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An Agent of Democracy: Evaluating the Role of Social Media in Modern Presidential Elections

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AN AGENT OF DEMOCRACY

EVALUATING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN MODERN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

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Abstract:

There is no better time to study media's influence than in an election year. This research synthesis will (1) present a history of social media networks and describe in detail how their proliferation in society has fed grassroots political efforts, particularly in Howard Dean's campaign in 2004 (2) outline how social media has become its own medium that challenges the corporate structure of mainstream media and (3) ultimately prove using research from United States presidential elections from 2004-2016 that social media has aided in actively upholding several major democratic principles.

This research synthesis examines both sides of the most current debate around social media use; while some believe it was responsible for spreading misinformation during the last election, automated ad buying and selling by big brands is actually to blame for the spread of fake news. Another debate argues that users of social media are less informed about political processes, but data from 2004 on suggests that social media has increased civic engagement among users in a variety of ways. This paper will also present original findings that only supplement the claim of previous research: social media has a positive affect on civic engagement.

Ultimately this paper will argue for social networks to be looked upon by future academia and educators as an agent of democracy, and a significant medium to be engaged with as much as television or radio within curriculums. Additionally, they are a resource that will be used as part of larger political campaign efforts at the grassroots level.

American democracy has inevitably undergone waves of change as a result of
technological innovation. Upon the invention of the printing press, media have served as a form

of pedagogy in American society, as agents of information. Today, they saturate every fabric of

American social and political culture, connecting citizens to ideas and elements of our world

through digital channels. Psychologists, sociologists, and political analysts have long studied the

effects of media on different audiences, and today the discourse surrounding new media

acknowledges how it has changed the way people get their news. A debate has always existed

about whether the mass media has become an institution that encourages or stifles democracy,

and when social media networks first emerged, that debate took on a different cadence.[1]

Much of the existing literature that comments on social media's larger impact on

democracy and social change has looked at its ability to give citizens a voice and speak out

against authoritarian governments. One particular event that most media scholars agree was a

turning point in how social media was viewed by academia was the Arab Spring. When a young

and impassioned local merchant named Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire in Tunisia in a

public protest against his oppressive government, images of his powerful display circulated

rapidly through digital channels and were shared and engaged with on social network sites

(SNS), allowing like-minded individuals in Tunisia and beyond to connect and ultimately

organize into activist coalitions that aimed to preserve civil liberties and speak out against their

governments.[2] The display and subsequent organization sparked a "democratic fervor" that not

only dissolved the regime structure in Tunisia and Egypt, but also resulted in civil war in Libya.

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[1] Renee Hobbs, "The Seven Great Debates of the Media Literacy Movement," *Journal of Communication* (1998): 2-5.

[2] Howard, Philip N., Aiden Duffy, Deen Freelon, Muzammil M. Hussain, Will Mari, and Marwa Maziad. "Opening closed regimes: what was the role of social media during the Arab Spring?." (2011).

More alarming still were the subsequent street protests in Algeria, Morocco, Syria, and Yemen,

all which have been linked to activist coalitions that found each other on social networks.[3]

A research study conducted in 2011 by a group of professors at the University of

Washington at the height of the Arab Spring conflicts analyzed over 3 million tweets in the

Tunisian blogosphere based on key-words and engagement, eventually concluding that social

media played a key role in defining the kinds of conversations and criticisms of governments in

Egypt and Tunisia.[4] Additionally, the study made an overarching conclusion that relates directly

to the importance of social media discourse that this research synthesis will unpack: during the

Arab Spring, "social media helped to spread democratic ideas across international borders."[5]

Evidence derived from the Twitter analysis study displayed an effort by Tunisian and Egyptian

advocates to connect with those also concerned with preserving civil liberties beyond state

borders. On the day Mubarak left office, 225,000 tweets were sent out by those living outside the

country itself.[6] There was also direct evidence to support that these connections made via social

channels helped inform Western news networks about the unrest associated with the Arab

Spring. An integral part of American democratic ideals involves a commitment to spreading the

preservation of civil liberties globally, and thus social media must be engaged with by academia

because of the power it has already displayed in doing so.[7]

This international example is essential to examine before looking at social media's

domestic impact on democracy. To narrow in on a specific cross-section of this impact, this

research synthesis specifically focuses on social media's affect on one integral part of American

democracy: elections. According to a breadth of media theory research, election campaigns have

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[3] Ibid., 3.
[4] Ibid., 4.
[5] Ibid., 3.
[6] Ibid., 5.
[7] Ibid., 4.

become defined by the media's role in informing publics on candidates. This informing function

also connects to the media's role in actually getting the candidates out of their homes to vote on

election day.[8]

The outset of the general election race marks the end of each candidate's nominating

campaigns, and begins the start of phase two in the presidential contest. Up to this point in a

presidential race, media have already greatly impacted the nominating process, coming to a head

at each party's convention-where each candidate's debut as their party's nominee is televised for

the world to critique. After this major media event, each candidate launches a media arsenal in

their individual crusades to earn the highest office in the land, which includes a television, radio,

news, and social media presence. America's most recent presidential contest has been referred to

by some as the most contentious presidential contest in history, and many blamed social media

for spreading fake news and fueling the fire on public forums. But is it possible that social media

has done more to help than hurt in the way of voter engagement, registration, and participation in

politics among its users? Social media has become another medium where its users can connect

on a partisan level, debate issues in real time, and circumvent the corporate institution that has

become television media.[9] In examining evidence from 2004 on, this research study will prove

that regardless of opinion, party, or candidate preference, social media has made great strides in

upholding major principles of American democracy through the role it has played during

presidential elections.

