

**MAKING SENSE OF DEMOCRACY, 147 CHARACTERS AT A TIME: AN
INVESTIGATION OF HIGH SCHOOLERS' ABILITY TO MAKE SENSE OF
POLITICAL MESSAGES PRESENTED VIA TWITTER**

BY

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Submitted to the graduate degree program in the Curriculum and Teaching Department
and to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Science.

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Date Approved: 02 June 2018

ABSTRACT

Social media's role in our society is difficult to overstate as it has become embedded in our daily lives as an efficient and convenient vehicle for communication and socialization. In recent years, social media has also become a power broker in the civic and political arena as politicians, elected officials, and citizens use sites like Twitter to discuss and debate the issues of the day, and in some cases organize supporters for civic and political action.

Given the increased role of social media sites like Twitter and its prevalence among young people it is critical for educators to understand how young people make sense of these political messages. This descriptive study seeks to flesh out how high school students in my American history course make sense of political messages they are exposed to during the 2016 presidential election.

Ultimately, the results from this study suggest that students are drawn to the more controversial and salacious tweets posted by presidential candidates. Results also suggest that students largely operated in an echo chamber as they tended to focus more on the tweets of the candidate which shared their views and were much less forgiving of the opposing candidate. Finally, students reported that they were skeptical of the value of the information found on social media sites like Twitter.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is with the generous support of many people that a project like this is possible. First, I must convey my sincere gratitude to the student participants in this study; they were unstinting with their effort, time, thoughts and coursework to make this piece possible.

Second, to my advisor Dr. O'Brien, I am forever indebted for your endless wisdom, encouragement and your shining example of a truly dedicated educator. I am forever grateful for your inspiration and patience over these last few years through all my admittedly half-witted ideas, our conversations always left me with new knowledge to endlessly parse and apply to my craft. Your questions of me always led me to peel back the layers of my own assumptions and illuminate valuable new perspectives. Joe, you always challenged me to be a better researcher and ultimately a better educator. Thank you.

To my wife, Sarah, your unconditional love, support and encouragement provided a foundation for me to achieve both a personal and professional goal. My sincere hope is that you never doubt your contribution to this thesis, it was not just limited to your willingness to allow me to spend countless hours at the computer parsing every sentence while you cared for our two young children, but it was getting to witness your determination, ambition and success, all of which I greatly admire and inspire me. Sarah, thank you for all the amazing things you do, I love you. Are you ready for my doctorate?

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

By early autumn of 1938, citizens in Western Europe were left with questions and an understandable fear as they witnessed a strengthening Germany under Adolf Hitler. With the devastation of The Great War still fresh, European powers would be faced with a difficult decision from a demanding Adolf Hitler. With the ultimate goal of preventing another world war, the leaders of Britain, France, and Italy agreed to Hitler's demand to annex the Sudetenland, a narrow strip of land that surrounds Czechoslovakia's western, southern and northern borders, without the input or participation of Czechoslovakia. While the Munich Agreement offered a questionable sense of relief for the moment, the oppressive and aggressive actions of Hitler continued to accumulate (Stokesbury, 1980).

At home, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) was confronting the challenges Americans were facing during the Great Depression but remained keenly aware of the alarming developments across the Atlantic Ocean. In September of 1938, FDR sought to draw American's attention to the growing threat that democracy was facing while stressing the importance of education to democracy's continued success. In a Message for American Education Week, Roosevelt argued:

...The conflict is still sharpening throughout the world between two political systems. The one system represents government by freedom of choice exercised by the individual citizens. In the other, and opposing system, individual freedom and initiative are all made subordinate to the totalitarian state. In this conflict the part which education plays in each ideology is crucial. ...Democracy cannot

succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education. Upon our educational system must largely depend the perpetuity of those institutions upon which our freedom and our security rest. ... To prepare each citizen to choose wisely and to enable him to choose freely are paramount functions of the schools in a democracy.

(Roosevelt, 1938)

Roosevelt's message stressing the role of educators in safeguarding America's most closely held ideals finds an important new relevance today. Unquestionably, the circumstances facing Americans is different but educators' role remains the same, to equip future citizens to "choose wisely". This thesis is presented during a period of intense debate over the future of the United States. In many ways, present debates are not dissimilar to those that have riddled and strengthened the American union over the last 240 years. Nonetheless, it is incumbent on educators from all disciplines to prepare our young people for the awesome responsibility of being a citizen.

It is often said that a picture can be worth a thousand words, but I often wonder how much thought has been given to the value of a hashtag, 140 characters, images, video or a combination of all of the above in the realm of civic education. Given the increasing role these characteristics of Twitter have in our society, it becomes progressively more urgent to consider their implications for students who will ultimately assume the role and responsibility of citizens in the months and years to come. For example, how might these things motivate one to become more knowledgeable regarding an issue or topic that interests them? How might these things create a forum for this newfound knowledge to turn into civic awareness and engagement?

Certainly, social media in forms such as hash tags, 140 characters, images, etc. have captured the attention of researchers, educators, parents, among others, as all stakeholders begin to deliberate the value of social media from the perspective of a variety of disciplines. danah boyd has described social media sites as “networked publics” in which people are able to connect and interact with one another without the traditional barriers such as proximity due to the *persistence, visibility, spreadability* and *searchability* of social media (2014, p. 11). The shift among stakeholders towards social media is well founded as research has pointed to a dramatic increase in usage in those aged 18-29. Social media usage among this age group has witnessed an 81% jump since 2005 (Smith & Anderson, 2018; Pew, 2018). Reasons for such an exponential increase are many, but most simply social media has made communication easier, not just among friends, family and acquaintances as well as among complete strangers who might share a common interest or even simply to have a lively debate of the issues of the day (Abe and Jordan, 2013).

Social media’s unique features such as hash tags make this communication all the more efficient. Hash tags allow users to view the Tweets of other users of the same topic by simply searching the desired hash tag (Bode, Hanna, Yang & Shah, 2014). Young people are quick to recognize this efficiency, however, as many educators can attest, getting students to resist the allure of social media often proves to be futile. Sure, there are classroom management techniques that aid in limiting the connection between students and social media, however, as I have learned, these often become ineffective quickly. So a central question develops for educators, how can educators harness the allure of social media to further students’ political awareness and engagement?

Research on civic education is plentiful, insightful and provides an important foundation for educators to draw upon in preparing students to be citizens in a new hyper-connected society (Bode & Dalrymple, 2016). From a civic education point of view, determining and understanding the value of social media is critical. Scholarship investigating the intersection of social media and political engagement is relatively limited. Many of the leading scholars agree that there is an important role to be played in preparing our future citizens for the ever-increasing role of social media in the civic and political arena. Among those scholars, is Joe O'Brien, in what should be viewed as a challenge to civic educators to determine the most advantageous approach to "...empower youth to become civically engaged in an online environment..." (O'Brien, 2010, p. 227). Empowerment which O'Brien seeks is not possible unless educators are aware of young people's limitations with regards to social media. As Rheingold (2008) points out, "...there's nothing innate about knowing how to apply their skills to the processes of democracy" (Rheingold, 2008; p. 99). Despite the increased awareness among scholars, valuable empirical research is scarce, and much of the existing scholarship is theoretical in nature.

