

American Media and Democratic Theory: Consequences of “Softest News”

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As the 2016 U.S. Election unfolded, it became clear that there were numerous stories about the campaigns, candidates, and the overall race that were not focused on any relevant political information that a citizen would use to make a reasoned political decision. This led me to question why these stories were even being considered political news, as they were often followed and reported by the same outlets that were focusing on the information that was relevant for a political decision. This led my research to political communication literature that was focused on how news is classified, and how people use news to make decisions. It was clear that the news stories that I was focused on were not falling into any former category, and I established a new category, “Softest News”. From this point I moved onto the impact that this category of news was having on the people who were engaging with it, and how the rapid increase of these stories was potentially changing how democracy was functioning. Focusing on the works of Benjamin Barber, Joseph Schumpeter, and Jason Brennan, I develop a case that softest news has altered the basic tenant of information gathering for democratic decisions. Using case studies, I seek to demonstrate that there is potentially a link in how people are gathering information from softest news and the political decisions they then make, which has alarming consequences for classic democratic theory. Finally, part of this work attempts to offer possible solutions to the issue that the paper brings forward, focusing on using a deliberative democratic method to create better decisions.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

On Monday, April 13, 2015, Hillary Clinton was driving to Iowa for the beginning of her campaign and stopped in Maumee, Ohio, a suburb of Toledo, to get lunch at a Chipotle Mexican Grill.¹ After a picture of Clinton was found through the security camera of the restaurant, the story went viral and news sources ranging from *The New York Times* to *The Huffington Post* were writing stories about Clinton and her lunch break. The fact that this became a story is something that should be addressed. It touches on the aspect of celebritization, but also goes further than that trend in the sense of how news, and particularly what people consider news when presidential candidates are involved, has evolved. The question turns to why was this even a story? And more alarming, are these types of stories building the base of people's political information?

This work has three goals: the first is to demonstrate that there is a new section of political news that has emerged and is changing the way that people learn about politics, and thus altering political knowledge and political behavior. This is will build upon previous political communication literature that discusses what political communication scholars call soft and hard news. My goal is to show that the way that news is classified, the way that people are now obtaining their news, and the types of stories that are being reported in regards to politics, has

¹ Haberman, Maggie. "Hillary Clinton, Just an Unrecognized Burrito Bowl Fan at Chipotle." *The New York Times*. April 13, 2015. Accessed December 11, 2015. <http://Snapchat.nytimes.com/2015/04/14/us/politics/on-the-road-hillary-clinton-stops-for-lunch-at-chipotle-and-goes-unrecognized.html>.

shifted drastically and this calls for a new category of news to be built. This category of news is called “softest news”, as it is softer than what is traditionally known as soft news in political communication scholarship. The second goal is to then move into what this new area of media entails for democratic theory. This will build upon prominent political theorists who have written about democratic theory and what the average citizen needs to be doing to make a democracy function. The third goal is to then offer potential solutions to the issue that softest news creates for political decisions. This will focus on using a deliberative democratic approach.

Overall, my belief is that the influx of softest news stories is detrimental to the overall democratic process, particularly because of its influence on how people collect information. Democracy and information are explicitly linked, so when one becomes compromised the other is likewise going to be impacted. My theory is that citizens are less informed because of an increase of softest news stories that are flooding the political media landscape and therefore are becoming a central source of information that is misleading, under informing, and even misinforming citizens who are still engaging in the democracy without the crucial information to make a reasonable vote. The rest of this work will aim to prove this claim. Starting with a literature review of political communication scholarship that focuses on news and the effects it can have on how citizens engage in political behavior, it will then move onto a more in-depth look at my theory of softest news and how it has the capacity to drastically harm democratic principles. Following this there will be a series of case studies that are going to show how specific aspects of softest news are playing out in the real world, demonstrating how softest news is creating this environment that can lead to misinformation, misleading, and under informed citizens.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW: DEFINING SOFT NEWS

Political communication literature has determined that there are different types of news in the media. Most scholarship uses two categories: hard and soft news. However, there is no consensus on exact definitions. This section will start with basic examples of soft news, and will build from the definitions of two prominent scholars, Thomas E. Patterson and Matthew Baum. By focusing on how soft news is defined, it will be clear that there are gaps in the way that news is defined today and that is where my category of softest news will start.

Starting with basic definitions of each type of news, hard news includes stories that are about information that is relevant to important decisions in political and current events, and they are focused only on giving the person who engages with this story information that is relevant to the actual facts. A good example would be a story on a presidential candidates' tax policies on any of the major news outlets like *Fox News*, *CNN*, or *MSNBC*. These stories would be focused on presenting facts and analysis, and would not worry about entertainment factors. Soft news stories differ because of this factor, the entertainment aspect. Soft news are sources like late night talk shows, morning talk shows, political satire, etc. These sources are not meant to be informational, their goal is to be for entertainment and that is why people engage with them. However, these stories will still cover aspects of current and political events, and because of this they can still impart information to the people who engage with them. An example of a soft news story would be a presidential candidate who goes onto *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon* and

between jokes discusses a part of their election platform. The rest of this literature review will be dedicated to describing in more detail the finer aspects of soft news, and through this review will demonstrate that there is a gap in the literature that will be addressed with “softest news.”

Patterson’s definition of soft news was one of the first that took hold in this area of academia, and many other scholars have used his definition as a basis for their own. Patterson’s soft news definition is based on a method of describing what hard news is, and then allowing anything else to be considered soft news. In other words, Patterson describes soft news as the news that is not hard news.² Hard news is news that involves top leaders, major issues in current events, or significant disruptions in the daily lives of people, such as a natural disaster or an airline tragedy.³ Soft news is everything that is not hard news, and is more personality-centered and sensational than hard news.⁴ Patterson’s understanding of soft news and the definition that he uses takes a completely content based approach, not giving weight to other factors like the outlet the story comes from.

As Patterson’s definition of soft news is based on being non-hard, other scholars have defined soft news on its own terms. One of the most prominent scholars in soft news research and its effects on political behavior, is Matthew Baum. Baum uses Patterson’s definition of soft news as his base and builds on it in his work. Baum makes the points that soft news tends to be very personality based, and focusing less on the hard facts. Using a foreign policy story as an example, Baum shows how when soft news touches on a foreign policy conflict, the outlet is more likely to focus on the human impact and morality of the situation over the geopolitical,

² Patterson, Thomas. "Doing Well and Doing Good: How Soft News and Critical Journalism Are Shrinking the News Audience and Weakening Democracy-And What News Outlets Can Do About It." President and Fellows of Harvard College (2000).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

diplomacy, or political issues.⁵ Another scholar who also uses Patterson's definition of soft news as a base for his own work is Markus Prior. However, Prior finds fault in some aspects of Patterson's definition, stating that "Using Patterson's definition any given news story can be classified as hard or soft, regardless of the news program in which it appears. Alternatively, several new news formats that are blends of information and entertainment have emerged in the past two decades labeled as 'soft news'."⁶ This literature review will focus on these two scholars' reasoning on Patterson's base definition of hard and soft news, as well as supplementing it with other works that help shape what soft news is, and outline the gap that is there to be filled by softest news.

Patterson's definition of soft news is widely used, but it has a critical limit. By focusing only on content this definition is overlooking many issues related to soft news and the news media, and some scholars believe that this definition does lack in certain areas. For instance, Prior discusses several new news formats, blends of information and entertainment, that have emerged in the past two decades that are labeled as 'soft news'.⁷ Prior is concerned with a major gap in Patterson's definition of soft news: that it leaves out a large number of outlets and stories that will be considered soft news due to the way that they blend entertainment and news. Current examples are sources such as *Buzzfeed* or the *The Huffington Post* in the reader platform and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* in the viewing platform. These are sources that have both hard, soft, and sometimes a mix of hard and soft stories. Along the same lines, Patterson states that any story can be classified as hard or soft news despite its outlet, yet this is overlooking an

⁵ Baum, Matthew. *Soft News Goes to War Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy in the New Media Age*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003.

⁶ Prior, Markus. "Any Good News in Soft News? The Impact of Soft News Preference on Political Knowledge." *Political Communication*, no. 20 (2003): 149-71. doi:10.1080/10584600390211172.

⁷ Ibid.

important part of news today. Most people give weight to a story based upon its outlet because people will trust certain sources more than others. A Pew Research Center study from 2014 ranked the news outlets that are more trusted by the American public and found that certain sources were much more trusted than others, such as *The Economist* being one of the most trusted and *The Rush Limbaugh Show* being the least trusted.⁸ Considering the fact that consumers of news, both hard and soft, trust certain outlets more than others, the source of a story should be a factor in determining whether the story is going to be hard or soft news.

Patterson takes a more content based approach to the news, and while this works on a story-to-story basis in most cases, in today's media landscape there has been considerable convergence of what he considers soft news with hard news. A perfect example is the story of presidential candidate Hillary Clinton making national headlines because she ate at a Chipotle restaurant. This created massive amounts of attention online and on social media, and became news in its own right. Furthermore, by using Patterson's definition of hard news being news that involves top leaders, this story would be considered hard news. Yet, by his own definition Patterson would consider this a more personality based story that does not involve information that a citizen needs in their daily life or is necessary for making a democratic decision. There are clear issues with Patterson's definition of hard and soft news, and research by different scholars has looked to address some of the gaps his research left.

A final point is that Patterson's definition is in many ways outdated with how the news media has changed in the past fifteen years. Patterson developed this definition of soft news in 2000, before the rise of the minute-by-minute news updates people can receive if they so choose. New media has come to dominate how many people obtain their news, and especially their

⁸ Mitchell, Amy. "Political Polarization & Media Habits: From Fox News to Facebook, How Liberals and Conservatives Keep up with Politics." *Pew Research Center*, 2014.

political news. Patterson's definition is not accounting for Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat and other platforms that have proven to be dynamic in the most recent elections and in how people learn about the world around them. Social media and the platforms that are available to people today are becoming some of the most turned to sources for information for every aspect of a person's life. World shaping events, such as the Arab Spring in 2011, often cite the availability of news updates on these platforms as reasons for citizen involvement. Zizi Papacharissi and Maria de Fatima Oliveira state that "the Egyptian protests that led to the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak were organized through a complex network that combined heavy Twitter and Facebook use with other forms of interpersonal communication."⁹ However, it is important to recognize that there is also room for extreme manipulation on these platforms. Alessandro Bessi and Emilio Ferrara write about this phenomenon, in particular about the ability for fake accounts called social media bots that are "algorithmically driven entities that on the surface appear as legitimate users."¹⁰ Their research shows that "the presence of social bots in online political discussion can create three tangible issues: first, influence can be redistributed across suspicious accounts that may be operated with malicious purposes; second, the political conversation can become furthered polarized; third, the spreading of misinformation and unverified information can be enhanced."¹¹ The last part, the spreading of misinformation and unverified information, is something that is crucial to my research on how new media is altering political behavior and in turn democratic processes, and will be explored later in this paper. Finally, politicians and world leaders themselves have recognized the potential for outreach on

⁹ Papacharissi, Z., & de Fatima Oliveira, M. "Affective news and networked publics: The rhythms of news storytelling on #Egypt." *Journal of Communication*, 62 (2012): 266–282.

¹⁰ Bessi, Alessandro, and Emilio Ferrara. "Social bots distort 2016 U.S. Presidential election online discussion." *First Mind* 21, no. 11 (November 7, 2016).
<http://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/7090/5653#p2>.

¹¹ Ibid.

these new sources and are turning to them to try and reach their constituents during campaigns, discuss their actions when in office, and even just try to connect and demonstrate that they are normal people like their voters. It is clear that Patterson's definition of soft news was a base to start from, but with updates to technology and the way that information is shared around the world today there is a large gap that is not accounted for.