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[8] Kiousis, Spiro, Michael Mitrook, Xu Wu, and Trent Seltzer. "First-and second-level agenda-building and agenda-setting effects: Exploring the linkages among candidate news releases, media coverage, and public opinion during the 2002 Florida gubernatorial election." *Journal of Public Relations Research* 18, no. 3 (2006): 265-285.
9 Loader B, MerceaD (2011) 'NETWORKING DEMOCRACY? Social media innovations and participatory politics', Information, Communication and Society, 14 (6), 757-769.

In proving social media as an agency of democracy, this research synthesis will present
both sides of the argument, as well as dissect basic principles of democracy that trace back to the

ideals of thinkers like John Locke, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. The study will also

contribute new research collected after the 2016 presidential election that asked voting-eligible

adults questions about their social media experience and political participation. Since social

media's proliferation in mainstream society, voters have been given a voice that evades the

filters and bias that the news media has come to be saddled with. Ultimately, social media has

made presidential campaigns more democratic, beginning back in 2004 during Howard Dean's

grassroots campaign and proving its pervasive affect on voting in the country's most recent

election.[10]

Because of how they have come to influence social behaviors, business, and political

processes, social media is attracting more academic research, and looking at existing scholarship

focusing on its place in American culture is essential to understanding why it is good for

democracy. The academia that does exist defines social network sites as "web-based services that

allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2)

articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their

list of connections and those made by others within the system."[11] Though their premises are all

similar, aiming to connect its users and ideas on a single platform, each social network differs in

its user demographics, features, and popularity.[12] To understand how each relates to our electoral

processes and contributes to upholding democracy in its modern state, social media must be

studied first through a historical lens.

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[10] Jack Lule, *Understanding Media and Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication (*New York: Flat World Education, 2014), Web. < http://catalog.flatworldknowledge.com/bookhub/reader/3833#lulemedia_1.0-ch02_s02 >.
[11] Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 13*(1), 210-230.
[12] Ibid.

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Though dating sites and messaging platforms like AIM had previously allowed for some

building of online communities, the first formal social network was released in 1997, and dubbed

SixDegrees.com. SixDegrees.com allowed users to create profiles, create a list of their "friends,"

and manage the friends list. Upon its release, SixDegrees promoted itself as a tool to message

and connect with like-minded people. In 2000, despite garnering more than a million users, the

service shut down to make way for new networks who would attempt to perpetuate a similar

mission. The next two social networks, LiveJournal and BlackPlanet, would break out almost

two full years later. LiveJournal listed connections on user page where they posted updates on a

real-time journal and allowed people to mark others as Friends to follow their journals and

manage privacy settings. This was the first network to involve exposing ideas and personal

feelings about the world on a public forum, then uncommon but today a regular part of most

citizens' day.[13]

The next wave of social network site emergence began when Ryze.com was launched in

2001, as a precursor for and arguably the inspiration behind LinkedIn, as a tool to help its users

grow a professional network online and utilize their contacts to grow professionally. The next

significant social network, Friendster, "became the most significant, if only as one of the biggest

disappointments in Internet history."[14] Friendster launched in 2002, and was meant to be

Ryze.com's social counterpart and a competition to Match.com, a dating site that was released

around the same time. While "most dating sites focused on introducing people to strangers with

similar interests, Friendster was designed to help friends-of-friends meet, based on the

assumption that friends-of-friends would make better romantic partners than would strangers."[15]

Friendster gained quickly earned 300,000 users, but its rapid rise to social network site

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid. 215.

[15] Ibid., 211.

popularity was more than the set-up domain could handle. As a result, the site lost a large

number of its users because the platform became difficult to use.[16]

The initial design of Friendster "restricted users from viewing profiles of people who

were more than four degrees away (friends-of-friends-of-friends-of-friends)."[17] In order to view

other user profiles, users began adding their more distant acquaintances and even strangers who

seemed like-minded. Some began massively collecting Friends, an activity that was implicitly

encouraged through a ''most popular'' feature.[18] After Friendster had been available to the

public for a period of time, the emergence of fake profiles representing fictional characters or

celebrities began to infect the site's purpose. These fake users, dubbed "Fakesters," infuriated the

company, who shut down fake profiles by eliminating the "most popular" feature.[19] Thus, "many

early adopters left because of the combination of technical difficulties, social collisions, and a

rupture of trust between users and the site."[20]

Following the demise of Friendster, several other social networks were released from

2003 on, all focusing on building profiles that friends could view and spread ideas on,

connecting on the basis of shared interests and positions. More creative outlets emerged during

this time, including Couchsurfing, which connected nomadic travelers with people who had open

couches (similar to AirBnB), and MyChurch, which allowed Christian churches and their

parishoners to connect with each other.[21] All of these smaller networks eventually gave rise to

MySpace, which today is remembered by millennials (the largest user pool of social media in its

modern state) as the first network to really take off in America. MySpace capitalized on

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[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid., 216.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., 217
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., 220.