Among the various social media sites, Twitter in particular has gained favor among users for political communications (Merry, 2016). Twitter was launched in 2006 as a free microblogging site aimed to enable users to post messages, called "tweets", to their timeline (a collection of tweets) that were originally limited in length to 140 characters or less (Marwick & boyd, 2010). In the fall of 2017 Twitter expanded the character limit of tweets to 280 characters (Tsukayama, 2017). Twitter timelines and tweets are accessible to followers and in some cases by the public, enabling users to re-

tweet messages posted by other Twitter users. By 2017, Twitter had roughly 328 million users worldwide, which illustrates the allure not only for politicians but for civically minded and engaged individuals (Yaub, Chun, & Vaidya, 2017). Twitter provides an avenue to political and civic participation for individuals or organizations that might have otherwise remained on the sidelines due either to the cost of content creation and distribution or the difficulty in acquiring political information (Raynauld & Greenberg, 2014).

This thesis aims to flesh out the intersection between political and civic engagement and social media among teenagers using a descriptive study during the 2016 presidential election. Twitter's role during the 2016 presidential election saw a shift from a platform used primarily for disturbing information about the candidates from the candidate's campaign to its supporters during the 2012 presidential election, to a platform used to critique opponents either by the candidate themselves or the candidate's supporters (Marx, 2017). Further, Twitter's role during the 2016 election was marred by the infiltration and distribution of 'fake news', the intentional use of misinformation (Bovet & Makse, 2018). The reality of 'fake news' being diffused to a seemingly unlimited number of people underscores the urgency which educators must prepare students to identify and confront political falsehoods so that they may 'choose wisely' among the political candidates.

Over the course of this study, study participants were asked to select the 2016 presidential candidate of most comfort to them based on information regarding key election issues, such as immigration, cost of college/student debt and their impression of the overall character of the candidate, which they obtained via Twitter. During the course

of this project students explored and evaluated tweets posted by each of the presidential candidates, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, regarding the election issues being studied. To accomplish this, student reviewed tweets posted to Twitter by each candidate regarding each of the three election issues, cost of college/student debt, immigration and the overall character of each candidate. Reviewing tweets from presidential candidates related to these key election issues provide students insight into the candidates thinking and position on the given issue. In order for students to locate tweets relevant to the election issues being investigated, students often used the search feature on Twitter.com as well as reviewing the Twitter timeline of each of the candidates.

Students were instructed to select and tweets regarding each of the issues that they felt impacted their view of each of the candidates regarding each of the election issues. Once a tweet was selected by a student, they would begin to complete a graphic organizer that was essentially divided in two parts; the first part was aimed at documenting their initial thoughts and impressions of the tweet based solely on the information provided in the tweet and their background knowledge. The second part of the organizer was designed to identify and document any changes in the students' opinion of the content of the tweet following the completion of research into the content of the tweet. Students were provided little instruction with regards to evaluating credibility of the messages and sources they obtain via Twitter. The reasoning for this is twofold, first to gain an authentic understanding of how students make sense of these messages, and second, to determine how educators can best equip students to interact with these messages in a critical manner. To this end, I seek to gain insight into the following research questions:

RQ1. Based on their analysis of two 2016 presidential candidates', Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump, Twitter posts, what are the 10th grade U.S. history students' impression of the character of each candidate?

RQ2. How do the 10th grade U.S. history students make sense of the Twitter posts of two 2016 presidential candidates, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump?

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In October of 2017, some of Hollywood's biggest stars took to various social media sites, such as Twitter, to share their experiences with sexual violence (Johnson & Hawbaker, 2018). The #MeToo movement quickly captivated a global audience and became another potent example of social media's power for change. While the movement was initiated by alarming allegation involving a top Hollywood director Harvey Weinstein, soon other women used Twitter to reveal their own experiences with sexual harassment and violence (Park, 2017). By October of 2017, nearly two million tweets from eighty-five countries included the MeToo hashtag (Park, 2017). Movements such as the #MeToo, #NeverAgain or #BlackLivesMatter fall under what has been termed a 'Cause Hashtag' by some researchers which is employed to "...to advance a cause, raise awareness, or rally support for a particular social issue" (Konnolly, 2015, p.2).

Social media's success in creating and driving social and political change forces researchers and educators to re-imagine social media's potential beyond simply a cultural fad that is likely to diminish in the coming years. While specific sites might fall out of favor, social media's core purpose of connecting people will remain (boyd, 2014). Certainly, one might argue social media is just another example of the indecisive relationship educators have had with new technologies as "...each new technology has resulted in demands by its advocates for a corresponding dramatic change in how teachers instruct and how young people learn..."(O'Brien, 2010, p. 208). However, social media's influence and reach only seems to be swelling as an increasing portion of the world is becoming reliably connected to the rest of the digital world (Broadband Commission, 2016 & ITC, 2017). This reality presents the opportunity to explore how

young people use social media and how their knowledge of social media might be transferred into an academic setting with the goal of young people learning how to utilize social media in a participatory democracy.

2.1 Understanding Teen Social Media Usage

I distinctly remember a conversation I had with one of my students; I'll call him James, during my first year of teaching. I remember seeing James sitting in his chair at his desk with his eyes glued to his smart phone and his thumbs working at a feverish pace. It took two or three times of calling his name for him to acknowledge me, I became quite interested as to what he was doing that would cause him to be wholly focused with little attention to his surroundings. As James looked up from his smart phone, I asked what he was doing with his phone that caused him to be so consumed with it. In what I'm sure is instinctive for many teens, James proclaimed that he was not doing anything wrong and was just texting with his friends. It seemed as though James only heard the portion of my question "what are you doing?" I explained to James that I was not suggesting that he had done anything untoward but rather my curiosity was piqued as to what is able to so thoroughly capture his attention.

As other students began to pay attention to our conversation, James explained to me the importance of smart phones and social media to him and nearly every other teen, stating how "Adults, just do not understand". James argued that social media (irrespective of platform) is just about the communication between people, though adults believe that little positive can come from interactions on social media. James suggested that he and his friends are doing what all adults do but that teens do it in a more efficient and convenient way. Smart phones and social media take this efficiency and convenience that

James describes to create a network of communication and personal connections that is omnipresent in the lives of young people.

As a social studies teacher I became intrigued about the way James was describing the use of and the views teens have regarding social media. The history teacher side of me told me that I am witnessing a shift in culture, and what stood out to me is that it is not just a shift in American culture but a shift in culture globally. I was certain that James did not see this as a big deal, as he probably should not, I mean after all, this so-called shift is simply his reality. James is a “digital native” meaning he has never lived without the internet or cell-phones (Education Commission of the States, 2012, p.1). The teacher side of me saw the limitless engrossment in which students were engaging with social media. While the anecdote about James was about socializing with his peers, I began to wonder about the possibilities of harnessing some of that connection to create authentic and lasting learning experiences. Essential to the exploration of such a possibility requires an understanding of where young people are with regards to the intersection of social media for their personal use and their use in the political and civic arenas.

A recent Pew Research poll reported that seventy-six percent of teens use social media and roughly seventy-one percent reported using two or more social media sites (Lenhart, 2015). Researchers have begun to pay closer attention to the usage of social media among teens and more specifically how and why they utilize social media. Among some researchers, popular social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook or Twitter are described as networked publics, a community that is connected by networked technology (boyd, 2014). These “publics” are not limited by literal membership or spatial

separation rather often times they mesh in form, function and location (boyd, 2014). One such public would be the “Twittersphere” in which users interact through Twitter’s website or mobile phone application. Researchers have argued that in many ways today’s networked publics, such as the Twittersphere, is not much different than traditional mass media was for the teenagers of 1990s, as they found their connection with peers and wider society through various television shows in which they could identify with (boyd, 2014). In today’s generation it can be argued that teens are seeking an identity and place in which they feel most comfortable and valued.