Given the ambiguous nature of soft news definitions and the fact that there is no consensus among scholars about what the definition should be, a group of scholars led by Carsten Reinemann did a comprehensive study of all the research that was done on soft news and the definitions that scholars used in 2011. By using an aggregate of all the research this team of scholars came up with a series of five different categories that can be measured to decide whether news is soft or hard. These included: Topics/events dimension, a focus dimension based upon the individual or societal relevance, a second focus dimension based upon whether the story is episodic or thematic in its framing, a style dimension based upon personal or impersonal reporting, and finally a second style dimension based upon whether the reporting is emotional or unemotional.¹² These five factors were identified by the group of scholars as being used in a majority of soft news studies, and they believed that covering these categories gives the reader a sense of what kind of news one is consuming. Given the nature of this subject, there will never be one definition of soft news that will be universally considered the correct version. However, it is worth noting that so many scholars have used a different definition and built upon former definitions, and it leads to questions regarding the future of soft news and how news is going to be defined as media continues to evolve. Are scholars going to argue that soft news is becoming

¹² Reinemann, Carsten, James Stanyer, Sebastian Scherr, and Guido Legante. "Hard and Soft News: A Review of Concepts, Operationalizations and Key Findings." *Journalism* 13, no. 2 (2011): 221-39. doi:10.1177/1464884911427803.

more common while hard news becomes less common? Or could it be that there is a new form of news that is not hard or soft? These are questions that future research will need to address, specifically in the case of political communication. For my purposes, hard news will be defined by the stories that are focused on facts that are necessary for citizens to engage in political activities, while soft news will be stories that involve politics, but are treated in a less substantive way.

2.1 VIEWERS OF SOFT NEWS

Having discussed how soft news can be defined, the following sections will focus on more specific features of soft news. This section will highlight how potentially powerful soft news is, and by extension softest news.

Starting with the viewers of soft news, if studies show that soft news plays a major role in shaping the political behavior of the people who consume it, it is first important to look at who the viewers of soft news are, and who is most likely to be influenced by soft news. Scholars agree that the people who consume hard and soft news in substantial numbers are a different demographic in terms of news consumption. Patterson states that “Hard news consumers are much heavier consumers of news” and that “Hard news consumers are the foundation of the news audience.”¹³ Patterson believes that the people who have a preference for hard news are a larger group and also do not consume soft news. Prior also believes this and takes it a step

¹³ Patterson, Thomas. "Doing Well and Doing Good: How Soft News and Critical Journalism Are Shrinking the News Audience and Weakening Democracy-And What News Outlets Can Do About It." President and Fellows of Harvard College (2000).

further, stating in his work that most Americans prefer hard news to soft news.¹⁴ Baum however, refutes these claims, as he believes that many people watch soft news and that number is growing. Baum cites Nielsen ratings data “that the audience for soft news outlets is neither particularly small (either absolutely or relative to that for network evening newscasts) nor necessarily shrinking.”¹⁵ Baum clearly believes that there are a substantial number of viewers of soft news, and this is one of the reasons that he will argue for the influence that soft news can wield, which is examined further on. However, there is a concrete difference between the viewers of soft news and hard news that is acknowledged by its proponents. Baum and Jamison state that citizens who follow and consume hard news do so out of an interest in politics or public affairs.¹⁶ The same cannot be said for the consumers of soft news, who are usually viewing soft news for other reasons rather than the political information they may be receiving.

One aspect of soft news viewership that scholars have identified and agree on is that most viewers who watch soft news consistently are not viewers of hard news. The foremost reason that most scholars agree on is that the costs associated with viewing hard news are very high. For instance, Baum and Jamison state that for people who do not understand or care about politics, hard news is costly in the sense of trying to understand what one is watching and the lost time to put toward something that one might enjoy.¹⁷ This points to the idea that the people who are watching soft news are usually not inclined to follow politics, nor are they very likely to be strongly attached to a specific set of political values. Along similar lines, scholars also believe that the consumers of hard news are more likely to keep up with news and current events than

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Baum, Matthew. “Soft News and Political Knowledge: Evidence of Absence or Absence of Evidence?”, *Political Communication*, 20:2, 173-190, DOI: 10.1080/10584600390211181.

¹⁶ Baum, Matthew, and Angela Jamison. "The Oprah Effect: How Soft News Helps Inattentive Citizens Vote Consistently." *The Journal of Politics* 68, no. 4 (2006): 946-59.

¹⁷ Ibid.

soft news consumers. Patterson shows that hard news consumers regularly keep up with hard news.¹⁸ The amount of news that soft news consumers and hard news consumers take in is one difference that scholars have found in the viewership of each group. There are distinct types of people who engage with hard and soft news, and the way that these two groups of people obtain political knowledge is very different. By obtaining political knowledge in different ways, and by focusing on different aspects of the political stories that they follow, these voters who engage with soft news are going to place more emphasis on aspects that may not be important or relevant to voters who use hard news as their primary source of information.

2.2 SOFT NEWS EFFECTS ON POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

Having defined soft news and showing who the consumers of soft and hard news are, the focus will shift to the effects that soft news has on the political behavior of the people who view it. This is going to be done in three major categories: an increase or decrease in political knowledge, the effects on voting behavior for consumers of soft news, and finally the perception of presidential candidates based upon soft news coverage. I will explore these three areas in more detail, and through this exploration examine the impact that softest news can have on the categories as well.

¹⁸ Patterson, Thomas. "Doing Well and Doing Good: How Soft News and Critical Journalism Are Shrinking the News Audience and Weakening Democracy-And What News Outlets Can Do About It." President and Fellows of Harvard College (2000).

2.2.1 Political Knowledge

How people learn about politics and the platforms they use to gain knowledge is something that has been disputed in many different bodies of literature. This review is focused on the idea of information costs that are associated with learning something. Some scholars, such as Patterson and Prior, argue that soft news is not going to be very effective in teaching its consumers about politics or increasing political knowledge. Baum, however, strongly argues against their claims and believes that the impact of soft news is extremely substantial in the increase of political knowledge in many ways.

Baum, aside from believing that soft news has a large effect on its consumers, was also one of the first scholars to address this question, and his results indicated that soft news viewers do indeed have an increase in political knowledge from soft news. In his book, *Soft News Goes to War: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy in the New Media Age*, Baum demonstrates through several hypotheses that watching soft news increases political knowledge of the United States and foreign affairs. For example, one of the events that Baum used in his testing was the United States' involvement in the Northern Ireland Conflict, stating how the United States played an active role in trying to resolve the civil war in Northern Ireland. Baum chose this example for several reasons, the first being that information about foreign policy is a key concept of political knowledge. He also chose this because it was covered on several soft news outlets, including *Live with Regis and Kelly*, *The Late Show with David Letterman*, and *The Daily Show*. Using a Gallup Organization poll from 1998 regarding this subject, and coding the answers dichotomously for his own analysis, Baum analyzed whether soft news taught people

about the US involvement with Northern Ireland.¹⁹ Using his coding scheme Baum showed that watching soft news was related to an increase in knowledge on the US involvement in Northern Ireland. The important concept here is that because people choose to engage with soft news sources, there is a lower cost of entry to view these sources and learn political information. In other words, it is easier for a person to engage with these sources because they do not entail a lot of prior information. This demonstrates how through engaging with soft news political knowledge can increase.

Another important factor with political knowledge and soft news is that some scholars assert that even if voters do not go to soft news sources to gain political information, the political knowledge they are gaining is still a by-product. Baum found that citizens do not need a lot of factual information about politics to be able to perform the responsibilities of a democratic citizen adequately.²⁰ Baum further argues that viewers who consistently watch soft news outlets, while they may not be learning the actual facts of the political issues discussed, are nonetheless gaining informational shortcuts and heuristic cues that allow them to make judgements on political issues.²¹ This claim is based on the idea that because soft news is easily accessible and lacks the high costs of hard news, viewers are getting political information piggybacked as they view this news for other reasons (i.e. entertainment).²² The high costs of hard news can be several things, such as the time needed to actually engage with the source or the time dedicated to learning enough to understand what the stories are about. This is why there is a belief that the

¹⁹ Baum, Matthew. *Soft News Goes to War Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy in the New Media Age*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003.

²⁰ Baum, Matthew. "Soft News and Political Knowledge: Evidence of Absence or Absence of Evidence?," *Political Communication*, 20:2, 173-190, DOI: 10.1080/10584600390211181

²¹ Ibid.

²² Baum, Matthew, and Angela Jamison. "The Oprah Effect: How Soft News Helps Inattentive Citizens Vote Consistently." *The Journal of Politics* 68, no. 4 (2006): 946-59.

piggybacking of political news that is done in soft news is enough to create informational shortcuts that increase political knowledge. Proponents of soft news leading to an increase in political knowledge also stress that not knowing all the facts behind many issues does not mean that the viewers have not learned anything from the soft news coverage. For instance, Baum states that soft news “consumers may have learned a great deal about certain aspects of homeland security, such as new security measures being taken at airports, without necessarily committing to memory the name of a specific federal agency.”²³ Soft news can increase political knowledge about the main ideas behind political events and issues even though it does not directly engage with these factors because of the low costs that are associated with these stories versus hard news, and knowing only the main ideas can increase overall political knowledge.

Some scholars believe that engagement with soft news does not lead to an increase in political knowledge. Prior found that people who only enjoy soft news were less likely to be knowledgeable about politics and public affairs, and the major problem that Prior has is the criteria for increasing political knowledge is too weak. Prior states that “According to a weak learning criterion, soft news is a ‘success’ if its viewers learn about the types of issues prominent on soft news, roughly sex, drugs and celebrities. A tougher learning criterion declares soft news a ‘success’ only if it increases knowledge of hard news topics as well.”²⁴ Prior feels that if the goal of soft news is to inform about soft news topics such as celebrities, to declare that it is successful for informing its viewers on hard news it should teach just as much about hard news topics as well. For example, Prior believes that Baum’s criteria is for judging an increase in political knowledge is too weak because people may say that they follow the stories that they

²³ Baum, Matthew. “Soft News and Political Knowledge: Evidence of Absence or Absence of Evidence?, *Political Communication*, 2003, 173-190, DOI: 10.1080/10584600390211181.

²⁴ Prior, Markus. “Any Good News in Soft News? The Impact of Soft News Preference on Political Knowledge.” *Political Communication*, no. 20 (2003): 149-71. doi:10.1080/10584600390211172.

were asked about (for example the US involvement in Northern Ireland) but might not learn anything about the actual facts behind the story.²⁵ By using a stronger criteria for political knowledge, Prior's statistical model demonstrated that when asked about political issues, soft news viewers were less knowledgeable than others. Prior demonstrates this with specific questions about soft news items (celebrities), the "War on Terror", and hard news items and found that "people who like infotainment programs are more knowledgeable than those who do not about only one item: Gary Condit's alleged affair with a flight attendant."²⁶ Prior's model shows that soft news is not increasing political learning, but rather is teaching about the soft news items that it aims to cover, such as celebrity gossip. Furthermore, viewers who are tuning into soft news are doing so out of the desire to be entertained, and the mix of news that they receive is not wanted nor does it lead to political learning. The important aspect of soft news and political knowledge is that there is an alternate view that engagement with it does not lead to an increase in political knowledge. This downplays the importance of soft news as a platform for voters to engage with and learn the political information they need to make a reasonable political decision.

Overall, there are conflicting findings about whether soft news consumption leads to an increase in political knowledge. However, the important issue in this section is that regardless of an increase in political knowledge, people who engage with soft news sources are getting some aspect of political information piggybacked from the other reasons that they are engaging with the soft news, such as entertainment. This means that regardless of whether they are learning anything they are still being exposed to information that may be leading to information shortcuts, or at the very least recognition. This could lead to possibilities of false informational shortcuts

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

because of taking minimal information to learn something and not taking the time to learn more about the facts behind the story. Furthermore, often times these soft news stories are focusing on the most outrageous stories that are about political actors or events, but are not focusing on factual information that is relevant to the people involved. This will be examined later in the case studies portion of this work.

2.2.2 Voting Behavior

Political knowledge and voting behavior are inextricably linked. How a citizen votes is based upon the information that they learn, or feel they know, about the candidates in an election, rather than from a basis of political knowledge, and soft news can play a major role in this process. Before going into the theories behind how soft news influences voting behavior specifically, how soft news and hard news consumers vote will be analyzed.