Friendster users who "jumped ship because of its insufficient offerings as a social network," and

thus grew rapidly in success. [22]

MySpace's original unique value proposition as a social network site was its allowance of

its users to personalize their profiles, which became focused on showcasing music they were

interested in.[23] For the first time, younger users began joining a prominent social network site,

whose policy allowed people ages 16 and up to make a profile. In July 2005, News Corporation

purchased MySpace for $580 million and a boom in users occurred.[24] MySpace also became the

first social network to engage in a string of litgation battles, many of which centered around

sexual interactions between adults and minors on its messaging feature. Social media was

crossing a new frontier as its users got younger and more impressionable, and began integrating

it into every aspect of their daily communication and routines.[25]

Facebook followed suit as the next social network to gain steam, and was created in 2004

by Harvard student Mark Zuckerberg as a tool to connect college students. When it was first

released, it was to Harvard students only, and to join, a user had to have a harvard.edu email

address. As it gained capital, Facebook began forming contracts with other schools; those users

were also required to have university email addresses associated with those institutions, a

requirement that kept the site relatively closed and strictly for students.[26] Beginning in

September 2005, "Facebook expanded to include high school students, professionals inside

corporate networks, and, eventually, everyone."[27] The change to open signup did not mean that

new users could easily access the network; high school students typically needed admin approval

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[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., 220-222.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., 225.
[27] Ibid.; 226-228.

and the domain had to be legitimate. Unlike other social network sites, Facebook users can't

have public pages, forcing users to connect if they want to view profiles. Another feature that

differentiates Facebook is "the ability for outside developers to build 'Applications,' which allow

users to personalize their profiles and perform other tasks, such as compare movie preferences

and chart travel histories."[28] The Election of 2008 saw a huge transformation in the American

political campaign landscape, when political newcomer Barack Obama mobilized millions of

voters on Facebook and ultimately clinch his party's nomination before going on to serve two

terms as Commander and Chief.[29]

 After these "business oriented" social networks took off, Twitter emerged. Created in

2006 by Jack Dorsey, co-founder of a podcasting service called Odeo, Twitter began as a

messaging-based social network where friends could connect on a public forum with others

being able to see what they were talking about, and engage or chime in to the conversations.[30] By

2007, the social network site had gained a great deal of popularity among users, who embraced

the concept of online messaging, just like Twitter's founder had hoped. Twitter limited user

status updates to 140 characters, which set it apart from other public forums and social network

sites in use at the time, as it took on a micro-blogging type of framework and changed how

conversations happened on social media, especially during presidential elections.[31]

 Twitter is one of the most interesting social network sites to examine, because its users

took an already user-generated content platform and rewrote the rules. As Twitter's user base

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[28] Ibid., 225-227.

[29] "Technology and the Modern Political Campaign: The Digital Pulse of the 2008 Campaigns." In *Politicking Online: The Transformation of Election Campaign Communications*, edited by PANAGOPOULOS COSTAS and PANAGOPOULOS COSTAS, 1-18. Rutgers University Press, 2009. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hj455.4.

[30] MacArthur, Amanda. "The Real History of Twitter." *Lifewire.* 3 Obtober 2016. Accessed 13 March 2017. <https://www.lifewire.com/history-of-twitter-3288854.>

[31] Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer- Mediated Communication*, *13*(1), 210-230.

started growing, users "were creating new jargon and different ways to use the service. Think of it as innovation born out of necessity."[32] When Twitter was first created and released for public use, its framework did not allow users to directly link another user or reply to a tweet. When some users started using the "@" symbol before another user's username to identify or reference them, the Twitter team added the functionality natively to the Twitter platform. Both "hashtags," which have come to define social media today and carried over to Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat, and "retweets" were born the same way; users came up with the concept that was eventually legitimized by the platform itself. Today, social media experts and managers report back to their clients on the metrics of their social content, measuring the number of "likes" "mentions" and "retweets" their tweets get, a measurement that was created entirely by Twitter's users.[33]

Instagram and Snapchat are the last social network sites relevant to the subject of this research synthesis, and to fully understand their implication for democracy it is imperative to see how they made an individual contribution to the modern medium. Instagram was founded in 2010 by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, and was purchased by Facebook in 2012. Just two months after it was released to the public, Instagram boasted over one million users, all of whom were captivated by the social network site's unique value proposition: the photo-only content sharing it allowed. As it gained popularity, the photo-sharing app released new filters within the application where users could edit their photos, tag a location or business in pictures, and even post short videos.[34] By 2013, Instagram had gained over 150 million users, and by the end of that year the app had added its own internal messaging feature in an effort to to compete with all

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[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Klien, Andre, "A Brief History of Instagram," *Internet Business: How To.* 31 August 2015. Accessed 4 April 2017. <http://Internetbusiness-howto.com/brief-history-of-instagram.>

other social network sites with their own direct messaging features. Today, anyone can gain a large amount of "followers" on Instagram, or people who indicate an interest in another users content, and become what social media experts have come to characterize as "influencers."[35] These influencers are often enlisted to promote products or services on behalf of other companies, but the concept translates to the political realm. Pictures of celebrities proudly boasting their "I Voted" stickers or outright endorsing a candidate were rampant during election 2016.[36]

The concept behind the most modern and politically significant social network site, "Snapchat," was an idea dreamt up by three friends at Stanford University. Evan Spiegel, Robert "Bobby" Murphy, and Frank Reginald "Reggie" Brown IV met in 2010, and their collective creativity and aptitude for technology and mobile applications led to the creation of a mobile messaging application called "Picaboo." The social network site allowed users to send and receive photos that would be deleted after a time and not saved into a photo gallery.[37] When the entrepreneurial trio discovered the term "Picaboo" had been copyrighted previously, they rebranded this messaging app, coining it "Snapchat." When it was first released, concerns about its privacy capabilities were circulated, as were concerns that it promoted the sharing of explicit photos by minors, similar to the controversy that almost took down early social networking sites. Despite these concerns, Snapchat has continued to grow at a rapid rate, and last reported having over 150 million users, most of whom access the site multiple times a day.[38] After partnering with Lightspeed Venture Partners, Snapchat added video support to their mobile application,

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[35] Ibid.