Teenage usage of social media is indeed about many of the same things previous generations were able to complete through a different method, largely in person (boyd, 2014). While much of young people’s usage is socially centered, roughly fifty percent of young adults 18-29 sought information related to the 2008 campaign via social media (Bennett, Wells and Freelon, 2011). This shift is notable compared to the likelihood of previous generations to use social media either for information or participation within the political sphere (Bennett, Wells and Freelon).

In some ways the characteristics of networked publics create a relationship of convenience for many teenagers who find themselves torn between many commitments. Networked publics share a level of persistence, visibility, spreadability and searchability (boyd, 2014). danah boyd defines these characteristics this way in her book *It’s*

Complicated:

Persistence: the durability of online expressions and content;

Visibility: the potential audience who can bear witness;

Spreadability: the ease with which content can be shared; and

Searchability: the ability to find content. (p.11)

While some of these characteristics are sure to be exhibit A-D in many parents' concerns over their children using social media, boyd argues that in many ways this fear is not the norm but rather the exception. boyd's description of networked publics is particularly noteworthy because despite the various time commitments of youths they feel they are able to catch up with their peers in an on-demand nature through social media.

Social media's believed longevity and increasing prominence in our society drives the need for this new media's inclusion in preparing students to become engaged and active within the political arena. This need is only further illustrated by a recent study that estimates roughly sixty-five percent of adults are active on social networking sites, which is a staggering increase compared to just ten years earlier, and roughly fifty percent of adults aged 18-29 report retrieving their news online (Perrin, 2015; Matsa & Lu, 2016). Further, there is a belief among some scholars that today's youth are more likely to "engage in online political and civic activities" than the rest of the population (Brandtzaeg, Folstad and Mainsah, 2012, p.1). These recent studies into both the prevalence of social media and the various ways adults use the platforms provide an illuminated path towards realizing the full scope of the urgency to equip our youth for a life that is likely to be grounded in social media.

While somewhat limited, literature has begun to provide a preliminary guide for aiding students' civic engagement and ultimately political engagement via social media. According to Brandtzaeg, Folstad and Mainsah (2012), "civic engagement is usually defined as the ability to influence choices through collective action," however, the authors seek to refine the notion of civic engagement to include a more precise definition involving social media (p. 2). Brandtzaeg, et al. suggest defining civic engagement in

social media as: “Youth action in response to societal needs, in the form of supportive, deliberative and collaborative practices in social media” (2012, p.2). Refer to Figure 1 for more detail.

<i>Category</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>Supportive Practices</i>	“Requires little to no effort” Examples include: quick and efficient methods for civic participation, such as the like button on Facebook or the re-tweet option on Twitter.
<i>Deliberative practices</i>	“Thoughtfully weighing different options through discussion where different opinions are represented”
<i>Collaborative practices</i>	“Youth create new ideas or solutions in collaboration to support, promote, or discuss societal issues.”

Figure 1. Brandtzaeg, Følstad and Mainsah, 2012 (p. 3)

Brandtzaeg et al. note that five case studies completed in 2011 offered valuable guidelines for furthering the civic engagement among students using social media. First and foremost, the guidelines assert that educators must “connect to where they (students) are and what they are doing” (Brandtzaeg et al., 2012, p. 3). Further, the authors asserted a sense of ownership and individual expression were needed to further civic engagement among youth via social media (Brandtzaeg et al., 2012). Providing opportunities for teenagers to create content that is persistent in its preservation, quickly visible, sharable and ultimately searchable not just among their peer groups but to an audience worldwide allows students to dip their toes into ideas and concepts in which they are unfamiliar. Meeting students where they are and using the technology students are familiar with will likely diminish some of the barriers some youth feel towards civic engagement as a result of limited knowledge of civic issues (Brandtzaeg et. al., 2012). By using a familiar

platform, students can begin to gain knowledge of and advance competency about unfamiliar issues.

Obtaining credible and reliable information often becomes a burden for students as they may feel the amount of research and work to fully understand critical issues is too cumbersome, particularly given that many of these students lack an incentive to learn about these issues because they are not yet eligible to vote. High school students' disengagement both in civic and political arenas might provide shed light on why only 23% of people aged 18-29 voted in the 2010 mid-term elections (Kahne, Lee & Feezell, 2012). Despite being the lowest of all demographics in terms of traditional political engagement, digital media and by extension social media might well hold the power to draw youth out of the shadows of political engagement and into the voting booths (Kahne et. al., 2012).

Educators, however, should note Burnett and Merchant's (2011) warning that while social media provides a powerful new tool to teach civic engagement and critical thought, there is a danger in redirecting their social media usage into something they no longer enjoy using. Burnett and Merchant (2011, p. 44) argue against simply using social media to introduce critical engagement without "integrating social media more fully into the classroom." In failing to do so, students may be left feeling as if using social media is "flawed or in some ways wrong" (Burnett & Merchant, 2011, p. 44). The authors' suggestion that teens might misunderstand the intent or message educators are attempting to convey through instruction seems to be validated, at least, in-part by the reaction "James" had during our conversation about his social media use. James proclaimed that he had done nothing wrong and adults do not truly understand why teens use social

media. . Instead, educators should work toward illustrating the intersection of social media and participatory politics, which “are interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern” (Kahne, Hodgin & Eidman-Aadahl, 2016, p. 2).

2.1 Social Media’s Relevance for a Participatory Democracy

Researchers have noted that the characteristics of social media sites like Twitter have blurred the lines between personal use of social networking sites and the use of these sites for political and civic purposes (Bowyer et al., 2017). Researchers suggest that today’s youth likely fall into a category of *inadvertent news consumers* in which young people are exposed to political news and information while using social media for other purposes (Bowyer et al., 2017). Some have argued that this type exposure provided by social media and more broadly the internet allow for individuals to be exposed to a greater variety of information and perspectives (Kahne et al., 2011). Exposure to a diversity of ideas and perspectives is likely to lead to the exposure of conflicting ideas and information that many have argued build the foundation for democratic societies (Mutz & Martin, 2001). Mutz and Martin cite what one might argue to be one of the greatest benefits of social media and its intersection with civic and political engagement by presenting a quote from John Stuart Mill, “if the opinion is right, [people] are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if wrong they lose what almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth produced by its collision with error” (p. 97).

The notion of *homophily* suggests that people tend to bond with others who are most like themselves (Yardi & boyd, 2010). It is widely accepted that the exposure and exchange of diverse ideas and opinions among the people is critical for democracy (Yardi & boyd, 2010; Mutz & Martin, 2001). However, it has been argued and hypothesized that the internet and new media have exasperated the effects of homophily and led to an online community in which people tend to “seek out points of view to which they already subscribe” (Yardi & boyd, 2010, p. 1). Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh have referred to this phenomenon as the *Daily Me* but they add that in some cases through this concentration on personal interests individuals may ignore the public interests that do not specifically pertain to them. (2011, p. 494). Other theorists have traditionally described this relationship as an “echo chamber” (Passe, Drake, & Mayger, 2017).

Two studies completed in 2010 seek to flesh out these notions and reached similar conclusions. Eric Lawrence, John Sides, and Henry Farrell concluded that blog readers are more likely to read blogs that match their political ideology as opposed to practicing a more deliberative approach (2010). While in a study to explore the viewpoints people are exposed to on Twitter and how they respond to others who do not share their stance, Yardi and boyd concluded that people were exposed to a variety of viewpoints through their use of the social media platform (2010). It was also noted that while people were exposed to a diverse range of positions but were “limited” in engaging in a productive discourse with those who do not share their point of view (Yardi & boyd, 2010). One reason for this difficulty, researchers have suggested, might be due to the *motivated reasoning* among individuals in which they experience difficulty comprehending the viewpoints that do not match their own (Bowyer, Kahne & Middaugh, 2017).