As stated earlier, there is a clear difference in the type of people who consume soft news frequently and the people who consume hard news frequently. People who engage with hard news do so more often, and as such their political preferences and ideologies are usually concrete, and they tailor the news that they view based upon these beliefs.²⁷ This also has implications of the type of news that these people choose to follow. Hard news consumers have strong preferences for news sources that are going to be in line with their political ideology and give them the information they believe is relevant to their lives. This means that for these hard news consumers, those who even choose to follow soft news, the effects of soft news on their voting behavior will be very small because they are not going to be influenced very much by the

²⁷ Baum, Matthew. "Talking the Vote: Why Presidential Candidates Hit the Talk Show Circuit." *American Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 2 (2005): 213-34.

information that they are learning, as it is neither new information nor is it usually very partisan towards their beliefs. However, this is not the case for citizens who are not inclined to follow politics and who consume more soft news. Baum and Jamison argue “low-awareness voters tend to be among the least strongly wedded to their political attitudes and preferences.”²⁸ For this group of people, the information they learn about candidates from soft news sources is going to influence their voting drastically. Furthermore, according to the 2000 American National Election Study “60% of respondents who indicated that they follow what’s going on in government and public affairs ‘hardly at all’ or ‘only now and then’ claimed to have voted.”²⁹ This means that soft news is potentially affecting a large group of voters who are learning about politics through these soft news outlets.

Baum and Jamison make the case for how soft news is extremely influential in the voting behavior of the viewers who consume it. Using his theory of how soft news provides informational shortcuts, Baum and Jamison make the case that soft news enables citizens to vote consistently based upon the information that they are viewing. This claim is based on the idea that soft news helps voters who consume it frequently vote consistently because many soft news viewers vote based upon “candidates’ personal qualities—as an information shortcut—than their policy positions.”³⁰ As such, because soft news focuses a large portion of its content to candidates personal qualities (although not all of it, which will be discussed in the next section) that the consumers of soft news will consistently vote a certain way. They also add to this with the evidence that, because low-awareness voters are not very ideological leaning, “even a

²⁸ Baum, Matthew, and Angela Jamison. "The Oprah Effect: How Soft News Helps Inattentive Citizens Vote Consistently." *The Journal of Politics* 68, no. 4 (2006): 946-59.

²⁹ Baum, Matthew. "Talking the Vote: Why Presidential Candidates Hit the Talk Show Circuit." *American Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 2 (2005): 213-34.

³⁰ Baum, Matthew, and Angela Jamison. "The Oprah Effect: How Soft News Helps Inattentive Citizens Vote Consistently." *The Journal of Politics* 68, no. 4 (2006): 946-59.

relatively small increase in information may enhance the ability of low-awareness voters to figure out which of the two major-party candidates best represents their interests, thereby resulting from an inconsistent to a consistent vote.”³¹ Using this logic, Baum and Jamison statistically proved that soft news consumption enabled low-awareness viewers to vote consistently, similar to high-awareness voters, despite not having the exposure to hard news or a preference to follow politics. News consumption, whether it be hard or soft news, has shown to be important when voters choose who is going to represent them, and scholars have proven that soft news consumption leads to a consistent vote based upon the information they receive from soft news sources.

Soft news has demonstrated the ability to make people vote consistently, with votes that are based more on personal qualities and less on factual information however there is at least some factual information that is presented in the soft news stories. What is not known is how stories that are focusing entirely on personal aspects, or are even softer than the stories that are considered soft, are impacting how people learn about politics and vote. However, soft news has proven that some people who engage with minimal information are still going to vote.

2.2.3 Candidate Perception

Soft news outlets have become a prominent part of any presidential candidate’s campaign, and scholars have done research on how this affects the perception of these candidates to the viewers of soft news. Many scholars, including Baum, believe that soft news outlets provide candidates with the ability to reach a demographic of people who are not going to be inclined to follow their

³¹ Ibid.

campaigns in the same way that people who are interested in politics will. Furthermore, scholars agree that presidential candidates can use soft news outlets to appear more personable and down-to-earth to citizens who feel alienated from the political system.³² However, research has also shown that soft news interviews touch on serious issues that are important to both candidates' campaigns and policy issues for the entire United States, as well as being a more unbiased media environment compared to other major news networks in terms of political ideologies. Candidate perception and soft news are becoming more intertwined, and research has shown that there is a link in how citizens view presidential candidates and soft news.

A common theme that most researchers agree on is that soft news outlets are a way for political candidates to appear more accessible and likeable to apolitical citizens. However, despite research and popular thought that would dictate that soft news appearances by candidates only serve to make the candidates appear more relatable to voters who are apolitical, these appearances are often a way to reach these apolitical audiences on serious topics after a personable section. The classic example of a candidate appearing on a soft news outlet to appear more personable is when Bill Clinton went on the *Arsenio Hall Show* during his 1992 campaign and played the saxophone. This appearance has been analyzed by many who study political communication. Parkin writes about Bill Clinton's Arsenio Hall appearance, stating that after the initial personal interview, Clinton and Hall discussed racism and democracy, focusing on the Los Angeles riot that had happened recently.³³ Parkin shows that, although it may be a soft news outlet, these sources can be platforms for very serious issues. Baum also backs up these claims, as his research has shown that political issues were mentioned about once a minute when

³² Parkin, Michael. "Taking Late Night Comedy Seriously: How Candidate Appearances on Late Night Television Can Engage Viewers." *Political Research Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (2010): 3-15.
doi:10.1177/1065912908327604.

³³ Ibid.

candidates appear on talk shows. As a result of the fact that soft news can be an outlet for serious issue discussion, many scholars believe it has the ability to represent political candidates in a way to persuade a group of voters who may not be very interested in politics. One reason is because talk shows are not very biased towards either party, and are a way for political candidates to be in an unbiased media environment for interviews. Baum believes that soft news outlets, like talk shows, are able to appeal to apolitical viewers because when candidates tailor their messages for talk show audiences, they are deemphasizing the partisan content of their message.³⁴ He also boldly argues from this point that soft news outlets are more desirable for presidential candidates because traditional news media has grown more negative with partisan leanings and as a result “traditional news outlets are becoming an inhospitable environment for presidential candidates.”³⁵ As traditional news outlets are becoming more partisan based, soft news outlets that are not as partisan based provide candidates from all parties the chance to reach viewers who may not typically see them based off their choice of news. Overall, just as scholars have argued that soft news plays a role in voting choice and political knowledge, many scholars also believe that there is a very large influence of soft news on how political candidates are presented to the public on soft news outlets, particularly to apolitical people, and this trend will continue as candidates continue to hit the soft news outlet circuit for their campaigns.

³⁴ Baum, Matthew. "Talking the Vote: Why Presidential Candidates Hit the Talk Show Circuit." *American Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 2 (2005): 213-34.

³⁵ Ibid.

2.3 SOFT NEWS AND HUERISTICS

Heuristics are mental shortcuts that people develop using minimal information to make decisions in their lives. For political science scholars, the area where heuristics are most important is in how a heuristic process allows individuals to vote. However, the verdict on whether heuristics are a valuable tool for voters is often disputed. On one hand by using heuristics voters can make reasonable decisions based on a small amount of information. On the other hand, heuristics may give a false sense of learning, leading to a poor decision when voting. The following will be a brief literature review of heuristics in political behavior, outlining the two major sides of the argument regarding the use of heuristics in the political world and how this ties in with soft news.

Starting with the basics, heuristic decisions, according to David C. Barker's and Susan B. Hansen's are ones that "rely on cognitive shortcuts to avoid the costs of information gathering."³⁶ This terminology, "cognitive shortcut" is the foundation of what a heuristic decision is. Yet what exactly do voters use as shortcuts? Matthew Baum and Angela Jamison state that "many low-awareness voters, in turn, base their vote choices more on the candidates' personal qualities—as an information shortcut—than their policy positions. By assessing a candidates' 'likeability' voters can often figure out which candidate best represents their interests, even absent substantial knowledge of their policy positions."³⁷ So, using cognitive shortcuts that resonate with the voter is a major aspect of heuristic voting, and multiple scholars have discussed how this can allow voters to make a decision regarding their vote. The goal of

³⁶ Barker, David and Susan Hansen. "All Things Considered: Systematic Cognitive Processing and Electoral Decision making." *The Journal of Politics* 67, no. 2 (2005): 319-344.

³⁷ Baum, Matthew, and Angela Jamison. "The Oprah Effect: How Soft News Helps Inattentive Citizens Vote Consistently." *The Journal of Politics* 68, no. 4 (2006): 946-59.

avoiding costs to achieve these shortcuts is also important in heuristic decision making. Gerd Gigerenzer states that “heuristics are frugal—that is they ignore part of the information.”³⁸ Jeffery Mondak also speaks to the idea of avoiding costs of information, particularly in politics as well, stating that “Most Americans face numerous concerns that are far more immediate and pressing than political events, concerns that dwarf most political occurrences in terms of personal relevance. Thus, heuristic processing may be of particular significance for the formation of opinions about political matters due to the citizen’s demand for cognitive efficiency.”³⁹ Mondak is pointing to the idea that citizens are avoiding costs because of other more pressing matters, and the end result is the same as Gigerenzer’s belief that people use heuristics to avoid the cost of information. As a result of these two factors, using a shortcut and avoiding the costs of procuring information, heuristics have become an extremely important part of political behavior for many citizens in the United States in regards to their voting choices. However, whether the use of heuristics is a good development in political behavior or a negative one is heavily debated.

Heuristic decision making can be an extremely important, and beneficial, aspect of political behavior. Heuristic decisions allow voters to use shortcuts to make a decision that still adequately reflects how they feel without paying the costs of learning a tremendous amount of information to do so. For example, Richard R. Lau and David P. Redlawsk state that “heuristic use at least partially compensates for a lack of knowledge about and attention to politics, so that citizens who are largely unaware of events in Washington nonetheless can make reasonably

³⁸ Gigerenzer, Gerd. “Why Heuristics Work.” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3, no. 1 (2008): 20-29.

³⁹ Mondak, Jeffrey. “Public Opinion and Heuristic Processing of Source Cues.” *Political Behavior* 15, no. 2 (1993): 167-192.

accurate political judgements.”⁴⁰ So, citizens who are unaware of political events can still make sound political judgements simply through using simple heuristics.

There are many common cues that are easy for citizens to use as a heuristic cue. Brian F. Schaffner and Matthew J. Streb state that “the most reliable and ‘cheapest cue’ available to voters is candidate’s party affiliation.”⁴¹ A voter can use a candidate’s party affiliation to make an easy decision about whether or not they, the voter, support this candidate’s policies. By using the heuristic of party affiliation, certain scholars believe that voters can support candidates without learning about the candidate’s policies or positions, and that this support would remain constant if they did learn about the candidate’s policies. Several scholars have expanded on this theory, and Barker and Hansen continue in their article that “considerable political science scholarship has argued that ‘gut level’ heuristics processing often produces political outcomes that are virtually indistinguishable from those produced under conditions of complete information.”⁴² In sum, heuristic political decisions can be positive because heuristics allow citizens to use small amounts of information to make decisions that ultimately give the same outcome as decisions that were made with more information, and this allows for more citizens to engage in voting with less information.

Though some believe heuristics voting is a positive action in political behavior, stating that heuristic political behavior produces a positive result is a broad generalization, and furthermore heuristics can actually produce negative results that do not reflect how voters feel. The main reason for this is that heuristics often offer incomplete or false information to the

⁴⁰ Lau, Richard and David Redlawsk. “Advantages and Disadvantages of Cognitive Heuristics in Political Decision Making.” *American Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 4 (2001): 951-971.

⁴¹ Schaffner, Brian, and Matthew Streb. “The Partisan Heuristic in Low-Information Elections.” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (2002): 559-581.

⁴² Barker, David and Susan Hansen. “All Things Considered: Systematic Cognitive Processing and Electoral Decision making.” *The Journal of Politics* 67, no. 2 (2005): 319-344.

people who use them, and this creates misinformed voters, in turn leading to a vote that may not truly represent their motivations. Tying into this, by using heuristics, voters are relying on information that does not adequately represent the political situation or policy information about their voting choice, also potentially leading to decisions that do not represent their political views. These ideas will be discussed and demonstrate that heuristics are not the easy path to voting that they may appear to be.