[36] Thomas, Holly, "18 Political Instagrammers You Should Follow ASAP," *Refinery 29*. 11 December 2013. Accessed 11 March 2017. < http://www.refinery29.com/2013/12/58808/cool-politician-instagrams.>

[37] Nusca, Andrew, "Snapchat: An Abridged History," *Fortune*. 4 February 2017. Accessed 28 February 2017. < http://fortune.com/2017/02/04/snapchat-abridged-history/>.

[38] Ibid.

allowing its users to exchange video messages in addition to still photos.[39] Today, Snapchat

includes a "My Story" feature that allows users to post photos or videos that can be seen by all

those who follow their account for up to 24 hours.[40]

The 2016 election was referred to by the New York Times as "The Snapchat Election."[41]

In January 2016, the company introduced a feature called "Discover," which allowed Snapchat's

media partners to post content to the app for up to 24 hours, or one news cycle, on their own

Snapchat channel, which users can view as long as they are posted, as well as share their content

with their friends. Many of these stories are human interest-like; perfect for campaign spots and

highlights. Another feature offered by the platform that became popular during campaign season

2016 was the "Live" feature. Live involves the placement of a "digital boundary, or "geofence,"

around an event or location. Users within that boundry can then upload their own pictures and

videos to a Snapchat "story" built around the event.[42] These snaps are "stitched into a narrative

by a team of Snapchat curators. They are basically home movies, shot by the app's own users."[43]

The Iowa Caucus, New Hampshire Primary and other major media events had their own "Live"

stories on snapchat displaying enthusiastic voters on both sides.[44]

While social networks will be proved in this research synthesis as important tools of

democracy and communication in the United States, when the first networks emerged that was

not the general consensus. Historically, whenever new media has emerged in the country the

public has seen it as potentially dangerous or subversive, a threat to innocence. In fact, the U.S.

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[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Mahler, Jonathan. "Campaign Coverage via Snapchat Could Shake up the 2016 Election," *The New York Time.* 3 May 2015. Accessed 14 March 2017. < https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/04/business/media/campaign-coverage-via-snapchat-could-shake-up-the-2016-elections.html>.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Nusca, Andrew, "Snapchat: An Abridged History," *Fortune.* 4 February 2017. Accessed 28 February 2017. < http://fortune.com/2017/02/04/snapchat-abridged-history/>.

[44] Ibid.

Congress has proposed legislation to ban youth from accessing social network sites in schools

and libraries (H.R. 5319, 2006; S. 49, 2007).[45] But as time wore on, more demographic groups

jumped on the social bandwagon, and the rise of social networks began to signal a shift in how

online communities built-up online. While "websites dedicated to communities of interest still

exist and prosper, SNSs are primarily organized around people, not interests."[46] Thus, despite

initial disdain for its immediacy and messaging and content-sharing feature, social media has

become its own, user-generated community and transformed existing online platform missions,

"and with it, a vibrant new research context," making it a source that must be engaged with by

academia as much as any other medium.[47]

In order to understand how social media upholds democracy, it is important to examine

four essential elements laid out by key thinkers like John Locke and Thomas Jefferson that

construct its integrity as a political system and set it apart from other political systems.

Democracy must have a system of free and fair elections to choose and elect candidates. Another

imperative component of democracy is the active participation of the people in political and civic

life. This includes an aspect of education, and staying informed about civic procedures and

current events in order to make educated decisions about candidates. It also means physically

turning out to vote for local, state, and national candidates in elections, as well as fundraise for or

donate to campaigns. The third and final key principal of democracy encompasses the protection

of the human rights of all citizens, those enumerated specifically in the constitution and those

retained by all human beings. This last key principle of democracy also refers to a branch of

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[45] Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer‑ Mediated Communication*, *13*(1), 210-230.

[46] Ibid., 228.

[47] Ibid., 230.

justice and the implementation of system of laws that apple equally to citizens.[48] The
maintenance of a just democracy hinges on the adherence to these principles by both the citizens

and the agents who enforce them. These agents include the formal leadership and control exerted

by leaders within the three branches of government, but also education and forms of media. In

order to prove social media as one of these agents, this research synthesis will look individually

at each principle of democracy, and bring together existing and new insights to show just how it

upholds them in modern day society.[49]

Related to how social media upholds the principle of free and fair electoral procedures is

how it directly confronts the corporate institution that mainstream media has become. Currently,

six networks with huge capital control 90% of the media in America, and by definition, any and

all media coverage during elections.[50] Those media conglomerates, inevitably, have huge

commercial interests, and collectively bring in $275.9 billion in revenue per year. Even more

shocking, a study conducted in 2010 by Business Insider estimated that approximately 232 media

executives control the "media information diet" for 277 million Americans, or 1 media executive

to 850,000 subscribers.[51] This corporate structure does not just apply to television news; a 1995

Federal Communications Commission sanction forbid radio companies to own over 40 stations,

yet the same study displayed evidence that the network *Clear Channel* owns over 1,200.

Additionally, NewsCorp owns the top newspaper in the United States, and in 2010 they avoided

paying over $875 million in taxes. This corruption that has infiltrated mainstream media is due in

part to FCC deregulation that has occurred over the last decade, as well as multi-million dollar

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[48] "What is Democracy?: Lecture at Hilla University for Humanistic Studies," *Stanford University.* 21 January 2004.
Accessed 15 April 2017. < https://web.stanford.edu/~ldiamond/iraq/WhaIsDemocracy012004.htm >.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Lutz, Ashley. "These 6 Corporations Control 90% of the Media in America," *Business Insider.* 21 June 2012.
Accessed 21 March 2017. <http://www.businessinsider.com/these-6-corporations-control-90-of-the-media-in-america-2012-6.>
[51] Ibid., 1

mergers of media giants. These statistics all support the claim that mainstream media has become

a corporate institution, without even considering the huge regulation they face by federal and

state sanctions.[52] One candidate for president in the election of 2004 proved in the way he ran his

campaign that the Internet and social media serve as agents of democracy in how they take some

of this corporate power away from mainstream media and give it back to the people.