Based on the exponential growth in the use of social media throughout the population as a whole, social media has predictably seen a correlated increase in the political arena (Bode, Hanna, Yang & Shah, 2014; Bode & Dalrymple, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2011). As adolescents transition to adulthood and begin to assume the responsibilities of a citizen they will continue to be confronted with politically oriented social media content (Middaugh, Bowyer & Kahne, 2017). It becomes crucial for students to have experience with engaging this media critically to determine the validity and/or appropriateness of the media's content and ultimately come to some sort of educated conclusion. The urgency for equipping young people with these skills is evident by the results of a study in England that reported one-third of teens believe that, if information is provided by a search engine such as Google, the information must be reliable and that most young people do not seek additional sources to determine the accuracy of the information (Kahne & Middaugh, 2012). The same study suggests that eighty-four percent of young people are aware of the need for and are yearning for skills to aid them in deciphering the reliability of information found online (Kahne & Middaugh, 2012).

Modern youth are diverging from previous generations' methods for civic and political identity expression (Weinstein, 2014). Historically, an individual's means for civic and political expression were concentrated on various groups, clubs and political parties in which participants were largely involved as a result of a feeling of genuine obligation to the community (Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2011). This characteristic of civic and political expression has been termed as *dutiful citizenship* (Bennett, et al.). Flanagan and Levine (2010) suggest that today's youth are less likely to display

traditional methods of civic and political engagement such as being contacted by a political party, belonging to a group or attending club meetings among others than youth were in the 1970s.

Today's youth found much less attachment to the traditional means of civic and political expression in large part due to increased connectivity to the Internet and expanded use of social media. These changes in access to information and peers gave rise to the *actualizing* citizen, where young citizens find multiple means for civic and political expression to be most valuable (Weinstein, 2014). Instead of receiving information from authority figures such as news outlets, teachers or other field-specific experts as the *dutiful* citizen does, *actualizing* citizens rely on the information that is created and published by peers (Baumann, 2012). Further, modern youth prefer the flexibility of less defined organizations or publics offer than their dutiful counterparts, thus they belong to *self-defined* networks and groups of peers that ultimately create activities for taking action in the community (Baumann, 2012).

Social media provides the perfect conduit for actualizing citizens to become active in the civic and political arenas. Civic and political actions from actualizing citizens often take many different shapes but the case of former Fox News host Bill O'Reilly perfectly illustrates one of the most powerful levers of action often referred to as *political consumerism*. Researchers have generally defined *political consumerism* as "...the practice of making purchasing decisions (e.g. boycotting, donating to a campaign – or encouraging someone to do the same) based on a set of political or ethical values" (Warner, McGowen & Hawthorne, 2012, p. 261). By April of 2017 Bill O'Reilly found himself as a subject of an investigative piece from *The New York Times* which detailed

numerous civil settlements made to victims of alleged sexual assault by O'Reilly (Steel & Schmidt, 2017). Outrage was swift and powerful as organizers on social media such as an anonymous group called 'Sleeping Giants' championed a campaign on social media to encourage their supporters to pressure advertisers of O'Reilly's show to withdraw their future advertising, ultimately leading to O'Reilly's ouster from his position at Fox News (Pierson, 2017).

Bill O'Reilly's case could be described as a symptom of a broader shift towards civic and political activism in the age of social media. While O'Reilly's case came on the heels of the growing #MeToo movement, other political and civic movements on social media sites such as Twitter offer a lens for viewing the future for actualizing citizens particularly among young people. In the aftermath of the 2018 school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida, the #NeverAgain movement was created by survivors of the shooting to demand change to the nation's gun laws (Alter, 2018). The movement's methods for demanding change is multifaceted, one method included supporters of #NeverAgain organizing a nationwide student walkout of roughly one million students on March 14th, 2018 (Alter, 2018). Supporters of the #NeverAgain did not stop with walkouts as they sought to employ political consumerism by pressuring companies such as Delta Airlines and MetLife to end their relationship with the National Rifle Association (NRA) (Alter, 2018).

The #NeverAgain movement effectively utilized social media and in particular Twitter's capacity for rapid and convenient communication to organize supporters and engage new supporters to create urgency around the issue of gun violence. Further, some supporters and survivors use Twitter's traditional character limit to tweet devastating

one-liners criticizing elected officials and others for their alleged complicity in continued gun violence (Dusenbury, 2018). For example, Sarah Chadwick a student and survivor who have amassed over 329,000 followers on Twitter posted a tweet criticizing Florida's U.S. Senator Marco Rubio stating "We should change the names of AR-15s to "Marco Rubio" because they are so easy to buy" (Dusenbury, 2018). Chadwick's effective use of Twitter should not be conceived simply as a result of wit but rather the ability to harness Twitter's format and audience reach to share and further a political message. Movements such as the #NeverAgain in many ways underscore the value of Twitter and other social media sites in the civic and political arena for young people. It is believed by some theorists that there is a positive relationship between participating online in political discourse and more traditional methods of political engagement such as donating to campaigns and even voting (Warner, McGowen & Hawthorne, 2012).

The transformation among the way citizens acquire political information and organize for action is increasingly recognized by the political candidates themselves, as social media has become a central component of political campaigns in recent years. The genesis of this relationship can be traced back to President Barack Obama's campaign in 2008. President (then Senator) Obama set the course and demonstrated the immense value of social media in political campaigns. Further, Levenshaus (2010) concluded President Obama's campaign used its social media presence as a means to connect and energize its supporters which resulted in the efficacious implementation of grassroots activism strategies (LaMarre & Suzuki-Lambrech, 2013; Levenshaus, 2010). Candidates for elected office are finding their social media investment can be returned in spades as social media allows and even encourages not just content consumption but also

production among their supporters. For example, during the 2008 presidential campaign an estimated 1.5 billion online videos mentioned Barack Obama or John McCain but of those online videos 9 out of 10 were created by individual citizens (Deagon, 2012).

Ultimately, President Obama was able to build an enormous social media presence that allowed for instant, free, and direct access with the electorate to communicate the campaign's message. Lessons learned from President Obama's use of social media were pronounced and definitive because by the 2010 mid-term elections nearly every national candidate for office had a Twitter account and "72 percent of congressional staffers believe that social media allows their members to reach people that they had previously not communicated with" (Bode & Dalrymple, 2016). Alternatively, some politicians have discovered that despite the ability to disseminate campaign talking points to incredibly large numbers of people, social media presents a cornucopia of potentially damaging potholes in which politicians can find themselves struggling to reset their message and regain control of the news cycle (Deagon, 2012).

Social media's role has expanded to become a central force within both state and national politics (Deagon, 2012). However, managing the tone and direction of the traditional media can be difficult for politicians. For others, the use of social media has provided some candidates for office the opportunity to usurp traditional media outlets and communicate with supporters directly. This is the tactic President Donald Trump effectively implemented during the 2016 Republican primaries and into the general election. President Trump was able to use Twitter as a means for generating interest and action among his supporters. President Trump's approach is supported by recent studies into American's usage of Twitter within the political arena. According to Bode and

Dalrymple, studies suggest that during the 2010 election “22% of adult Internet users reported using Twitter or other social networking sites for political purposes” (2016). Results of a survey that was conducted during the lead up to the 2012 presidential election reached a similar and interesting conclusion, an estimated 40% of respondents stated that that social media would have impacted the direction of their vote (Deagon, 2015).