A crucial aspect of the damaging effects that heuristic voting can have regards a false sense of information leading to misinformed voters. In other words, voters using heuristics are basing it on information that is not necessarily correct and this in turn leads to voters being misled and misinformed. Logan Dancey and Geoffrey Sheagley state that misinformation can be even more detrimental than having no information, saying that “the problem of misinformation, on the other hand, can prove even more insidious. Not only do the misinformed lack knowledge, but they actually believe that they know something when they do not.”⁴³ The false sense of information leading to misinformed voters that is created by using heuristics is especially evident by using party affiliation in certain situations. Kevin Arceneaux points out in his work that “there is no guarantee that political candidates will always adopt policy positions that conform with prevailing stereotypes.”⁴⁴ Arceneaux continues using “Bill Clinton’s move rightward on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and welfare reform and President George Bush’s move to the left on education and the Medicare drug plan”⁴⁵ as examples of when using a heuristic cue to vote, in this case party affiliation, led voters to have a false sense of information

⁴³ Dancey, Logan, and Geoffrey Sheagley. “Heuristics Behaving Badly: Party Cues and Voter Knowledge.” *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 2 (2013): 312-325.

⁴⁴ Arceneaux, Kevin. “Can Partisan Cues Diminish Democratic Accountability?” *Political Behavior* 30, no. 2 (2008): 139-160.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

regarding the policies of the person they have voted for. Dancey and Sheagley also speak to false information in partisan cues in their work stating that “even in an era of polarized parties, party cues are not always foolproof. Elected officials are not bound to a party platform and are therefore free to vote against the majority of their party. When a member of Congress votes against her party, party cues become not just uninformative but actually misleading.”⁴⁶ Essentially, by only relying on heuristics, such as party cues, voters can be falsely led into believing they have the correct information about their political behavior. Arceneaux sums up this negative factor of heuristics in his work, putting forth that “rather than consistently being ‘a reasonable way to surmount lack of political knowledge about political issues, individuals who rely on heuristic processing risk being led astray by counter-stereotypical messages.”⁴⁷ Heuristics can be damaging in political behavior rather than beneficial because of the political information that is used to create the shortcut.

Heuristics can also be a negative development because voters using heuristics and can gain a false sense of information. Essentially, there is a break between what people sense they believe about a certain political issue from their heuristics and what their political belief would be if they would not rely strictly on their heuristics such political party. I am going to call this voters making decisions that do not represent their political views. Dancey and Sheagley continue in their work, discussing how “heuristics can lead people to make poor decisions because they will use whatever information that is available, even if it is a small or

⁴⁶ Dancey, Logan, and Geoffrey Sheagley. “Heuristics Behaving Badly: Party Cues and Voter Knowledge.” *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 2 (2013): 312-325.

⁴⁷ Arceneaux, Kevin. “Can Partisan Cues Diminish Democratic Accountability?” *Political Behavior* 30, no. 2 (2008): 139-160.

unrepresentative amount to make their judgement.”⁴⁸ This means the this small amount of information is leading to misinformed voters, and consequently these voters are making poor judgements in their political behavior. James Kuklinski et al also agree with this sentiment, stating that “under conditions of extreme misinformation, in fact, it can lead to worse outcomes than if citizens made random, totally informed judgements.”⁴⁹ Kuklinski et al go even further than Dancey and Sheagley, saying that a misinformed vote is worse than an informed, random choice, which strongly suggests that the heuristics getting to this misinformation are doing more damage than good for political behavior. It is worth noting that, when based on sound information, heuristics can be beneficial and can successfully allow a voter to make a decision based on a minimal amount of information. However, the issue lies in the soundness of the information that is coming from softest news. Most often this news is not going to be based entirely in fact, or is going to be leaving out crucial components that will create a poor informational base for a heuristic decision. Furthermore, the proliferation of softest news in the media landscape today ensures that this type of information is likely to provide a base for a voter’s heuristics. So, it is clear that voters who rely simply on a heuristic cue stemming from softest news for their vote, without doing any further research into how their candidate actually stands on certain issues, are potentially making a choice that does not represent their actual political beliefs. Heuristics in political behavior are negative because these heuristics lead to misinformation, which in turn potentially leads to a choice that is unrepresentative of the voters political beliefs.

⁴⁸ Dancey, Logan, and Geoffrey Sheagley. “Heuristics Behaving Badly: Party Cues and Voter Knowledge.” *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 2 (2013): 312-325.

⁴⁹ Kuklinski, James, Paul Quirk, Jennifer Jerit, David Schwieder, and Robert Rich. “Misinformation and the Currency of Democratic Citizenship.” *The Journal of Politics* 62, no. 3 (2000): 790-816.

3.0 THEORY

With the emergence of new media formats in recent years, the way that people are obtaining their news about current events in the world is rapidly changing. This includes political news, and especially news related to political candidates. As stated in the Literature Review, the general consensus among political communication scholars is that people are now getting much of their news from non-traditional news outlets that are less informational and more entertainment based, or as scholars put it “soft news”.⁵⁰ The literature review has shown that the political communication field has determined that although these soft news outlets are not necessarily covering political news in the most informational format, there can be major effects on the political behavior of those who engage in it. However, there are disputes as to how large these effects are, and even more alarming, are the disputes in how to even define soft and hard news. These developments have led to issues in the political communication field and there needs to be new ways to study how media is influencing political behavior.

With the dated time of past research, the disagreements in both the definition of soft and hard news, as well as the effect it can have on political behavior, and finally with the increase of new technology and ways to obtain information, there needs to be a new category of news created. With that being said, I have created “softest news”. I argue that not only is this a category of news, but also that it has the possibility to have an impressive impact on its viewers.

⁵⁰ See Literature Review.

This is a category of news that has come from a multitude of developments including analyzing how past political communication scholars have tried to classify news, as well as three different attempts to code news stories. New formats of how people are obtaining information for politics have been understudied, yet they clearly are going to have an impact as it is putting political news out for people to engage with.

3.1 METHODOLOGY

Similar to political communication scholars who have tried to put specific definitions on hard and soft news, it is extremely difficult to find a set of characteristics to encompass every softest news story. For this reason, softest news is not something that can be looked at as black/white. There is no way to say “if this story has X instead of Y it is a softest news story”. It became very evident during initial research that softest news was a qualitative rather than quantitative category. Quantitative methods were attempted, where the goal was to try to develop a coding scheme that would enable news stories to be coded into various categories of hard, soft, and softest. After using three different methods and schemes, I realized that it was going to be extremely difficult to discover a universal method of coding.

My initial methodology focused on trying to break down stories with different categories such as content, where the story originates, length of the story, and how a person would come to find the story. Each category was broken down into sub-categories, and each sub-category had a point value to it. For instance, a story originating from a well-known and trusted news source such as *Reuters* would be given four points. This would continue for each category and the goal was to be able to give each news story a specific value that would separate stories into hardest,

hard, soft, and softest news stories. However, this format proved too ambiguous as it was hard to judge many of the categories and often times stories were bunched together in similar point values. It did, however, reaffirm that there was a category of news that had not been studied yet, but that it was going to be difficult to put a numeric value on the category. As a result, my second coding scheme was to tweak the scoring methodology to make the stories stand further apart, which involved changing the scoring system and some of the categories. However, the same problems persisted and this methodology was also eliminated as a way to discern the types of news stories. The third coding scheme was going to take a more hands on approach that involved actually measuring the amount of space that stories were using for text, pictures, ads, and titles. This process involved printing out stories from the internet, using a ruler to measure the stories, and then giving percentages to each part of the story. The stories that had the highest percentage of actual text related to the subject were going to be the “hardest” stories and the stories that glorified the issue, such as using very large pictures, were going to be rated as softer. The goal was to again have stories that were going to be clearly hardest, hard, soft, and softest by giving a numerical value to each story. This method also proved troublesome as there were many issues including: how to make the measuring concise and accurate for each story as many websites printed stories very differently, the problem of only being able to use this method on internet stories, and again the same problem from the previous coding schemes of having many stories bunched together with similar percentages and not having a clear defined set of stories in each category. This method did give a great insight into how the stories that are covering similar topics could be harder or softer, however. The failure of schemes to determine how to classify news stories was frustrating, yet led to several realizations that have furthered my research of softest news. These attempts at coding demonstrated that softest news, although it is hard to

code, is recognizable in that it is not hard news or even soft news. This is mainly because softest news is something that varies greatly from story to story, and also in how people analyze the stories.

A story that exemplifies this happened when Hillary Clinton went to a Chipotle restaurant, as described in the Introduction. This was simply Clinton deciding to get lunch, yet this story blew up and was covered by various outlets and analyzed politically. At first glance it would seem ridiculous to consider this a news story, yet it became a national sensation. Furthermore, using Patterson's definition of hard news, because this is involving a presidential candidate, this is a hard news story. Yet, at the same time it cannot be classified in the same category of news as a presidential address. The story provided no facts about Clinton's campaign, her policies, or any other aspect that would give a voter information to make a political decision. This means that it is not a hard news story. With this being said, the story also should not be considered a soft news story because it was an unplanned event, not a talk show or speaking engagement. In addition, there is really no entertainment factor such as a presidential candidate doing jokes on a late night talk show or demonstrating a hobby that a voter might not know about. Going further, using Baum's approach to soft news, there is no political information that could even be piggybacked to this story. As it was not a hard news story or a soft news story, yet still clearly treated as news, demonstrated that a different category needed to be created to classify it. This is where softest news fits.

3.2 SOFTEST NEWS

Having shown how I worked to create this category of news, this next section is going to be devoted towards explaining the nuances of softest news, focusing on how softest news works together with heuristics for political decisions, how the low costs with softest news give it the potential to have a massive impact on the political behavior of the people who engage with it, and finally how the stories are able to pull people from traditional political news. As the Literature Review demonstrated, the distinctions between hard and soft news are blurry at best, however I believe that softest news exists today because of the stories that are in the media landscape and the platforms that they are often available on.

Beginning with what exactly softest news is, as pointed out with the Clinton illustration, these are stories that fall in an area where they are not hard or soft news. They are not hard news because they are not providing information that is relevant to an election or they are not providing information that is factually correct. These stories are not soft news because they are not being used for entertainment purposes, and they also are not giving even the low amount of information that some soft news stories are able to give. So, softest news is going to involve some sort of political aspect, however it is not going to help a voter decide between two different candidates or give them new information on a campaign issue. Softest news can also have different effects on the people who engage with it. Softest news can mislead people, as in giving them a false sense of information on a subject. It can also not give people enough information on a subject, simply because of the limits to these types of stories. Also, softest news can make people focus on stories that are not relevant to gaining political knowledge about the campaign because of their prevalence. Finally, some softest news stories are purposefully used by

candidates' campaigns to create an image or manipulate voters. These claims will be explored in more detail later in this work during the Case Study section.

Moving onto how softest news actually works to impact voters, heuristics is a major part of this process. Softest news and heuristics work together to create misinformed voters whose votes often do not reflect their actual feelings. The main crux of this theory rests on the similarities between softest news and heuristics in political behavior, particularly in that they both allow the user obtain a goal by evading the costs that are associated with that goal. For heuristics in political behavior, the goal is to vote but avoid learning about the race, candidates, and the political landscape. For softest news, avoiding the costs has to do with the platform and the actual content of the story, as well as avoiding a time cost in the actual engagement and time spent learning to engage with more informational stories. Furthermore, the ubiquitous nature of softest news means that these stories become the main source of information for voters, creating the base of information that will become voters' heuristic shortcuts when they go to vote. Softest news combined with the proven heuristic behavior of voters has been and will continue to lead to misinformed voters who are casting votes that most likely are not representative of their true feelings.

One of the most important aspects of softest news, as well as heuristics, is the idea of avoiding costs to gain a goal. For heuristics, the goal is to use a cognitive shortcut to be able to achieve the goal of voting. In other words, rather than paying the costs of learning about the various candidates and their policies, voters instead take the lower cost approach of using a heuristic to vote. Softest news is similar because it also has extremely low costs for the people who engage with it. This is in terms of both the platforms that have softest news stories and for the content in the stories themselves. Starting with the platforms, softest news has low costs in

this area because often times the stories can be viewed in a very small amount of time that takes minimal effort on the viewer's part. It is my belief that people will use softest news to create heuristics because of how low the costs are to engage with a softest news outlet. In other words, voters are using softest news to create their base of information, and later use this base as a heuristic when they vote because softest news has such low costs.

In addition, softest news has the ability to have a massive impact on the political behavior of people who are exposed to it. I build this upon previous literature that shows that soft news has the ability to affect political behavior and upon heuristics research that demonstrates that people often use minimal information to create cognitive shortcuts. Baum makes the claim that because of how easily accessible soft news is and the lack of high costs associated with hard news, the people who view it are getting political information piggybacked as they view this news for other reasons (i.e. entertainment).⁵¹ Following this claim, softest news could have even lower costs to the viewer. This is because of how easy it is to access, how easy the stories are to follow, how the stories are often not related to politics when they initially happen, and how widely viewed they are in many instances. With the low costs associated with softest news, the people who obtain their news this way are going to have political news piggybacked in a similar fashion that Baum was able to prove with soft news.