In his work, *The Revolution will Not be Televised,* campaign expert Joe Trippi argues that

the Internet, and by extension, social network sites, has the potential to restore media integrity in

elections. Drawing on his own experience from the election of 2004, Trippi gives credibility to

his ideas in an afterword that discusses how the Obama campaign successfully harnessed the

same Internet power to leverage existing support mobilize voters in the 2008 presidential race.

Trippi headed Governor of Vermont Howard Dean's presidential crusade for the Democratic

Party, taking on what seemed like an impossible feat at the campaign's outset; Dean's financial

resources and network of support in no way indicated his ultimate rise to that of a front-runner in

the 2004 race. Drawing upon evidence from Dean's campaign to ultimately outline a formula for

success in campaigning, Trippi underscores the importance of the Internet and SNS as tools to

maintain the principles of democracy that our country was founded on.[53]

Trippi describes how utilizing new media in the 2004 election defied, "forty years of a

corrupt system [that] had reduced politics to its basest elements: the race to raise money from

one-quarter of the wealthiest one percent of Americans and corporate donors in exchange for

dictating the policy of the country."[54] Fed up with decline in voter interest and faced with an

opportunity after Dean emerged as a candidate, Trippi decided to test a strategy to utilize the

Internet to kick start voter interest and send Dean to the top, all the while keeping in mind his

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[52] Ibid.

[53] Trippi, Joe. *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised.* New York: HarperCollins, 2004.

[54] Ibid. xviii

larger vision for democracy. Trippi oversaw the development and implementation of MeetUp.com, which mobilized and linked over 600,000 "Dean for America" supporters online, and serves as an historical example of how Internet insurgency during a presidential campaign spurred voter interest and expanded democracy at a pace faster than Trippi himself had ever hoped to achieve. He argues that MeetUp.com, a SNS, allowed voters to connect with other like-minded individuals in direct opposition to "TV's fifty-year spell of cynicism and powerlessness."[55] The problem he speaks to is the commercial interests of television, and "the insidious corruption of our politics and government due to the disproportionate influence of wealthy donors, special interests and corporations. The Internet shines a light on these dark recesses and organizes millions of Americans cheaply, without relying on billionaires who want something for their money."[56]

Trippi does utilize a great deal of research and evidence to support the growing nature of Internet applications as tools of the masses, and a revolution that is gradually forming; one that will stand up to corporate leaders and investors to restore the integrity of democracy and express the will of the people. When qualifying the success of MeetUp and the Dean campaign's subsequent "dot-com miracle" in 2004, Trippi said: "When people know they are being heard, they will speak up, and when they speak up, they will offer ideas that never occurred to you or your $60 million-a-year marketing team or your billionaire board of directors." [57] His main argument centers around the disconnect caused by both the corporate nature of other forms of media as well as government regulation of such networks, which has taken the voice away from voter, a crucial check and balance to upholding American democracy. His point is that the Internet is the key to getting it back; to allow voters to voice opinions without having to cut

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[55] Ibid., 1-2.
[56] Ibid., 226.
[57] Ibid., 234.

through red tape. To uphold the democratic principle that calls for free and fair elections, it is

necessary to remove any corruption in the media, because of its role in informing the public

about candidates and news. Dean's online efforts also displayed the encouragement of political

participation, another integral part of democracy, because he raised $14.8 million in three

months, most of which came from independent contributors who donated online via his social

networking site.[58] This historical evidence from the election of 2004, which saw the rise of a

campaign-specific social networking, displays how social media and the Internet as a whole can

aid in combatting this corporate structure and contribute to the preservation of democracy using

modern tools.[59]

Though Dean did not secure his party's nomination in 2004, the general election race that

followed, between incumbent President George W. Bush and newcomer Senator John Kerry, saw

an increase of voters getting election-related news from social network sites, giving social media

credibility in its ability to uphold the democratic principle involving civic engagement by

citizens. The Pew Internet & American Life Project and the University of Michigan School of

Information conducted a survey in June before the election of 2004 to test the Internet's, and by

extension, SNS content's role in informing voters about key issues. The study honed in on "four

dimensions of contemporary politics: the arguments anchoring the campaign between George W.

Bush and John Kerry; the arguments for and against the war in Iraq; the arguments for and

against gay marriage; and the arguments for and against free trade."[60]

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[58] Espinoza Vasquez, Fatima K. and Cogburn, Derrick L. "From Networked Nominee to Networked Nation: Examining the Impact of Web 2.0 and Social Media on Political Participation and Civic Engagement in the 2008 Obama Campaign:" 18 October 2011. *Journal of Political Marketing*. 10 (1-2), 189-213. Web.

[59] Trippi, Joe. *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised.* New York: HarperCollins, 2004. 170-230.

[60] Horrigan, James, Garrett, Kelly, and Resnick, Paul. "The Internet and Demographic Debate." *PEW Research Center.* 27 October 2004. Accessed 18 February 2017. http://www.pewInternet.org/2004/10/27/the-Internet-and-democratic-debate/.

According to the study, 53% of respondents said they got all their news about the Iraq war on online platforms.[61] That number represents over 67 million people. The study concluded that the Internet contributed to users understanding the variety of opinions on key issues, which in turn made them more informed citizens and heightened their civic engagement. In its conclusion, the study analysis stated:

> The Internet is contributing to a wider awareness of political views during this year's campaign season. At a time when political deliberation seems extremely partisan and when people may be tempted to ignore arguments at odds with their views, Internet users are not insulating themselves in information echo chambers. Instead, they are exposed to more political arguments than non-users. While all people like to see arguments that support their beliefs, Internet users are not limiting their information exposure to views that buttress their opinions. Instead, wired Americans are more aware than non-internet users of all kinds of arguments, even those that challenge their preferred candidates and issue positions.