Social media’s expanded role within the wider political discourse has a foundational impact on young people as they begin to dip their toes into the political pool of society, as young people are in a point in their life in which their views politically are still malleable (Bowyer, Kahne & Middaugh, 2017). This malleability affords educators a prized opportunity to impart the skills of investigating and evaluating public policy issues, deliberation and meaningful discussion in the civic and political sphere. Researchers have aptly noted the importance of these skills because making sense of messages such as tweets is different than in the past because previously individuals relied on experts for assistance in understanding unfamiliar issues (Kahne & Hodgins, 2016). The Twittersphere complicates this method of meaning making because often times young people have difficulty in determining the trustworthiness of information they find online (Kahne & Hodgins, 2016). This is underscored by a 2011 survey in which eighty-four percent of young people stated they would benefit from instruction on evaluating the credibility of the information they find online, yet the same survey found only sixteen percent of young people had more than a few experiences with this type of instruction (Kahne & Hodgins, 2016). Theorists in the areas of media literacy, digital literacy and critical media literacy have begun the painstaking task of providing the necessary

framework to prepare educators to fully seize the opportunity to prepare today's students for *their* future.

2.3 Critical Media Literacy

Focusing on the traditional print and media mediums with regards to media literacy education is a disservice to students as this method largely ignores the volumes of media in which they consume, produce and share regularly (Kellner & Share 2006). Recently, the notion of media has begun to change, no longer is the perception of media hamstrung to print or television media, but it has expanded to include the instantaneously available media that a connected digital society provides. Among the media forms that are available in a modern digital society it is becoming increasingly clear that social media networks are dominant, this is particularly true among teens aged 12-17 as ninety-five percent have access to the internet and eighty percent use social media sites (The Progress of Education Reform, 2012, p. 1).

Kellner and Share's vision for critical media literacy is in many ways a compilation of several approaches to media education. Perhaps chief among those approaches is the methodology of *media literacy*, which focuses on "...a series of communication competencies, including the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate" (Kellner & Share 2007). However, Kellner and Share argue that *media literacy* is not enough because it does not peel all the layers of media literacy back to expose the relationship of "*ideology, power and domination*" that is fundamental to media culture (2007). To this point, Kellner and Share argue, "one is often not aware that one is being educated and constructed by media culture..." and suggests media literacy must make an effort to equip students to explore "...deeply embedded ideological notions

of white supremacy, capitalist patriarchy, classism, homophobia...” (Kellner and Share, 2007). In sum, it seems Kellner and Share see critical media literacy something similar to a checks and balances system in which students are prepared to critically engage the information they receive from both traditional and new media sources.

Kellner and Share’s notion of critical media literacy further differs from traditional media literacy movements as some educators “openly express the myth that education can and should be politically neutral...” (Kellner and Share, 2007). This belief highlights what has turned into subject of intense debate among scholars within the media literacy field (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013). For Kellner and Share’s part, they argue that the attempt to remain politically neutral within the “mainstream” media literacy movement can find its roots to its conservative base and undermines media education’s ability to confront “oppression” and “strengthen democracy” (Kellner & Share, 2007).

With the surging growth of an uber-connected global society, challenges for educating our youth to live in a world in which anything and everything can be shared with a global audience at a push of a button are illuminated. Researchers have recognized that social media and other mediums within the connected marketplace create a new more specific type of literacy. Some within the media literacy arena have begun to view media literacy as a method for encouraging and advancing civic education (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013). One particular sub-field is *digital media literacy*, which focuses on the intersection of traditional media literacy and modern media mediums (Kahne, et al., 2007) and attempts to elucidate that students must understand how to use and analyze the media they are exposed to in order to truly participate within a democracy and the wider marketplace of ideas.

While the focus remains on the ability of future citizens to be able to critically engage the digital media they are exposed to; social media provides a beacon for evaluating the notion that users of social media are multimodal and are no longer relegated to role of media consumer but rather they could occupy the role of producer as well (Kellner & Share, 2006; O'Brien, 2010). While the role of producer is not unique to social media, as one also has the ability to be a producer for say a blog or a personally owned website, the distinction is found in what danah boyd described as *reachability* and *spreadability* (boyd, 2014). That is, content produced on social media provides a larger initial audience and through the sharing of the content by other users the pool of content consumers would quickly increase.

Media literacy offers the opportunity to prepare students for political engagement both in their communities and on a national level. By demonstrating how one would "...advocate positions, contest claims and organize action around issues they truly care about..." educators are able to use participatory media to "create positive early experiences with citizenship that could influence their civic behavior throughout their lives" (Rheingold, 2008). These early experiences are crucial for the development of skills for critical evaluation of social media messages that today's students are sure to receive from candidates for political office, news organizations or simply peers on social networks.

Differences are apparent in levels of digital literacy among young people and even access to media across the socio-economic spectrum (Docksai, 2014; see boyd). Beyond differences with digital literacy and access to that media, educators and other adults often mistakenly assume that because a given student or generation (*digital*

natives) had access to a particular technology they are familiar and comfortable with using it effectively (Baumann, 2012). While youth utilize digital media and are *digital natives*, whether it is social media or visiting sites on the Internet, in large majorities, they may not necessarily be comfortable using that technology in a political or civic arena.

Assumptions on the part of educators that are made with regards to students' preparedness, either in familiarity or the critical engagement of the digital world ensure a continued disservice to students (Baumann, 2012 & Rheingold, 2008). Educators who fail to educate students in the use of the technology that is going to be most prominent for the students' generation are preparing students for the history that they are likely to read about rather than the history that has yet to be written.

This approach for equipping students for civic participation via social media cannot be an exercise in vilifying the various forms of media those students or the general public is exposed to; there cannot be a position that a particular media medium is either inherently positive or negative despite potential examples that might lead one to this conclusion. Kellner and Share assert that this is a "protectionist" view on media literacy and "...its anti-media bias which over-simplifies the complexity of our relationship with the media and takes away the potential for empowerment..." (Kellner & Share, 2006, p. 60). Additionally, as noted previously this type of valuation might have the opposite impact than educators seek as young people might no longer enjoy using social media (Burnett & Merchant, 2011). Our most suitable conclusion here can be that new media indeed exists and that it offers an opportunity to not only prepare students for a future that is more technologically centric and global in nature but also use it as a method for improving outcomes within the social studies classroom and within the civic arena.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

A descriptive case study was chosen to determine how 10th grade students in a high school U.S. History course make sense of social media messages during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

3.1 Research Questions

RQ1. Based on their analysis of two 2016 presidential candidates', Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, Twitter posts, what are the 10th grade U.S. history students' impression of the character of each candidate?

RQ2. How do the 10th grade U.S. history students make sense of the Twitter posts of two 2016 presidential candidates, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump?

3.2 Student Population and Sample

This study utilizes a convenience sample as the target population for this study was all students enrolled in my high school U.S. History course. The high school used in this study is part of a suburban school district. In this high school, males and females are essentially equally represented with in the student population with 49.9% male and 50.1% female. Further, this high school has a majority white population (61%), followed by African-American (18%), Hispanic (18%) and Other (6.9%). Among the student population of roughly 800 about 50.4% are economically disadvantaged and 4% are determined to be English Language Learners.