Aside from platform, softest news stories are also very low cost because of the actual content that is in the stories. For instance, a softest news story that is focusing on a candidate's favorite sports team has extremely low costs and is relatable to a person who does not normally follow politics. Given that scholars have proven that heuristics are created by using minimal

⁵¹ Baum, Matthew. *Soft News Goes to War Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy in the New Media Age*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003.

information and focusing on personal qualities rather than policies,⁵² it is easy to hypothesize that softest news is going to create these cognitive shortcuts because they have such low information and are focusing on aspects that are not considered traditional political information. It is a possibility that voters will use softest news stories to give themselves information on candidates because they are easy to engage with and do not have the cost that is associated with hard news sources or even soft news sources. However, this is very troubling, because softest news stories often do not even have minimal information on policy or the goals of candidates, and they certainly do not provide an adequate analysis of the political landscape.

A final aspect of my theory connecting softest news and heuristics ties into how softest news stories often go viral. Viral in this context means that the stories are covered by numerous outlets, and are in many formats such as print, social media, and television. As these stories become more common and take space away from other more informational stories, I propose that these stories can increasingly become the ones that apolitical voters use to form their cognitive shortcuts. It is possible that, rather than using even soft news sources for their political information, people are going to rely on these softest news stories to build their heuristics. This is because of a combination of the low costs and the availability of the stories. To put it from a different angle, the viral factor of softest news plays into heuristics because if voters who typically do not follow politics are only seeing softest news stories that do not give much substantial information regarding candidates or the political landscape, and then they do not go out and look for other sources to learn new information after they engage with the softest news, then these softest news stories are going to be the voters' information source. This ultimately leads to the voters' heuristic processing.

⁵² See Literature Review.

The theory of softest news bears some resemblance to the idea of “pseudo-events” that Daniel Boorstin discusses in *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. Boorstin’s theory is that in the United States people have created news stories that are looked at as more impactful than are simply out of a desire to be entertained. He states that as Americans “when we pick up our newspaper at breakfast, we expect—we even demand—that it bring us momentous events since the night before. We turn on the car radio as we drive to work and expect ‘news’ to have occurred since the morning newspaper went to press.”⁵³ Boorstin’s pseudo-events are something that is very similar to my idea of softest news stories. They are both stories that are created as a result of consumers’ desire for more news and constant interaction. Boorstin also speaks to the idea that news outlets are now attempting to fill this desire, stating that “the successful reporter is one who can find a story, even if there is no earthquake or assassination or civil war. If he cannot find a story, then he must make one—by the questions he asks of public figure, by the surprising human interest he unfolds from some common place event, or by ‘the news behind the news.’”⁵⁴ This idea of creating stories certainly fits with my own theory of softest news, and the story of Clinton going to Chipotle from the introduction is a clear case of this.⁵⁵ Boorstin’s pseudo-events are definitely in the realm that my research is focused on, how stories have moved to an area where they are not providing people with the information that they should.

However, while these pseudo-events bear a similarity to my own theory of softest news, there are some differences and reasons that I chose to go with softest news over a new category that incorporates more of Boorstin’s work. To begin, Boorstin’s work has a broader look to it

⁵³Boorstin, Daniel J. *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. New York: First Vintage Books Edition, 1992, 3.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 8.

⁵⁵ See Introduction.

than my own softest news theory, focusing on the entire news media landscape. Softest news is primarily focused on political news landscape and how this impacts political behavior of the people who engage with it. Furthermore, softest news was always meant to continue down the spectrum of hard and soft news that is described in the Literature Review. In addition, despite being broader in the types of stories that can be pseudo-events, Boorstin's criteria for a pseudo-event is extremely specific. For instance, Boorstin continues in his work that a pseudo-event "is not spontaneous, but comes about because some has planned, planted, or incited it"⁵⁶ and that "it is planted primarily (not always exclusively) for the immediate purpose of being reported or reproduced."⁵⁷ This idea of having stories planted may fit into some softest news stories, however as the case studies will demonstrate, many softest news stories are impossible to plant or plan because they appear out of the least likely occurrences. Finally, pseudo-events as described by Boorstin do not speak to the idea of costs that is a key component of softest news, instead focusing more on the illusion that people create around news and how the news reporters attempt to fuel these illusions. Boorstin's pseudo-events is an extremely valuable approach to the way that political news stories are being created and covered, but I believe that the softest news approach better fits with my line of research and the phenomenon I am attempting to shed light on.

This new category of softest-news is vital for new political communication studies for various reasons. For starters, this is an area of news that is only going to expand. Voters want more access to their political leaders, and this will lead to softest news stories. Furthermore, new media formats will continue to be developed, leading to news being delivered in a faster and

⁵⁶ Boorstin, Daniel J. *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. New York: First Vintage Books Edition, 1992, 11.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

more personal way. Studying how this area of media is going to affect the political behavior of Americans who are engaging in it is going to broaden the political communication field and give valuable insight into how our leaders are being elected. It will also fill in gaps in the current research on soft and hard news, and lead to a more solid definition of how to categorize news.⁵⁸

3.3 DEMOCRATIC THEORY

The question now turns to how softest news, and the effects it can have on voters, impacts democratic theory. If softest news is something that voters are engaging with, how does this impact their voting behavior and thus one of the most important actions for a democracy. This ties into the idea of how much information a voter needs in order to make a decision on an election day. Various scholars have weighed in on this idea since democracies came to be. By taking a look at some of these theories, I will demonstrate that softest news, and the way that people interact with it, has implications for the way that democracy is practiced in the twenty-first century. My argument is that having misinformed voters, as a result of softest news, leads to an outcome of voters believing that they are knowledgeable but in actuality are not or they are being led astray of their real interests, and that is dangerous for democracy because it is not representative of factual information and voter preference.

Starting with the more classic theorists, having a base of knowledge is something that these men believed was essential to be an efficient democratic actor. Plato's Philosopher Kings

⁵⁸ During the research on softest news, it became apparent that there was a difference between misinformation versus no information in all news stories, not just softest news stories. Hard, soft, and softest news can all have misinformation in their stories, and this work is not aiming to discuss that aspect of news. The relationship between softest news and information does not focus on misinformation, but rather on the idea that softest news has nearly no information, or potentially a very small amount, compared to hard and even soft news.

were the rulers of the Kallipolis because they had the most knowledge through extensive training. Machiavelli said that the ignorance of the masses was something that a leader needed to both understand and use to their advantage to obtain and keep power. Rousseau said that to interact in a democratic society requires that a person know all the required information to make a decision that reflects their will. All three of these political theorists base a large portion of their material on how much knowledge one has, and how this dictates how that person is to interact in a democratic society. However, when it comes down to the actual practice of democracy, how does having something like softest news impact the way that people are going to vote? This will be examined in light of how Benjamin Barber and Joseph Schumpeter believe that people engage in democracies and then look at how Jason Brennan believes that democracy is not something that should be followed as it once was.

Starting with Benjamin Barber, this theory pulls mainly from his work *Strong Democracy*. In this work, Barber lays out what is wrong with the current model of democracy, or what he calls “thin democracy.” Barber describes thin democracy as “one whose democratic values are prudential and thus provisional, optional, and conditional—means to exclusively individualistic and private ends. From this precarious foundation, no firm theory of citizenship, participation, public goods, or civic virtue can be expected to rise.”⁵⁹ Barber believes that the current state of democracy in the United States is a thin democracy, and thus there is room for improvement because this system will not ultimately lead to truly democratic results. Barber feels that a major issue is that of free riding, people who are not truly engaged in the democratic system but are receiving the benefits of the people who are. I believe that one major aspect of free riding in terms of democracy today is in people who choose not to learn enough about

⁵⁹ Barber, Benjamin R. *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, 4.

politics but still choose to vote. People are able to do this because they can choose news sources such as softest news that have low information costs and only feel that they are learning significant information but in actuality are not. So, by only choosing to learn minimal information, these citizens are free riding off of the voters who have researched the issues and candidates in more detail. Going further, it is possible that the more informed citizens are using the less informed citizens to gain results that are more prudent for them, while the less informed citizens do not realize this as a result of not having enough information. I believe that these citizens who are less informed, are so because of an increase in softest news stories that are flooding the political media landscape and therefore are becoming a central source of information that is misleading and under informing citizens who are still engaging in the democratic system. These citizens then take these softest news stories at face value, instead of digging deeper to find out the truth about the candidates they are voting for, and as such are gaining an distorted view of the political choice they are going to make in the future.

Focusing on Barber again, he believes the better system of democracy is one that is centered around more participatory politics and what he dubs “strong democracy.” Strong democracy, unsurprisingly is the opposite of thin democracy, and “is a distinctively modern form of participatory democracy.”⁶⁰ The key to Barber’s idea is that citizens themselves have a vested interest in politics and the way that the institutions around them take shape. Barber continues, saying that strong democracy “rests on the idea of a self-governing community of citizens who are united less by homogenous interests than by civic education and who are made capable of common purpose and mutual action by virtue of their civic attitudes and participatory institutions

⁶⁰ Ibid, 117.

rather than their altruism or their good nature.”⁶¹ The civic education is the most important part of Barber’s work in my context, and in more detail the idea of how to achieve this civic education. Barber believes this is done by having citizens who all have mutual goals and also are willing to compromise with their fellow citizens. Furthermore, Barber believes that the act of becoming more involved in politics will lead to a more informed citizenry. “Where politics is the preeminent domain of things public (*res publica*), political knowledge is communal and consensual rather than either subjective (the product of private senses or of private reason) or objective (existing independently of individual wills).”⁶² In other words, if a citizen makes politics one of the most important functions of his life, the political knowledge will be something that everyone possesses in equal measure and will use to make informed judgements. This in turn will create a citizen who not only is able to debate issues that have relevance in their lives, but also be able to feel that they are an integral part of the political process. Having this knowledge, and knowing how to apply it in a political context will create a better democratic environment for everyone.

However, Barber himself understands how difficult this notion is to achieve. In his chapter, “From Citizen to Consumer and Back Again: Deliberative Democracy and the Challenge of its Interdependence”, he states that “we may be born free, but we are not born citizens. To become citizens takes a life of practice, learning, and engagement.”⁶³ While this is something that would happen in an ideal world, this civic education has not happened in the way that Barber believes it should. There is a clear lack of knowledge, and more importantly a gap in

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid, 167.

⁶³ Barber, Benjamin. "From Citizen to Consumer and Back Again: Deliberative Democracy and the Challenge of its Interdependence." Edited by Robert Cavalier. In *Approaching Deliberative Democracy: Theory and Practice*. Pittsburgh, PA: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2011, 64-65.

knowledge, between people who are voting in democratic countries. This is because, as Barber continues in his chapter, “people are born knowing what they want and what they desire; they are not born deliberative.”⁶⁴ I believe that people can learn to be deliberative, and the practice of deliberative democracy has been put into action in various places around the United States. My fear, though, is that softest news has created an environment where people are less likely to capture the deliberative education that Barber speaks of. More alarmingly, there are groups of voters who I believe feel that they have the proper information that they need in order to make a vote and even perhaps engage in a form of deliberative democracy, but as a result of false information from softest news stories, they actually do not. I do not believe that this is for everyone who votes, and I do not believe that it is due to a lack of good information in the media landscape. However, a major factor that I believe has led to the lack of civic education that Barber requires for his strong democracy is both the existence of softest news and how popular it has become. Tying into that is the fact that the information costs for softest news are so low that people can easily engage with them and still believe that they are contributing to their civic education. I believe that softest news, with the low information costs and its proliferation in the media through major events, has led to more people seeing these types of stories and using them as the base of their political knowledge. If softest news is creating the base of information for voters, or even just giving them some of their information before they cast their vote, this is potentially devastating for democratic elections.

Softest news itself does not undermine the democratic process, however whenever softest news stories become more relevant to the actual facts of an election then it becomes potentially

⁶⁴ Ibid, 65.

disastrous for the democratic process. Softest news creates an environment that is more in line with how Joseph Schumpeter believes that citizens interact within a democracy.