> -   The Pew Internet & American Life Project and the University of Michigan School of Information 2004

This PEW study also qualified their findings with a statement that said even when comparing Americans "who are similar in interest in politics and similar in demographic characteristics such as age and education," their conclusion holds up.[62]

Keeping this issue insight in mind, Howard Dean's site, DemocracyForAmerica.com, is today remembered as the first blog devoted to a presidential candidate, and the precursor to the utilization of Web 2.0 communication tools during presidential campaigns since.[63] Thus, the election of 2004 was the first presidential race in America to shed light the potential of both the Internet and SNS to motivate and connect voters through grassroots efforts to get a candidate

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[61] Ibid.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Espinoza Vasquez, Fatima K. and Cogburn, Derrick L. "From Networked Nominee to Networked Nation: Examining the Impact of Web 2.0 and Social Media on Political Participation and Civic Engagement in the 2008 Obama Campaign." 18 October 2011. *Journal of Political Marketing*. 10 (1-2), 189-213. Web.

support, as well as to expose users to a variety of issue viewpoints and encourage civic

participation.[64]

While Howard Dean's historically rapid rise as a candidate in 2004 showed signs of life

for social media's democratic potential, the greatest wealth of evidence to support social media's

positive affect on American democracy can be found when looking at the election of 2008 and

2012, where President Barack Obama came out on in both races because of his genius ability to

motivate and engage voters at a digital grassroots level using social media. Like Dean, Barack

Obama once seemed an unlikely presidential candidate. As a senator with a thin resume, his fate

seemed sealed when he announced his candidacy for the Democratic party and challenged the

clear front-runner: Hillary Clinton. Nonetheless, in 2008 Obama was elected America's first

African American Commander and Chief. His victory was historical, both for what it meant for

the black community in America, but also for what it displayed about social media power. As of

December 2006 there were 22,000 social networks registered on Facebook associated with

corporations, and in the 2008 presidential primaries, both Clinton and Obama announced their

candidacies via viral videos online in the Web site of the Democratic National Committee,

kicking off the campaign that would harness Internet power like never before. [65] President

Barack Obama utilized a social media-based strategy, complete with his own social network site,

to motivate Americans under his messaging and brand, encourage political engagement and

participation.[66]

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[64] Horrigan, James, Garrett, Kelly, and Resnick, Paul. "The Internet and Demographic Debate." *PEW Research Center*. 27 October 2004. Accessed 18 February 2017. http://www.pewInternet.org/2004/10/27/the-Internet-and-democratic-debate/.

[65] Espinoza Vasquez, Fatima K. and Cogburn, Derrick L. "From Networked Nominee to Networked Nation: Examining the Impact of Web 2.0 and Social Media on Political Participation and Civic Engagement in the 2008 Obama Campaign:" 18 October 2011. *Journal of Political Marketing*. 10 (1-2), 189-213. Web.

[66] Chang, Victoria. "Obama and the Power of Social Media and Technology." *The European Business Review.* June 2010. Accessed 18 March 2017.

An empirical study conducted by Derrick L. Coburn and Fatima K. Espinoza-Vasquez in 2011 analyzed qualitative data from social media tools used in the 2008 Obama campaign, including the campaign Web site, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, iPhone application, and the site created by the Obama-Biden Transition Team, as well as public information, and its findings are significant to democracy.[67] The Obama campaign in 2008 used social media to rouse 3.1 million individual contributors to donate, and mobilized a grassroots movement of more than 5 million volunteers.[68] This raising money and mobilizing of grassroots movements eventually translated into actually influencing "ground game, enhancing political participation, and getting out the vote."[69] Obama's campaign team focused its energy first on building a database of voter information, like most campaigns, and then its own social networking site. The site, BarackObama.com, "had Web usability principles strategically in order to achieve high participation."[70] He connected with specific interest groups by mobilizing online "Obama communities" in specific localities, and "used Facebook to organize, Twitter to send news, and YouTube to communicate." In addition, Obama '08 also used additional photo-sharing applications, like Flickr, to keep voters a part of the campaign experience. These tools were able to also "help the campaign to segment out its supporters and to provide targeted messages to unique and narrow constituencies and slices of their activist base." [71]

Coincidentally, the media director for Obama '08 was one of the masterminds behind the creative approach to Howard Dean's campaign, who employed the same money-raising gusto to

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[67] Espinoza Vasquez, Fatima K. and Cogburn, Derrick L. "From Networked Nominee to Networked Nation: Examining the Impact of Web 2.0 and Social Media on Political Participation and Civic Engagement in the 2008 Obama Campaign:" 18 October 2011. *Journal of Political Marketing*. 10 (1-2), 189-213. Web.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid.,200.
[71] Ibid., 201-204.

the Obama campaign effort.[72] Obama's strategy, however, added the technological innovations

that had come about in the four years since, integrating "SMS, distributed media, phone tools,

and communications technology." In addition to these major tools, the Obama campaign also

utilized other prominent social media network sites, including YouTube, Flickr, Digg, Eventful,

LinkedIn, BlackPlanet.com, FaithBase.com, Eons, GLEE.com, MiGente.com, Batanga,

AsianAve.com, and the Democratic National Committee's PartyBuilder.[73]