Student population used for the convenience sample (n = 8) of this study primarily included 10th graders; however, the population also included a few 11th grade

students. All students were assured their participation in this study would not positively or negatively impact neither their grade nor my opinion of them as students. All students were informed that the study included a pre/post survey, the use of their Tweet Organizer and a culminating focus group interview and that they could decline to participate in any part of the study at any time. While the target population was all students enrolled in U.S. History, eight students volunteered and granted permission for participation in this study and were assigned pseudonyms of Student 1-Student 8, additionally Students 1-4 agreed to participate in the focus group discussion. Below is brief description of each student participating in this study. These descriptions are provided to better situate their responses in a wider academic and civic awareness context.

Student 1: Student 1 is an academically high achieving student who is actively involved in many extracurricular activities. This student has also demonstrated a high level of interest and awareness to civic and political issues.

Student 2: This student excels academically and has assumed student-leadership roles within the school and many other extracurricular activities. Student 2 has demonstrated an interest in issues in the civic and political arena.

Student 3: Student 3 also is an academically high achieving student who tends to be a little quieter than other peers but has communicated a strong interest in civic and political topics.

Student 4: This student is bilingual and is committed to academics and has demonstrated curiosity and an outspoken approach to civic and political issues.

Student 5: Student 5 is academically centered but demonstrated a little less natural interest and curiosity regarding civic and political issues than others in this study.

Student 6: This student tends to be less academically centered but is quite interested in global cultures and has demonstrated a passion for civic and political issues.

Student 7: Student 7 is also less academically centered and often struggles to complete coursework but is quite curious about public policy issues and tends to be outspoken in their views.

Student 8: This student is academically centered but does not demonstrate an interest in civic or political issues in the same manner the other participants do.

3.3 Procedures

During the lead up to the 2016 presidential election, all students in my American history course were assigned a weekly current event assignment asking them to interact with the things in the world around them as a vehicle aid in connecting key themes and concepts in history. Undoubtedly, during this timeframe the presidential election became a dominant topic during current event assignments and discussion. This created a framework for a brief mini-project I planned for covering the 2016 presidential election in my American history class.

For this mini-project I utilized a student-centered learning approach to instruction which sought to put the students in the driver seat of their learning. The antecedence of the student-centered learning approach is found in constructivism (Hsiao, Mikolaj, & Shih, 2017). Constructivists emphasize the importance of learning experiences as students build their knowledge, relatedly, student-centered learning stresses the “active role of students and their ownership of learning (Hsiao, et. al., 2017, p. 23). Further,

Hsiao et. al. note a student-centered approach builds students' knowledge "by gathering, synthesizing and integrating information" (2017, p. 23).

Instructionally, the mini-project included both formative and summative assessments for all students enrolled in my American history course. Formative assessments included the pre/post survey in which students address their comfort level with the candidates. Quantitative results from the formative assessments were shared with students at the end of the project to allow students to identify the continuity and change in their thinking regarding the candidates. Students' Tweet Organizer represented a formative assessment aimed at capturing their analysis of the candidates' tweets. Tweet Organizers were collected and graded on completeness and the quality of the response.

While all students in my American history course completed the same coursework for the unit over the 2016 election, eight students volunteered to participate and allowed me to work with them on this study. These eight students agreed to allow me to explore, analyze and report on all formative and summative assessments and their thoughts during our focus group discussion. While presenting issues in terms of generalizability, this small group of students allowed me to thoroughly evaluate how they made sense of the tweets they were exposed to.

In early October 2016, students were surveyed to determine which issues they felt were most important to them during the upcoming presidential election. Options of potential issues presented to students during this survey were related to a Pew Research Center survey determining which issues were most important to voters in the months prior to the 2016 presidential election (Pew, 2016). Further, these options were narrowed further based upon the instructional needs of students and to ensure the terminology of

each issue within the survey would not be confusing to students. For example, the issue of the “economy” referenced in Pew’s 2016 study was presented as “jobs” in the student survey. The results from this survey were the basis for two of the three issues students would investigate as a part of this study. The issue of overall candidate character was added as a way to capture the qualities one might view as important to anyone seeking the presidency but not necessarily captured by other issues.

In mid-October of 2016, students were asked to complete a pre-study questionnaire aimed at determining their level of comfort for each of the two primary presidential candidates, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, and their position on the issues of immigration, cost of college tuition/student-debt and overall candidate character (Refer to [Appendix A](#)). A five-level Likert scale was used for students to respond to the questionnaire ranging from “extremely comfortable” to “extremely uncomfortable”.

Each question addressed an individual candidate and an issue. Respondents would select their level of comfort for the candidate and the associated issue, and then respond to a short free-response question, "Based on your response to the question above, why do you feel this way?" Short-response questions were added to allow students to offer an explanation to the response for each question. This opportunity for explanation was warranted because students’ idea of “comfortable” or “uncomfortable” could have multiple meanings. For example, one might be “uncomfortable” with Hillary Clinton’s position on student-debt not because the student disagrees with her position but rather because they either do not know what her position is or would like additional information. All students received instruction as to the purpose of the free response questions and were aware of the potential for multiple meanings for their selection.

Following the pre-study survey, students were introduced to the project they would be completing. Students learned that they would be researching at least seven tweets relating to the four primary presidential candidates, Hillary Clinton, Gary Johnson, Jill Stein and Donald Trump regarding the issues they selected as most important to them during the upcoming election. Students were then presented with a “Tweet Organizer” that they would use to document the tweets they selected, to analyze the tweet’s contents and provide their thoughts on the tweet and its content (see [Appendix B](#)).

Students were then provided a digital copy of the Tweet Organizer. Instruction was provided to students for each portion of the Tweet Organizer detailing the information that should be completed for each tweet. Basic fields of the organizer include the date of the tweet, which candidate the tweet relates to, the text of the tweet or a brief distribution of a photo or video attached to the tweet, which issue the tweet relates to (immigration, cost of college tuition/student debt, candidate’s character) and whether the contents of the tweet is fact checkable.

Due to the descriptive nature of this study, students were not provided detailed instruction with regards to critically analyzing the contents of the tweets they would ultimately engage with. However, instruction was provided to students at the beginning of the study to ensure students clearly understood how to complete the Tweet Organizer. This limited instruction included the modeling of one Tweet for the Tweet Organizer. Further, I provided additional clarifying instruction as needed throughout the study while taking care not to influence the tweets students selected or impact their understanding of the content of the tweets.

3.4 Data Collection

For this descriptive study there are five instruments for collecting and analyzing data. Noted below is each instrument with a description of each and a description of how each data source will be analyzed.

Pre/Post Survey (Refer to [Appendix A](#)). The pre-survey was used to first capture the comfort level via a five-level Likert Scale of students as it relates to Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump's positions on the three key election issues of immigration, cost of college tuition/student debt, and overall candidate character. Additionally, students were given the opportunity to explain their comfort level for each question through a free response portion. After the completion of the in-class project, students were presented with an identical survey as they completed prior to the start of the project. The post-survey was used to identify any change among students from the pre-survey. Like the pre-survey, students were given the opportunity to explain their reasoning for the selections they made for each candidate and issue.

Analyzing both the pre and post survey was identical as a basic statistical analysis will be performed to determine the percentage of students selecting each of the five levels of comfort regarding each of the three election issues and each presidential candidate. Responses from students in the free response portion was first grouped by the identified level of comfort selected by the student and then the coded to identify representative themes in reasoning for the students' reported comfort level.

Researcher Notes. During the course of the in-class project brief researcher notes were created to document general observations of interaction between student to student and also student to teacher. No direct quotations were documented; rather the researcher will note thematic similarities among the interaction of students.

