'm Your Next President of the United States.

(TDPE 2) Title: It's a Movement – Watch with the Trump Train TONIGHT!

(TDPE 3) Title: DRAIN the SWAMP

(TDPE 4) Title: MAINSTREAM MEDIA is rigged!

(TDPE 5) Title: Let's MAGA

(TDAE 1.1) Title: DONALD J. TRUMP DECLARED THE WINNER!

(TDAE 1.2) Title: ELECTION NIGHT MAGATHREAD 4: WE. ARE. GOING. TO. WIN.

(TDAE 1.3) Title: ELECTION NIGHT MAGATHREAD! NO BRAKES!

(TDAE 1.4) Title: IMMINENT VICTORY THREAD.

(TDAE 1.5) Title: ELECTION NIGHT MAGATHREAD 3: Let the Tendies Hit the Floor!

(TDAE 2.1) Title: INAUGURATION DAY MAGATHREAD! GET IN HERE, WINNERS!

(TDAE 2.2) Title: INAUGURATION DAY MAGATHREAD 2 - HERE COME DAT PRESIDENT!

(TDAE 3) Title: ARE WE TIRED OF WINNING YET? It's Electoral College MAGAthread time! Get in here!

(TDAE 4) Title: LIVE: Confirmation Hearing of Trump Attorney General Nominee Jeff Sessio...

(TDAE 5) Title: LIVE: President-Elect Donald Trump Holds Press Conference at Trump Tower 1/11/17 (RSBN)

/r/Politics Posts

(PEP 1) Title: Megathread: FBI reopens investigation into Clinton emails

(PEP 2.1) Title: 2016 Presidential Race - First Presidential Debate Megathread

(PEP 2.2) Title: 2016 Presidential Race - First Presidential Debate Megathread II

(PEP 3) Title: 2016 Presidential Race - Vice-Presidential Debate Megathread

(PEP 4) Title: Hillary Clinton has pneumonia, doctor says

(PEP 5.1) Title: 2016 Presidential Race - Second Presidential Post-Debate Megathread

(PEP 5.2) Title: 2016 Presidential Race - Second Presidential Debate Megathread
(60-90 min)

(AEP 1) Title: Megathread: Intelligence report claims Russia has compromising information on Trump

(AEP 2) Title: Megathread: Federal Court overturns President Trump's executive order regarding immigration

(AEP 3) Title: Donald Trump surpasses 270 votes in Electoral College to formally win presidency

(AEP 4) Title: 2016 Election Day Returns Megathread (1040pm EST)

(AEP 5) Title: 2017 Presidential Inauguration Post-Megathread

VITA AUCTORIS

Evan Alexander Nevard was born in Scarborough, Ontario in 1992. He graduated from Agincourt Collegiate Institute in 2011. In 2016 he obtained his BA [H] in Psychology and Sociology from the University of Windsor. In 2018 he completed the requirements for a Master of Arts degree in Sociology from the University of Windsor. In September of 2018 he started his PhD in Communications at Carleton.