One way in which the Obama campaign mobilized these supporters was through a free

application for the Apple iPhone. The application asked users to identify supporters' geographic

location, which in turn opened a breadth of data that the campaign could internalize. The

application would then use this information to identify relevant local campaign activities in

which the supporter could immediately engage, such as phone banking, volunteer meetings, and

debate activities, and went about convincing them to take part in them. On the app, users could

also access e-mail updates about the campaign, which played to the personalized touch the

overarching strategy employed.[74]

The overall findings of the empirical study cited previously concluded that the

"techniques that were most significant to enable the Obama '08 campaign to translate online

activity to on-the-ground activity included: targeted messages facilitated by social media and

Web 2.0 tools…promoting active civic engagement using online tools, enabling peer-to-peer

political campaigning, educating the public on issues and organizational strategies, [and]

enabling voters to make informed decisions."[75] The conclusions reached by the study were done

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[72] Espinoza Vasquez, Fatima K. and Cogburn, Derrick L. "From Networked Nominee to Networked Nation: Examining the Impact of Web 2.0 and Social Media on Political Participation and Civic Engagement in the 2008 Obama Campaign:" 18 October 2011. *Journal of Political Marketing*. 10 (1-2), 189-213. Web.
[73] Ibid., 204.
[74] Ibid., 204-207.
[75] Ibid., 211.

so by analyzing users of the app and other campaign-centric social media tools as well as how

users participated at each stage of the campaign process, including phone bank volunteering and

more. In total, there were more than 2 million users of the Obama '08 social network and more

than 200,000 offline events, and 5 million volunteers.[76] According to the study's data-backed

findings, the Obama campaign "utilized these tools to go beyond educating the public and raising

money to mobilizing the ground game, enhancing political participation, and getting out the

vote."[77]

While it is important to examine exactly how social tools utilized in the 2008 campaign

contributed to civic participation, thereby upholding a major principle of democracy, it is also

essential to look at voter turnout data from the election of 2008. A study conducted in 2010 by

Georgetown University used data from the Pew Center to examine the relationship between

voting behavior during the presidential election of 2008 and online and social media use prior to

the election. Ultimately, the conclusion reached by the credible university found that "a very

significant relationship existed between accessing political content on social network sites and

the likelihood of voting. The findings estimated that voter turnout increased by 1 vote for every

11 to 25 people who accessed political content on social network sites, depending on the

specification used."[78] This finding is significant, and backed by a wealth of political turnout data

from 2008; Obama made history when the turnout rate broke a "40-year high," and more than

131 million people voted, setting a new record for presidential elections. The only variable in

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[76] Ibid., 210-213.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Boroughs, Bryan. "Social Networking Websites and Voter Turnout." *Georgetown University*. 14 April 2010. Accessed: 11 April 2017. Web.
<https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/553661/boroughsBryan.pdf >.

how it was able to uphold such strong democratic principles, is its uniqueness in how it used

social media tools to connect and mobilize voters, and steer the conversation around him.[79]

While the tactics utilized by the Obama campaign are significant to American

democracy, they are even more far-reaching, contributing to the spread of democratic ideals

worldwide. The 2011 general elections in Nigeria, a federal republic, showed a similar use of

social media to connect voting groups within a very civically disconnected country. Encouraged

by President Barrack Obama's use of social network sites to motivate voters and volunteers,

Nigerian politicians have followed suit in their own campaign efforts. A study conducted in 2012

that looked specifically at electoral processes in the South-East of Nigeria explored "the extent of

youth involvement with the social media for electioneering process."[80] The findings showed a

significant result: "political campaigning using new media had significant effect on the

electorate's decision-making and participation in Nigerian elections. The study therefore

recommends the embracing of social media for successive political campaigns that grants the

electorate the interactive opportunity with the political candidates."[81] Thus, not only was

President Barack Obama's campaign indicative of how social media can increase civic

engagement, it spread similar campaign tactics to other non-democratic nations who used it to

increase civic engagement as well.

The Obama campaign in 2012 saw a similar result. While his established Republican

challenger, Mitt Romney also had a sophisticated online social presence, Obama still came out

on top in terms of how he engaged voters using online communications tools. According to data

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[79] "2008 Election Turnout Hit 40-Year High," *CBS News.* 15 December 2008. Accessed 27 March 2017. Web. < http://www.cbsnews.com/news/2008-election-turnout-hit-40-year-high/>.

[80] Jayaprakash, K. Rekha, A.P., Rajendiran, S. "Open Access Journals-A Study," *Journal of Humanities and Social Science,* 8:3. February 2013. Accessed 21 Feburary 2017. Web. <http://iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol8-issue3/B0820709.pdf>.

[81] Ibid.

provided by the PEW Research center, the 2012 Obama campaign posted nearly four times as

much content as the Romney campaign, and was active on nearly twice as many social

networking platforms.[82] Obama's digital content also engaged its users more; garnering twice the

number of shares, views and comments of his posts from voters, proving once again that social

media gives voters a voice and encourages political participation.[83]

While Trump employed a similar tactic to the Obama administration on social media,

personalizing content and mobilizing specific groups to engage, the most modern debate

surrounding social media and its role in democracy in the country's most recent presidential

contest centered on what extent it was involved in the spread of fake news. Though not a new

concept, fake news stories gained huge momentum during election 2016 and the campaign

season before it. While a huge debate exists about what is responsible for this dissemination of

misinformation, social media sites have proven themselves again in how they can combat against

corporate, established media and allow citizens to speak for themselves, solidifying their role as

a defender and protector of democracy in America during presidential elections.