Student Tweet Organizers. (Refer to [Appendix B](#)) – Tweet Organizers account for the majority of the in-class project for all students. Tweet Organizers were coded inductively and then categorized based on prevailing themes among the study participants. Below is a description of each key component of the Tweet Organizer.

- a. Candidate Selection.** Students were prompted to select the author of the tweet they have selected by placing a checkmark in the box for each of the four candidates (Hillary Clinton, Gary Johnson, Jill Stein, and Donald Trump). Candidates are presented in the Tweet Organizer in alphabetical order by last name.
- b. Text of the Tweet.** Students were asked to include the exact text of the tweet to include any @replies, hashtags, and a brief description of any images or videos that were posted as a part of the tweet.
- c. Related Issue.** Students were asked to indicate which of the election related issues the tweet they have selected is connected with by placing a checkmark by one of the three election issues (immigration cost of college tuition/student debt, and overall candidate character). Students are required to explore tweets pertaining to each of the three issues at least once during the project. Once students have met this requirement they were free to select whichever issue they found to be most compelling to them personally.
- d. Fact Checking.** In this box students were asked to determine if the content of the tweet is fact checkable. Check boxes are provided for both a yes and no response. Further, students are provided with three possible websites (factcheck.org, politifact.org, and votesmart.org) which they could use to

determine accuracy of the content of the tweet. Check boxes are provided for each of the websites provided for students to indicate which site they used.

- e. **Initial Thoughts.** During this short response section students were presented with a few questions seeking to get their thoughts on a given tweet. Students were instructed to how to complete this section prior to doing any research into the content of the tweet. Students were presented with the following questions:

1) What were your initial thoughts about the content of the Tweet?

Through students' response to this question, I hope to determine how students interpreted the content of the tweet. This will assist in-part to answering RQ2.

2) Why did you choose [the tweet] it? Student responses to this

question will help determine at least in-part students' motivation for selecting the tweets they did for their Tweet Organizer. This question also assists in answering RQ2 as students' motivation for selecting tweets to focus on might provide a lens for how they make sense of the political messages they are exposed to.

3) Does the candidate make a claim about an issue or their opponent? Do you agree, disagree or unsure of your opinion?

Why? These questions seek to determine what the students' opinion was on the content of the tweet. Responses to these questions were used as method for determining change in opinion following the research portion of the Tweet Organizer.

f. Fact vs. Opinion:

1) Does the Tweet seem to be based more in facts or opinion?

Students' responses to this question were used again as a method for answering in-part RQ2, by determining if students are able to delineate between facts presented by the candidates and their opinion.

2) Does the Tweet seem to be more positive or negative in nature?

Explain. This question seeks to determine the students' perception as to the overall positivity or negativity of the content of the tweet.

Determining the students' understanding of the tone of the tweet will aid in answering RQ2.

Following the open response questions above, students were instructed to use the websites provided in the *fact checking* section or their own sources to research the content of the tweet. Once they have completed their research into the content of the tweet, students continue to the last two sections of the Tweet Organizer. Those sections are detailed below:

g. Accuracy of the Content of the Tweet:

1) Was the Tweet factual based on the information you found?

Student responses to this question will better inform my analysis of how students formed their final opinion on the content of the tweet in the final section of the Tweet Organizer.

2) Do you feel you still need more information? Explain? This

question seeks to determine whether students felt as though they were

able to find sufficiently convincing information to either support or refute the claims made in the tweet.

h. Students' Final Opinion:

1) After researching the content of the Tweet, do you still have the same opinion of the Tweet as you did above? Responses from

students to this question will help to illustrate any change in the student's opinion following their research into the tweet.

2) Do you feel this Tweet will help the candidate gain supporters?

This question seeks to determine how students viewed the overall effectiveness of the tweet.

Focus Group Interview

Following the completion of both the Tweet Organizer and the Post Study Survey a focus group interview was conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol. The focus group interviewed was structured to provide guiding questions while allowing for the participants to interact and respond to the comments of the other focus group participants. Focus group participants included four of the eight students who agreed to participate in the study. The other four participants declined to participate in the focus group. Participants were encouraged to discuss with and respond to one another during the interview. Guiding questions for the focus group interview were derived from an initial analysis of all datasets and to allow students to ensure I correctly understood their ideas.

3.5 Limitations

A number of limitations were identified during the course of this study. These limitations are listed below.

1. Generalizability is not possible due to the nature of the convenience sample used in this study.
2. The conclusions in this study are also limited by the exposure of students to multiple other social media platforms that might augment their use of Twitter during the in-class project and thus might alter the conclusion about how students make sense of messages posted to Twitter.
3. Student participants in this study were academically high achieving and civically centered, this limits the generalizability of the results to the broader group of students in my American history course and further limits generalizability to any other population.
4. Students' level of knowledge of the political or historic context that underpin the content of tweets posted by presidential candidates.
5. This study is also limited by the study participants' ability level to articulate their ideas and thought processes both in written and verbal form.

While these limitations restrict the generalizability of this study to the group of study participants, the results presented in Chapter 4 allow for a greater understanding how young people make sense of the political messages they are exposed to via Twitter and inform future research.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This chapter presents and analyzes the five data sets, the pre-survey, researcher notes, Tweet Organizers, Post Survey and the focus group interview, and their related findings. For this study respondents responded to a pre and a post survey regarding their comfort level with each candidate, created Tweet Organizers during the course of instruction and finally participants were given the opportunity to take part in a focus group discussion.

4.1 Pre-Study Survey Results

At the beginning of the unit over the 2016 presidential election I gave each student a formative assessment in the form of a survey. Instructionally this assessment allowed me to determine where students were with their knowledge and overall feelings regarding candidates and the election issues. This formative assessment was also used to demonstrate to my students any change in their opinions between the beginning and end of the in-class project. During the pre-study survey There are two datasets for this survey. First, is a Likert scale in which students select their comfort level with each of the two candidates for president and second is an open-ended response in which students were asked to explain why they had the comfort level they indicated.

Hillary Clinton

Participants' (n=91) responses to the Likert scale based question "How comfortable are you with the overall character of Hillary Clinton?" demonstrated a majority (53.8%) were either *somewhat* or *extremely uncomfortable* with Hillary Clinton's overall character as a candidate. This is compared 28.6% of respondents reporting either being *somewhat comfortable* or *extremely comfortable*, leaving 17.58%

as *neither comfortable nor uncomfortable* with Hillary Clinton’s overall character (see Figure 2).

How comfortable are you with the overall character of Hillary Clinton?

#	Response	%	Count
1	<i>Extremely Comfortable</i>	3.30	3
2	Somewhat Comfortable	25.27	23
3	Neither uncomfortable nor comfortable	17.58	16
4	Somewhat uncomfortable	26.37	24
5	Extremely uncomfortable	27.48	25
Figure 2	Total	100.00	91

Following their response to the Likert scale based question, participants were immediately prompted to respond to an open-ended question which asked; *based on your response to the question above, why do you feel this way?* Responses for this open-ended question were analyzed and placed into one or more of five prevailing categories (see Figure 3).

	Category
Candidate Maturity (+/-)	Responses in this category deal with the perceived maturity level of the candidate. Can be viewed as a positive or negative for the candidate.
Trustworthiness (+/-)	Responses in this category deal with the overall level of trust the participant has with the candidate. Can be viewed as a positive or negative for the candidate.
Unfit/Unqualified/Mean	Responses in this category deal with attributes that the participant feels makes the candidate unacceptable for office.
Most Qualified/Nice	Responses in this category deal with attributes or feelings that make the candidate most qualified for office.
Other	Responses in this category do not fit well in the others.