Schumpeter believes that democracy itself is not a viable institution because of the conflicting interests of people and human nature, and that a combination of these leads to democracy essentially being a system that allows elites to control the public. This is for a few reasons. One is that Schumpeter believes that humans are not good judges of what they want, mostly because they are suspect to short-term interests that are individualistic. “Voters thereby prove themselves bad and indeed corrupt judges of such issues, and often they even prove themselves bad judges of their own long-run interests, for it is only the short-run promise that tells politically and only-run rationality that asserts itself effectively.”⁶⁵ Schumpeter feels that a major issue is that many citizens are very shortsighted in how they analyze political information, and choose to put all of their focus on the issues that are going to impact them the most. Softest news is something that plays perfectly into this idea. One reason is again the low information costs, and how people can easily find stories that are going to contribute to their beliefs. These softest news stories are not going to provide the necessary information for people to make an informed decision, and thus they will become the bad judges that Schumpeter believes citizens are in a democracy.

Another reason is because Schumpeter feels that humans are very easily manipulated in a democracy. He feels that this comes from many angles, including the media and the actual politicians that citizens are voting for. “Newspaper readers, radio audiences, members of a party even if not physically gathered together are terribly easy to work up into a psychological crowd

⁶⁵ Schumpeter, Joseph A. *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. New York: Harper, 1950, 260-261.

and into a state of frenzy in which attempt at rational argument only spurs the animal spirits.”⁶⁶ Schumpeter believes that people in a democracy are able to be molded into various factions and from these factions engage with minimal intellectual actions. However, Schumpeter believes that this is mostly because of people not caring enough to create their own ideas and gain political knowledge. “The reduced sense of responsibility and the absence of effective volition in turn explain the ordinary citizen’s ignorance and lack of judgment in matters of domestic and foreign policy...”⁶⁷ Schumpeter believes that the information is out there, but that people do not care enough to do the research and find out the relevant facts to increase their political knowledge. In sum, Schumpeter believes that the downfall of human nature, combined with the idea of elites manipulating the masses, makes democracy an institution that does not fulfill its purpose of being a rule by the people. Building upon Schumpeter’s work, I believe that softest news has created a playing field where the manipulation that Schumpeter believes happens is not only very likely, but would also involve citizens who feel that they are not being manipulated because of their false belief of being informed from their softest news stories.

Combining both Schumpeter’s and Barber’s theories regarding democracy, I propose that with the emergence of softest news the nature of democracy itself has shifted in most Western societies. I rest this claim primarily on the ideas of softest news, and how this source of information creates political knowledge, or lack of political knowledge in certain cases. A classic principle of democracy is having informed voters who can analyze the prominent issues and create a decision that reflects their views. Both Barber and Schumpeter agree that this is a tenet that makes or breaks democracy. Barber’s ideas for a successful democracy calls for a lot of input from the average citizen. This input, therefore, has extremely large costs, in the form of

⁶⁶ Ibid, 257.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 261.

information costs by learning about relevant issues and time costs of actually engaging. However, one of the key aspects is what Barber calls a civic education. Barber believes that this civic education, and therefore the participatory political framework that he proposes needs to be achieved through talk. “At the heart of strong democracy is talk. As we shall see, talk is not mere speech. It refers here to every human interaction that involves language or linguistic symbols.”⁶⁸ This is a major problem today, however, because of the influence of softest news that leads to an overflow of human interactions. Furthermore, these new human interactions of softest news are not nearly the intellectual discussion that Barber needs to make strong democracy work, but rather are the low-cost information that creates misinformed voters. So, it is clear that Barber’s idea of democracy has not emerged, and that the development of softest news has created an even harder barrier to be overcome because people do not engage in the type of civic behavior that would enable strong democracy to take root.

However, Schumpeter’s claim that democracy itself is unattainable as a result of human nature has not come to light either. Rather, something more alarming has happened in that a large sect of people have started to believe themselves knowledgeable based on the information that they receive from softest news. This group of people then lead the charge, and others follow as a result of the lack of political knowledge they also have. The increases in technology and formats for people to engage with political news has created smaller barriers to entry, but also lower information costs, and consequently less quality information. In addition, people have also begun to care about certain issues and stories that are not vital political knowledge, and are giving the information from these stories the same weight as they should to stories that have real implications on politics. This leads to more voters who are going to the polls without the proper

⁶⁸ Barber, Benjamin R. *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, 173.

information to make a reasonable political decision. This could lead to the manipulation by the elites; however, with the sheer amount of information that is in the world today in the form of softest news stories, it is nearly impossible for there to be a monitoring system that would enable elites to control the stories that are making it into the world. During Schumpeter's time it was much easier for the political elite to control the media because of the lack of technology that exists today. As such, the stories that are becoming softest news that a majority of voters are seeing are often stories that the political elite cannot control. So, for Schumpeter, something more alarming than having the political elites control the masses has happened, an uninformed mass of voters dictating the state of democracy by using information that is not factual or is not relevant to the policies that will be enacted.

In more detail, I do not believe that softest news has given way to the manipulation that Schumpeter believes democracy entails. Rather, the people who engage with softest news are gaining knowledge that leads them to believe they are informed and politically knowledgeable, when in actuality they are not. But, it is the nature of softest news that it does not lend itself to being used to manipulate citizens in the way that Schumpeter believes elites want to. This is for various reasons, one being that it is too unpredictable. Softest news happens every day in multiple formats, and the stories that become the most followed happens in a seemingly unpredictable way. Yet, just because it is not possible to manipulate softest news does not mean that people are less influenced by it, it just means that elites are not able to use softest news to dictate their wishes. Ultimately, what is created is a group of voters who are influenced heavily by news that does teach one enough about politics to make a reasonable political action, but gives the feeling that they have learned enough. As these groups of people believe that they are knowledgeable enough about the political landscape, they are making choices that do not truly

reflect their beliefs. These choices that do not reflect their views happen as a result of heuristics.⁶⁹ People are using these sources that have nearly no information costs to provide them with the information that is creating informational shortcuts for political behavior, primarily voting. This has led to massive consequences for how democracy functions, and will continue to do so as softest news becomes more and more a part of the democratic culture in Western societies.

If people are using softest news to create their base of knowledge, or at the very least are being somewhat influenced by these stories, how should democracy go forward? Jason Brennan argues in his new work *Against Democracy* that democracy is an ill-functioning form of government that does not reflect the true will of the people. He bases his claim on of several points, but put briefly the fact that people do not study politics in a way that creates informed voters and as such democracy is not a functioning form of government. “Voters are for the most part ignorant, irrational, and misinformed, but nice. While voters vote for what they perceive to be the national interest, the most straightforward reading of the evidence suggests voters as a whole are incompetent.”⁷⁰ Brennan does not believe that voters possess the knowledge to make a decision that is in the best interest of even themselves. He places the typical citizen into one of three categories: Hobbits, Hooligans, and Vulcans. “Hobbits are mostly apathetic and ignorant about politics. They lack strong, fixed opinions about most political issues.”⁷¹ While Brennan believes that Hobbits are an issue, I go further and would put forth that Hobbits are a group that is likely to be influenced by softest news given the low information costs and ease of access to these stories. This makes them a group that is going to be most susceptible to being misled. The

⁶⁹ See Literature Review.

⁷⁰ Brennan, Jason. *Against democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016, 172.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 4.

second group are Hooligans, who are “the rabid sports fans of politics. They have strong and largely fixed worldviews. They can present arguments for their beliefs, but they cannot explain alternative points of view in a way that people with other views would find satisfactory. Hooligans consume political information, although in a biased way. They tend to seek out information that confirms their preexisting political opinions, but ignore, evade, and reject out of hand evidence that contradicts or disconfirms their preexisting opinions.”⁷² This group of voters are also going to be influenced by softest news, but in a different way than Hobbits. This is because this group of voters will follow political news, and will use softest news stories because they are easy to access and will confirm their opinions. This means that softest news is going to create a group of voters who are misinformed, but will believe that they are correct because they can use softest news stories for their heuristic cues. The last group that Brennan describes are Vulcans. “Vulcans think scientifically and rationally about politics. Their opinions are strongly grounded in social science and philosophy. They are self-aware, and only as confident as the evidence allows.”⁷³ This is the most rare group, and a group that would not engage with softest news except to determine that it is not useful news for the formation of their political information on a candidate or policy. Brennan believes that these three groups make up the United States citizenry, and that if the largest number be either Hobbits or Hooligans, the democratic system does not make sense.

My own theory does not contradict Brennan’s ideas, but rather I believe that softest news is something that works hand-in-hand with his theory because it is fueling the opinions or influencing both Hobbits and Hooligans to create decisions that are not reflective of how they actually feel, and as such may be not truly democratic decisions. Softest news is very appealing

⁷² Ibid, 5.

⁷³ Ibid, 6.

to both Hobbits and Hooligans because it is so accessible and does not require much effort on the part of the person engaging with it. For Hobbits, this means that they can choose to interact with politics slightly at a low cost. They do not have to learn enough to understand a story about how a certain tax policy is going to alter their life, rather they just need to interact with viral news story that they understand with knowledge they already possess. Softest news is even more dangerous for Hooligans, however. This is because Hooligans by nature know enough about politics to filter the stories that support their views. This means that they can choose the softest news stories, that often are not rooted in fact, to bolster their political views, further entrenching themselves with information that leads to uninformed voting and unrepresentative government. Softest news has created a media landscape that creates misinformed voters on a widespread scale, and as such the decisions of these citizens does represent a truly democratic outcome.

To conclude, softest news has created a dangerous political media landscape that gives voters the ability to selectively choose which stories they believe are relevant because of the low costs of these stories, the availability of them, and the many low cost platforms they are available on. These stories are not creating informed voters with a sense of a civic education, but are creating voters who believe they are informed but in actuality are not. Rather than being informed, these citizens are being misled and are making political decisions without a true sense of what is going on in the political landscape. These voters are going to the polls with an misrepresentation of what they are voting for, armed with softest news stories as a basis for their political knowledge and their heuristics. Softest news is leading to democratic outcomes that are not representative because voters are misinformed, but they believe they have factual information, which is more worrying for democracy as an institution.

4.0 CASE STUDIES

The following case studies will highlight the theory of softest news and the potential negative effects it can have on political behavior, and subsequently on democratic theory. The issue with softest news is that these stories, with such low costs as pointed out in the theory section, is that they become major parts of the news that people use to educate themselves on the election. This then leads into the heuristic shortcuts that people form. These cases were each chosen for a specific reason, and because of the issues that they highlight. The first case is Brexit. This case will analyze how false information with the combination of softest news sources led to misinformed and undereducated voters in the European Referendum in the United Kingdom, and demonstrate that when softest news is used as a source of information to create heuristic political decisions, the consequences are a sub-optimal vote. This case also focuses on how softest news stories create an environment where the actual information is overclouded by events that are not relevant to a certain extent. The second case will focus on Ken Bone, a man who became an internet sensation following the second presidential debate of the 2016 Presidential Election in the United States. This case will focus on how softest news stories take time away from significant issues, pushing people to focus on stories that are not crucial to the overall election. The final case will be an analysis of the medium through which softest news was broadcast throughout the 2016 Presidential Election in the United States, focusing on how these popular platforms provide the perfect format for softest news. Its focus is on showing how new

technologies give ample opportunity for voters to take the lowest cost option in getting their political information, and that this consequently leads to a lack in political knowledge. Finally, all three of these cases will touch on how softest news is altering democracy because of how voters are gaining, or not gaining, political information.

4.1 BREXIT

The British referendum to leave the European Union was one of the most significant political decisions for voters in the United Kingdom in many years. Needless to say, this event picked up substantial media coverage around the world. However, what was the extent of the coverage, and how much of a role did softest news play in the education of people about the major issues of the referendum? This case study will seek to answer these questions, and show how softest news potentially led to citizens who were not properly prepared to vote and subsequently made a voting choice that may not have represented their true feelings or motivations.