According to the PEW Research Center, in 2016 62% of adults reported getting their

their news on social media, and 18% say they do so "very often."[84] The survey conducted by this

research synthesis showed similar results: in a survey that asked 100 voting-eligible adults where

they get news about politics, 69% attributed social media as their top source of information. This

is significant when studying how social media affects democracy in the modern age.

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[82] "How the Presidential Candidates Use the Web and Social Media." *PEW Research Center.* 15 August 2012.
Accessed 15 March 2017. Web. <http://www.journalism.org/2012/08/15/how-presidential-candidates-use-web-and-social-media/>.

[83] Ibid.

[84] Gottfried, Jeffrey and Shearer, Elisa. "News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2016." *PEW Research Center.*
26 May 2016. Accessed 28 February 2017. Web. < http://www.journalism.org/2016/05/26/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2016/>.

In order to have a well-functioning democracy, where citizens make informed electoral decisions, it's incredibly important that citizens are privy to credible information. In 2016, Gallup Poll reported that "Americans' trust and confidence in the mass media ' to report the news fully, accurately and fairly' has dropped to its lowest level history, with '32% saying they have a great deal or fair amount of trust in the media.'" [85] Down eight percentage points from the previous election, the distrust in media can be attributed to the rapid spread of fake stories surrounding the election. However, as verifiably false content gains millions of shares, and Americans harden in their distrust in media, it is important to educate the public on how exactly the fake content spreads in society and what social media's role in the spread of fake news involves.

As more forward-thinking brands have integrated advertising technology into every aspect of their marketing strategy, the close relationship that advertisers and publishers once had seems like a distant memory. The argument for automating the buying and selling of advertising through complete open exchange seems simple: traditional direct deals don't afford the same efficiency, and with the breadth of consumer purchasing knowledge now available, it is easier for adtech providers to target audiences. While most ad tech can place filters that keep advertisements from being served on violent or inappropriate sites, publishers are now facing a new challenge: the possibility of ads being served on digital platforms that promote fake news, once again proving the corporate dangers and implications of established media. [86]

2016 saw a rapid spread of fake news content, much of which had to do with the election and endorsements for each candidate. Automated bidding for ad space is largely to blame;

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[85] Swift, Art. "America's Trust in Media Sinks to New Low." *Gallup Poll.* 14 September 2016. Accessed 28 December 2016. Web. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx>.
[86] "Meet the Ad Companies Ditching Breitbart and Fake News." *Wired.* 15 December 2016. Accessed 1 January 2017. Web. <https://www.wired.com/2016/12/fake-news-will-go-away-tech-behind-ads-wont-pay/>.

because third-party networks designate advertising money based on search history and purchasing insights, monetization streams are directed to these sites. As a result, brands that leverage open exchange now risk appearing to endorse political stances, candidates or false news that potential customers could deem offensive. Even worse, false information at a rapid rate as the fraudulent sites collect advertising money from unsuspecting brands and grow in their influence in the digital space.[87]

While vetting every domain where an ad could be served may not be feasible, there are steps these publishers can take in exerting greater control of the ad tech to do their part in mitigating the spread of these fake news stories. Instead of buying and selling advertising through open exchange, some notable brands are leveraging programmatic direct, which keeps the efficiency aspect of real-time automated bidding while allowing brands to work more closely with advertisers in specifying the audiences and platforms they want to target.[88]

To name a few big publishers, both Google and The New York Times are leveraging programmatic direct, with unparalleled results. What these companies have discovered is that when they have more access to their data and inventory, they can better target buyers, work with agencies to develop more informed campaigns, and negotiate pricing based on traffic. Leveraging programmatic direct also opens up the relationship between buyer and seller, which allows publishers more transparency in keeping track of revenue.[89]

While leveraging programmatic direct exists as one step big brands and mainstream, corporate media structures can take in combatting the spread of fake news, social media

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[87] "Advertising Tech: How the Ad Industry is Tackling the Problem." *MIT Technology Review*. 15 December 2014. Accessed 12 November 2016. Web. <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/532561/advertising-fraud-how-the-ad-tech-industry-is-tackling-the-problem/>.

[88] "Meet the Ad Companies Ditching Breitbart and Fake News." *Wired*. 15 December 2016. Accessed 1 January 2017. Web. <https://www.wired.com/2016/12/fake-news-will-go-away-tech-behind-ads-wont-pay/>.

[89] Siefo, George. "Google Says Programmatic Direct is Due for a Rise in 2017." *AdAge*. 16 December 2016. Accessed 13 March 2017. Web. < http://adage.com/article/digital/google-programmatic-direct-rise-2017/307111/>.

networks are taking their own steps to help mitigate this spread of disinformation and preserve

democracy. One network specifically has armed its users against fake news: Facebook just

recently signed a $14 million initiative designed to stifle its spread. While earlier in the year it

allowed users to flag stories and articles as "fake news," giving them a voice to combat the

corporate corruption, this most recent initiative's mission: "…is to advance news literacy, to

increase trust in journalism around the world and to better inform the public conversation," and

will fund "applied research and projects, and convene meetings with industry experts."[90] Thus,

not only are social media networks not responsible for the momentum gained by fake news over

the last year, their creators are actually arming users against the false stories by adding features

to maintain democracy.

As this research synthesis has presented, over the last decade social media has displayed

a positive influence on civic engagement, voter turnout, and ease of connecting to like-minded

voters, proving it as an agent of democracy in America. Ultimately, the best way to preserve

democracy in media is through media literacy education, but social media allows users to engage

in politically significant conversations with a few keystrokes. What could be more democratic

than that?

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[90] Moscaritolo, Angela. "Facebook Joins $14 Million Initiative to Fight Fake News." *Entrepreneur.* 3 April 2017. Accessed 3 April 2017. Web. < https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/292352>.

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