To begin, British referendum, commonly referred to as Brexit, or British exit, was a significant democratic activity, and gave the British people the chance to decide something that was going to alter their lives, the lives of everyone else in the EU, and the geopolitical landscape at large. It is clear that the EU Referendum was a very complex issue, and the repercussions of whether the United Kingdom left or stayed were massive. However, as pointed out in this work, many people do not care, for various reasons, to research at great length political decisions regardless of the impact the political decision may have on their lives. Rather, people are more content to follow the major news stories that are the easiest to find, or softest news. As such, there were three promises from the “Leave campaign”, or the faction of the UK who wanted to

exit the EU, that were extremely prevalent in the media leading up to the actual vote. These were: the end of sending 350 million pounds to the EU that would instead be used on the UK's healthcare, reducing immigration and closing the borders, and leaving the EU quickly under Article 50. These three promises were some of the most heavily preached by the leaders of the Leave campaign. As such, these stories became prime targets to be created into softest news stories. For instance, the promise to stop sending 350 million pounds to the EU was promoted everywhere in the media leading up to the referendum. This was the backdrop of the main proponents of the Leave campaign's leaders, Boris Johnson and Michael Gove, when they would give speeches as well as being plastered on the side of the Leave campaign's tour bus.⁷⁴ The leaders of the Leave campaign used the same rhetoric over and over to create stories that focused on minimal factual information. Finally, the story that truly captures the heart of what softest news is the "Brexit Flotilla Battle." On June 15, 2016, Leave leader Nigel Farage decided to lead a flotilla of boats down the Thames river to the London Parliament to demonstrate their commitment to their cause. However, he was interrupted in this when a different series of boats, led by Remain supporter and musician Bob Geldof, went on to the Thames to disrupt Farage. This led to a series of events between the two groups including: spraying one another with hoses, playing loud music to drown out the speakers on the boats, and overall hostile behavior towards each other. This created a lot of social media coverage, multiple parodies, and was covered by the major news sources. However, nothing was actually covered that discussed the main facts behind the EU Referendum, rather just the ridiculousness of this scene was covered, as is the case with softest news related to political stories.

⁷⁴ Travis, Alan. "The leave campaign made three key promises – are they keeping them?" The Guardian. June 27, 2016. Accessed 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/27/eu-referendum-reality-check-leave-campaign-promises>.

Softest news created an environment that led to voters in the UK having an unsure amount of information regarding the EU Referendum. Many were left believing that the main promises of the Leave campaign were going to be kept, and did not realize the extent of the referendum and what the actual consequences were. Others were most likely not aware of the drastic consequences that this vote could have, as the media coverage of stories such as the Flotilla were covered instead of more substantial pieces. I theorize that softest news stories gave the voters a feeling of knowledge in their actions, and that they did not need to dig any deeper to find out what the truth of what would happen if the UK left the EU. So how did this all play out? Of the promises from the Leave campaign, none had been fulfilled in the timely fashion that was promised and the leaders of the Leave campaign have backpedaled. So, the voters did not realize that the truth of these statements, which was reinforced through softest news. In addition, lending more credit to my theory that softest news created voters who were not aware of what they were voting for, following the referendum the highest searched questions on Google were: “What does it mean to leave the EU?”, “What is the EU?”, “Which countries are in the EU?”, “What will happen now we’ve left the EU?”, and “How many countries are in the EU?” (GoogleTrends). This demonstrates that the voters in the UK lacked the basic knowledge of what they were voting for, but chose to vote regardless.

In sum, the promises that were made by the Leave campaign were circulated frequently throughout the media leading up to and during the referendum. However, these promises were half-truths at best, but because softest news gives people the impression that they are informed, people did not feel the need to look into these promises in further detail. This created voters who were misinformed and under informed, but they still went to the voting booth, creating a dangerous democratic actor. Thus, softest news created voters who went against a principle of

democracy, an informed voter, and this led to a disastrous result because the voters did not understand the issues of what the consequences of their political action was.

So, in terms of democratic theory, with misinformed, or at the very least misled voters, was this a democratic decision? Put in the barest terms, it certainly was, because citizens voted on a decision and that decision will be upheld. However, a case can certainly be made, as Jason Brennan would argue, that this was not a truly democratic decision. Rather, Brennan would argue that this was a decision that was led by Hobbits and Hooligans, and maybe a few Vulcans, and the outcome is not a reasoned democratic decision, but rather is an eschewed democratic outcome. However, this paper is not arguing what a democratic decision does or not does constitute, rather it is seeking to demonstrate that the emergence of softest news has created an environment where democracies, and the way that decisions are made in them, has been compromised. The media environment, driven by stories that lack substance and serve to create misled and misinformed voters, has given way to voters who are making decisions that may not reflect what they truly believe.

4.2 KENNETH BONE

This case study will demonstrate the importance of the softest news factor of news stories that most would not consider noteworthy being turned into national news stories, and the impact that these stories can have. To demonstrate this, the case will focus on Kenneth Bone and the impact that he had after his rise to fame following the second presidential debate.

One of the most crucial aspects of softest news is that often stories are created around political events and actors that are not giving the people who engage with them any sort of

information that is going to help them make a political decision. This was seen in the introduction with the Hillary Clinton and Chipotle story. That story shows how a news story was created simply because, on one hand, it was interesting to voters, and on the other it was used by Clinton's campaign to create an image of their candidate. However, there was nothing in that story that was going to give a voter new information about Clinton, the presidential election, or anything else relevant to making a decision about whether this is a person who they want to vote for. By information, I mean information that is substantive in the way that Patterson would consider it hard news.⁷⁵ The issue is not so much that this story exists, but rather the issue lies in the fact that a story like this becomes political discourse for many people. This takes away from serious stories that are going to inform voters on the issues that matter. Furthermore, when these types of stories go viral, they become something that voters are seeing over and over again and become a base upon which to build their political views. Clinton and Chipotle was not the first, nor was it the last in the 2016 Presidential Election.

A softest news story that bears several similarities to Clinton and Chipotle happened during the second presidential debate. The second presidential debate featured a town hall style debate with audience interaction with presidential candidates Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Undecided voters were chosen by Gallup and then selected by the moderators to ask questions of the candidates about some issue that they feel strongly about. One of the audience members who was selected to ask a question was a man named Kenneth Bone, a middle-aged man with glasses, a mustache, and who was wearing a bright red Izod pullover sweater. His question was "What steps will your energy policy take to meet our energy needs while at the same time remaining

⁷⁵ See Literature Review.

environmentally friendly and minimizing job layoffs?”⁷⁶ Both candidates took time to answer the question, and then Mr. Bone’s moment in the debate was over. However, for reasons that are certainly not related to his political question, Ken Bone became a softest news story and quickly went viral. He was trending nationally on Twitter, various media outlets said that regardless of who the pundits choose as a winner, Ken Bone was the real winner. There were even Halloween costumes created for Ken Bone. Bone himself was shocked at the response to his question, stating that “I went from, last night, having seven Twitter followers, two of which were my grandmother, to now, I have several hundred and I don’t know why they care what I have to say, but I’m glad they’re engaged in the political process.”⁷⁷ As a result of his new found celebrity, Ken Bone became a major story of the second presidential debate.

What does this kind of story mean for the way that the second debate was covered? Further, how does this impact the way that people take information from the debate or the coverage of it? Of course, there was the usual post-debate pundit coverage that discussed who won or lost the debate, who made the better points, and the fact checking of the statements made. However, Ken Bone was one of the major news points and was covered by many of the same outlets that discussed the debate’s relevant political information. Furthermore, not only did he become a major news story, he became a major news story because of his new found celebrity status, his general looks, and how the internet reacted to him, not because of the question that he asked or because of the answers that Clinton and Trump gave. This creates drastic implications of how people are reacting to the debate on a widespread scale. This story should not have

⁷⁶ Ahmed, Saeed. "Ken Bone: The real presidential debate winner." CNN. October 10, 2016. Accessed 2016. <http://www.cnn.com/2016/10/10/politics/debate-ken-bone-staring-man-trnd/>.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

become a focal point, and certainly should not have become a focal point for the reasons that it did.

Given that people who are not inclined to follow politics are attracted to news stories that have the lowest costs,⁷⁸ this type of story was one that was most likely going to be followed by many people. They would see this story, and instead of finding out what exactly happened at the debate, would focus more on the new internet sensation. These kinds of stories are not necessarily detrimental to the democratic process, or to the way that people gather information in order to vote in elections. However, the fact that these types of stories are becoming so popular, and are certainly being followed by millions of people, is reason for alarm. Are stories such as these becoming more important, or at least followed more closely, than stories that actually have substantial information? It is my belief that they are, and part of the reason is because of the widespread accessibility of them. By accessible I not only mean in terms of being covered by multiple news outlets and social media, but also accessible to people who are not likely to follow politics or do not care about politics, yet still vote. This means that people are going to the polls with the information they need to vote based only on a very slim amount of information upon which to decide who they believe will better represent their view points.

Discussing this type of story in terms of democratic theory, a story such as this is definitely not the material that Barber believes needs to be discussed between citizens in order to decide how they are going to vote. More likely, these types of stories are going to lead to misinformation and citizens not having the type of information that they need in order to make a correct decision regarding how they are going to vote. This then, plays into the ideas that Schumpeter and Brennan have regarding democratic theory.

⁷⁸ See Literature Review.

In Schumpeter's case, people are choosing to engage with a story that has no rational reason for existing in terms of political information. They are building their base of political knowledge, which they will use to make a political decision regarding who they believe to be best for president, off of useless information. Instead of focusing on the information that Bone's question brought, voters are more focused on turning him into an internet sensation. Ultimately, these voters are focusing on details that are not going to make them any more knowledgeable, and would create a mass of voters that are able to be influenced and controlled by the elites. Furthermore, as this paper argues, what is further worrying is that these voters believe that they are informed because of stories like this. For Brennan, this plays into the ideas of voter ignorance, especially in his theory's notion of Hobbits⁷⁹. For a Hobbit, this type of story is extremely appealing because it does not require having information in order to understand what is going on. Rather, this is a fun story that enables the person to feel that they are keeping up with the election, simply because it occurred during the debate. Basically, softest news stories such as these are creating a base of political knowledge for people that is not going to arm them with the information that is necessary to make an informed political decision, while making them believe they are informed.

4.3 NEW MEDIA

Throughout history when changes in technology happen, at some point these new advances will be used for political reasons. Radio created new ways for people to hear their politicians stump

⁷⁹ See Theory, Democratic Theory.

from in their own homes. Television allowed the voter to see their presidential candidates engage in a debate during which they could see how the candidates interacted with one another, giving a level of access that had not been seen up until that point. Social media took this access even further and allowed presidential candidates to reach millions of people with their messages in real time, creating a speed and connection with voters that had not been seen yet. The innovations of technology and the way that people learn information has not slowed but rather has continued to thrive. With the emergence of new media in the world today, it is easier and easier for people to engage with various aspects of life from the palm of their hand. Political news is no different, and today political actors all take advantage of social media such as Twitter, Snapchat, Facebook, and more. However, are these sources adequate platforms for true political knowledge to be imparted? It is my belief that they are not. Rather, these platforms serve as a launching pad for softest news that leads to voters who believe they are informed from the low cost source. This case is going to focus not on any particular softest news story, but rather on the overall medium that softest news thrives in and how this medium has grown and developed in a way that leads to misinformation and misleading on a vast scale, damaging the ability for average citizens to glean useful, factual information about the candidates and election.

The ease of access and the low information costs mean that these are sources that are certainly used by people, but they do not mean that they actually learn anything. This case study will aim to demonstrate how new media outlets have extended the media landscape, as well as show that this area of softest news will impact American voters and their knowledge of the presidential candidates drastically. To do this, two of the most popular social media platforms today will be focused on, Snapchat and Twitter.

Before going into how Snapchat will affect political knowledge and behavior, it is necessary to have a brief explanation of what Snapchat is and how it functions. Snapchat is a social media platform that allows users to send videos and pictures to other users of the app. The photos and videos are deleted after between 1 and 10 seconds. It also has a feature known as a “Story”. This is a feature that enables users of the app to upload pictures to their “Story” that is then able to be viewed by their followers on the app. Finally, it has a final feature known as “Live Stories” that feature a variety of events every day that anyone who has the app is able to see. Snapchat demonstrates the importance of softest news because this a new media outlet has gathered a tremendous number of followers, particularly younger followers. This is a large demographic of people who are engaging with this piece of technology every day. So, if these people are engaging with this app, and are viewing the material that is connected to politics, what impact is this going to have on that person? Is there going to be an increase in political knowledge? Will this have an effect on the voting behavior of Americans who use it?

The material is definitely available for the users to see, and this was aptly demonstrated during the 2016 Presidential Election. This revolves around two factors that tie into the “story feature” of the Snapchat. The first is that Snapchat has started to run live stories of the various campaign events in the 2016 election as the race has gone on. For example, Snapchat has had live stories of all the major events in the 2016 election, including rallies, debates, and both parties’ conventions. On the live story there were interviews with the candidates, commentators discussing issues related to the Republican primary, and then videos of the actual debate itself. This is a dynamic new way that technology is being used to reach a group of people who would possibly not be tuning into the debate. The second way was through a feature that was a more in-depth look at the election with former CNN Reporter Peter Hamby, called “Good Luck

America”. This segment featured bits and stories that were broken down by Hamby for Snapchat engagers. Both of these features may appear to be able to give voters information that could help them make a decision in the election, but unfortunately they serve as a platform for the creation of and distribution of softest news that does not leave citizens with any new information or provide them with the wrong information upon which to create heuristics.

Breaking down these two facets will demonstrate that Snapchat is providing a launching board for softest news information to the people who engage with it. Beginning with the Live Stories that were focused on the major political events of the election there is very little reason to suspect that these were able to give voters a new sense of information regarding the election. Often times these clips were focused on the soundbites of the candidates, or just focused on filming the candidates as they moved around in the various scenarios. Even when the candidate did do a solo shot, in 10 seconds there is not enough time for the candidate to say anything that is going to give a viewer a meaningful piece of information. Rather during these times, the candidates are using the same phrases that are already resonating throughout the media. These include Trump’s infamous “Build the wall” or Sanders’ “Free education” pitches. While this platform is allowing the candidates to reach the voters in a new way, it does not allow the voters to learn substantial information that is going to help them make an educated choice on election day.

The second facet is the feature called “Good Luck America” with veteran political reporter Peter Hamby. These segments are an original program from Snapchat that gives Hamby the ability to break down key aspects of the 2016 election. The videos themselves have a wealth of information that can certainly leave the viewer more informed about the candidates and the overall state of the race. However, the major issue with this segment is that despite being on the

10 second Snapchat platform, it is actually a series of videos that range several minutes in total. This of course brings in the issue of information costs that was discussed in the Literature Review. Viewers are more likely to ignore things that have high information costs, whether those costs are time or learning new information regarding the story they are trying to learn about. With “Good Luck America”, both of those problems are prevalent. First, the videos themselves are longer than the average clip on Snapchat so it is likely that many viewers choose not to engage with them for the entire length of the video. The second reason is that these videos require a viewer to have at least some basic knowledge of the election, and this goes past the usual softest news stories to focus on the relevant information of the election. I believe that when this information is focused on, viewers will tune out and choose not to watch it. One reason is because it may disagree with their own beliefs, but also it requires having a substantial base of knowledge that the viewer may not want to take the time to learn. In sum, Snapchat certainly reaches a massive amount of viewers and is one of the most dynamic applications in the world today, but the impact it has on the political knowledge of the people or the political realm is small and can be potentially negative because it is promoting and creating softest news stories.

Snapchat will continue to evolve and become more of a force in the world as people continue to use it. However, as of right now and during the 2016 election, it was not a tool that was able to create more informed voters, but rather created and promoted softest news. This speaks to the larger issue of how new media is going to continue to create softest news and be a platform for softest news. New media formats allow people to interact more with each other and the people they are voting for, but the interactions need to have substantial information in order to bear any fruit. If not, these formats are going to simply be another way for voters to become less informed, and it is even more powerful because of how low the information costs are with

new media such as Snapchat. Rather what new media does is plays into the Brennan's idea of how certain citizens engage with democracy, by creating Hooligans who engage with politics for a sport like desire.⁸⁰

Focusing now on Twitter, although this is certainly not new media as Twitter has been around for some time, it is still worth discussing in relation to how it is being used to create softest news. Just as Snapchat has low costs, Twitter also has very low costs for people to engage with along the same dimensions. Furthermore, as pointed out in the Literature Review, technological capabilities have gotten to the point where it is possible for non-humans to run Twitter accounts. These accounts work to spread false information about opposing candidates, how policies are going to work, or to spread positive information about the candidate that their owners support. This is going to cause people to have different reactions. One reaction could be taking all of this false information at face value and believing what they are reading about the candidates. This is a scary thought, as often times the information that is being pushed is outright false. A second reaction could be that people completely filter any political news on these platforms, which excludes some material that is informational if it is from a reliable source, or from the candidates themselves.

With new media in general, it is important to note how it can be used by both political candidates. Political operatives that are hired by campaigns are not making use of this type of media for everything from campaign outreach to fundraising. For example, again going back to the Clinton Chipotle story, one can make a compelling case that these photos were leaked by the Clinton campaign in order to create an image that they believed would aid Clinton. This is a

⁸⁰ See Theory, Democratic Theory.

form of manipulation that Schumpeter would say is being used by the elites at the expense of the common citizen.

To conclude this case, it is clear that the media landscape has shifted towards softest news that is potentially being used to manipulate people, spread false information, or at the very least present information in a way that does not present the whole story. This is at least partially responsible from new media formats such as Snapchat, and older formats that have grown to allow certain types of manipulation to occur, like Twitter. Furthermore, these sources have, at least to an extent, aided the overall growth of the softest news environment that leads to people questioning the validity of news, people taking news that is false or misleading at face value, and finally make it harder for people to gather factual information on their political candidates.

5.0 SOLVING THE SOFTEST NEWS PROBLEM

The overall tone of this paper has been negative, focusing on how softest news has created an environment that is leading to citizens making political decisions that may not reflect their true feelings as they are misled, misinformed, or potentially simply told false information. This has led my work to question whether the outcomes of these citizens truly reflects a democratic decision. I want to use the last part of my paper to devote some time to how this situation could be solved, and how citizens could obtain the civic education that Benjamin Barber speaks about and avoid the conclusions of Jason Brennan in that democracy is no longer a viable institution. While I do not believe there is any one solution that is going to solve the issues that softest news has created, I do feel that there are steps that can be taken for citizens to have a better notion of what the current political media landscape is and to engage in the democracy around them in a more productive way. I mainly rest this idea on creating a more deliberative democracy.

Deliberative democracy requires talk and collective thinking. Barber states that “deliberation today, the essence of democracy, remains what it has always been: the ability to think like a citizen not a consumer, to think in public and in common rather than in private terms, to think in terms of ‘we’ not ‘me.’”⁸¹ This is obviously a challenge, however it is not out of the question, and requires people to become personally invested and make challenging decisions by

⁸¹ Barber, Benjamin. "From Citizen to Consumer and Back Again: Deliberative Democracy and the Challenge of its Interdependence." Edited by Robert Cavalier. In *Approaching Deliberative Democracy: Theory and Practice*. Pittsburgh, PA: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2011, 68.

seeing both sides of the issue. Robert Cavalier states that “by finding ways to bring stakeholders and the public into a forum for discussing the necessary tradeoffs, final decisions will achieve a level of legitimacy since the process include a broad range of perspectives and the opportunity to hear from all sides.”⁸² The key here is bringing the public into this forum, and this requires levelheadedness and a willingness to listen to opinions and voices that may not be in line with how one may personally feel. This has happened in certain situations, and an example can be seen on a city-wide level in the City of Pittsburgh.

In the City of Pittsburgh an illustration of deliberative democracy in action involves a chief of police selection during 2014. In order to gain a better understanding of how to choose a chief of police that the citizens of Pittsburgh would be happy with there were six Deliberative Community Forums where any who desired could participate.⁸³ By setting an agenda, developing useful surveys, and implementing a deliberative democratic strategy the participants had overwhelmingly positive results that included: “a better understanding of the issues”, feeling that “the forum provided a real opportunity for their voices to be heard and their opinions valued”, and identifying the qualities that the citizens felt should be addressed in choosing a new police chief.⁸⁴ This example demonstrates that it is possible to gather citizens together to discuss the important issues that are relevant to their lives, even issues that may have polarizing opinions such as political discussions.

As seen with the example from the city of Pittsburgh, the key to solving this softest news issue is getting citizens to do several things. The first is getting them to come together, not

⁸² Cavalier, Robert . "The Conversational Turn in Political Philosophy." In *Approaching Deliberative Democracy: Theory and Practice*. Pittsburgh, PA: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2011, 13.

⁸³ The Program for Deliberative Democracy. *A Handbook for Deliberative Democracy*. Pittsburgh, PA: Carnegie Mellon University.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

necessarily in a physical sense, but at least to the point where they are recognizing the value in having tradeoffs between what they believe is best for themselves and what is best for the entire population. The second key is then having these citizens discuss these issues and tradeoffs in a way that is going to be beneficial. This means having an understanding of the issue from all sides, which leads to the third most important factor in solving the softest news issue: having factual information that citizens can use to make their opinions about the issues they are discussing. When the softest news stories are filtered out, the only remaining information is factual and presented in a way that demonstrates how different political decisions are going to give different outcomes. Taking these steps is clearly easier on a local level, however Pittsburgh is not, by any means, a small town with a single demographic. It is one of the largest cities in Pennsylvania with a varied demographic. This shows, and other cities demonstrate as well, how democracy can be put into action for millions of people. Barber writes in *If Mayors Ruled the World* that “cities are increasingly networked into webs of culture, commerce, and communication that encircle the globe.”⁸⁵ Barber is speaking to the idea that cities are not places with a single mindset of people, but are complex places with problems that vary drastically for the citizens there. However, as the Pittsburgh example above shows, it is possible to find solutions through deliberative democracy that leaves all parties pleased. Barber continues that “these networks and the cooperative complexes they embody can be helped to do formally what they now do informally: govern through voluntary cooperation and shared consensus.”⁸⁶ The strength of deliberative democracy in cities shows that it is possible to translate a successful democratic system to millions of people to solve issues that citizens have conflicting ideas about.

⁸⁵ Barber, Benjamin R. *If Mayors Ruled the World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013, 5.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

However, with that being said, translating this system to large scale politics, which this paper had focused on almost exclusively, will be extremely difficult and will face several large barriers. The first is that citizens are usually stubbornly biased in their opinions on large scale political decisions, focusing in on being a Republican or Democrat or third party, to the exclusion of most other schools of thought. This does not build an environment that is conducive to deliberation where one side recognizes the importance in trading off personal decisions for public ones. Secondly, it is much harder for evidence to be seen from these tradeoffs if people do make them, leading to a lack of confidence if people would ever buy into the system. Lastly, and most importantly for this work, is that there is an over proliferation of political news stories, especially in the realm of softest news stories. These are only going to increase as technology increases and people continue to be disassociated with politics, and this will lead to the outcomes that this paper discussed, not giving people the unbiased and clear facts that deliberative democracy requires.

6.0 CONCLUSION

The goal of this work was to examine a trend that emerged during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, the idea that many news stories were becoming extremely popular and filling up the political media landscape, but had no apparent value to the consumer of the news. This of course became the basis of softest news and quickly branched out into other areas of media, not only focusing on the U.S. Election, but also on other areas where it was clear that low cost stories were increasingly becoming a part of the way that people were gathering information for their political decisions. After establishing that there was an area of news that was becoming more popular in the media landscape, the question turned to what did this mean for democratic theory? It became apparent that how the people were gathering information was not how many democratic theorists imagined people would, and this has created a dangerous notion in how democracies are functioning on a large scale.

This area of research could be continued through several avenues. An empirical study that would connect how people who do gather much of their political information from softest news stories vote would be able to make a substantive claim about how this area of media is impacting political behavior. Another empirical route could take the angle that Baum has taken in his work with soft news, measuring how much people actually learn from softest news stories. This would be a difficult task because of the nature of softest news, but would help shed light on how this area of news altering the political knowledge of citizens.

Softest news is going to continue to make up a large portion of the stories that are connected to politics, especially in elections. More Ken Bones will drift into the political world, Snapchat Stories will increasingly become a source for news, and massive political decisions will continue to be overshadowed by Brexit Flotillas. Without a doubt, well researched political information is available for the citizens who choose to pay the costs, but these costs are tangible in time and effort, and until more citizens choose to pay them, it is very possible that softest news will play a large role in the democratic decisions that citizens are making, which often does not give a truly democratic outcome where informed citizens are making the decision that is best suited to their own, or their fellow citizens, needs.

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