Figure 3

Respondents' whom signaled they were either *somewhat uncomfortable* or *extremely uncomfortable* with Hillary Clinton's overall character principally based their reasoning on the lack of trust they had for her. For example, Student 6 stated

I don't like her, to me she's a criminal. She had the power to save our people at this one place but she didn't send any troops and they were shot dead. I understand how Donald Trump says things but I rather have someone who says bad things instead of someone who had done or doing bad things."

This response serve as a representative sample of other respondents' who were *somewhat uncomfortable* or *extremely uncomfortable* with Hillary Clinton's overall character in message both in tone and in message.

Conversely, those who stated they were either *somewhat comfortable* or *extremely comfortable* found their reasoning in Hillary Clinton's overall qualifications for office. Representative examples of participants' responses include Student 8's "I feel comfortable because Hillary Clinton is very nice and cares about our country," additionally Student 2 states "I feel like she has many good points but based on her decisions in the past I tend to wonder how she will lead." Student 2's hesitation is particularly representative of other students who had some reservations regarding Hillary Clinton but still reported being *somewhat comfortable* with her overall character.

Donald Trump

Participants' (n=91) responses to the Likert scale based question demonstrated that 67% of students were either *somewhat uncomfortable* or *extremely uncomfortable* with Donald Trump's overall character as a candidate. Conversely, just 16% of

respondents reported being either *somewhat comfortable* or *extremely comfortable*, leaving 16% reporting being *neither comfortable nor uncomfortable* with Donald Trump’s overall character (see Figure 4).

How comfortable are you with the overall character of Donald Trump?

#	Response	%	Count
1	<i>Extremely Comfortable</i>	5.49	5
2	Somewhat Comfortable	10.99	10
3	Neither uncomfortable nor comfortable	16.48	15
4	Somewhat uncomfortable	20.88	19
5	Extremely uncomfortable	46.16	42
Figure 4		Total	100.00
			91

Participants were then posed with the same open ended question as they were previously; *based on your response to the question above, why do you feel this way?* These responses were, too, evaluated and placed into one or more of the categories listed in Figure 3.

Participants expressing feelings of being either *somewhat uncomfortable* or *extremely uncomfortable* with the overall character of Donald Trump grounded their feelings in their concern over Donald Trump’s fitness/qualifications and overall maturity level. For example, Student 3 explicates their position by describing Donald Trump in this way:

I don’t like him at all. He says really stupid things that aren’t what presidential characteristics should be. There are so many things that I don’t agree with, and I just think that about 90% of his ideas and statements shouldn’t be allowed anywhere near the head of our country. We don’t need to fall farther down into chaos than we already are with him running as president.

Among those who felt either *somewhat comfortable* or *extremely comfortable* based their opinion on trustworthiness and qualifications for office. Representative examples would include:

Student 6: I rather have him who says he's gonna do bad things (which he might not) than Hillary who already had done bad things (which she has). Don't get me wrong or anything, people may have different views on Hillary and Trump and I'm okay with that – this is just my opinion.

Student 1: I agree with him over more things than I do with Hillary Clinton, however they are both terrible candidates in my eyes.

Analysis of Pre-Study Survey

Data gained from the pre-survey demonstrates two broad conclusions and several more nuanced ones. First, a majority of respondents reported being uncomfortable with both of the candidates, which was supported by the data as reported in Figure 3 and Figure 5. Second, among those who were uncomfortable with both candidates the overall trustworthiness of the candidate became the determining factor and many students reported feeling as though they were presented with a false choice. Responses among the study participants begin to flesh these patterns out a little more.

For example, while a majority were uncomfortable with both candidates, Student 1 described their comfort level being influenced by their dissatisfaction with the available candidates. Student 1 explains that while she is *somewhat comfortable* with Donald Trump, she is convinced that both candidates are unfit to be president. Further, it is worth noting that some patterns were present in all students that were not present in the students who agreed to participate in the study. First, despite the general dissatisfaction among all

students with both candidates, students were more comfortable with Hillary Clinton than Donald Trump if for no other reason than she is not Donald Trump which might explain why many respondents were more willing to give Hillary Clinton the benefit of the doubt rather than Donald Trump.

Additionally, open-ended responses often ventured into critiquing the candidates in a more abrasive personal tone. Overwhelmingly, this was the case with Donald Trump as respondents voiced their level of discomfort with Donald Trump, some responses were in a jarring personal tone, and others did not share the coarse jarring language but sought to convey the same personal tone. Conversely, abrasive responses regarding Hillary Clinton's overall character were not nearly as prevalent. In such instances, responses were more muted than the coarse language to describe Donald Trump's overall character, such as Student 6's claim that Hillary Clinton is a criminal.

4.2 Student Created Tweet Organizers

As noted in Chapter 3, students completed a Tweet Organizer as a part of the in-class project. Students were required to address each of the three election related issues (immigration, cost of college tuition/student debt, and overall candidate's character) at least once in their Tweet Organizer. After meeting this requirement, students were free to explore and focus on any of the three issues they found to be most compelling. Refer to Appendix B for a copy of the Tweet Organizer.

Data obtained from the Tweet Organizers provided valuable insight into how students make sense of the political messages they are exposed to via Twitter but also underscored the difficulty in making generalizations to the broader population of my students. For example, of the 91 students enrolled in my high school U.S. history courses,

eight students choose to participate in this study. Additionally, these eight students tended to be more academically centered and more attentive to civic and political issues. Tweet organizers from the eight study participants presented five key categories for investigating how the students made sense of the political messages they were exposed to during the study. Each of the five categories is presented below.

Student Tweet Selection

This category relates to both the means and motivation students used for selecting the Tweets they included in their Tweet Organizer. A few characteristics were notable. First, student Tweet Organizers showed a vast majority of students selected candidate tweets related to overall candidate character and based on the tweet's *salacious or controversial* content. Forty-three tweets were submitted by the eight study participants via their Tweet Organizers. Of those forty-three tweets, four addressed the election issue of college tuition/student debt, twenty-three tweets addressed overall candidate character and sixteen tweets addressed the issue of immigration. While the issue of overall candidate character accounted for fifty-three percent of the tweets selected by the study participants, it was less than the frequency observed from all students in the course. While extensive researcher observation notes were not taken during the course of the study, I did however make note of common patterns either in student to student interaction or student to teacher interaction. I noted multiple conversations between students regarding the “crazy” things that Donald Trump had tweeted. Data obtained from participants in this study reinforce and illustrate how students selected tweets for inclusion in the Tweet Organizers. Student 3 provides a representative example of the types of tweets selected by students that fit in this category. Student 3 selected the below

tweet that was re-tweeted by Donald Trump on April 16, 2015 claiming “@mplefy: If Hillary Clinton can’t satisfy her husband what makes her think she can satisfy America?” Further evidence from the Tweet organizers supports that this method of selection was largely unique to Donald Trump.

Second, students’ selection of tweets was also the result of *convenience*. Students were asked to select at least one tweet from at least two presidential candidates regarding each of the three election issues. Responses from the Tweet Organizers and entries to the researcher observation notes indicate that students selected Tweets relating to the other two election issues that were not as appealing to students as the issue of *overall candidate character* were chosen out of mere convenience. In fact, in many cases students failed to include tweets relating to either of the other two election issues and instead focused their work solely on the issue of overall candidate character. For those students who did address the other two election issues, their selection of tweets often relied on a first come basis that would allow students to fulfill the requirements of the in-class project to cover each of the election issues at least once.

Third, evidence from the Tweet Organizers also suggests that students were more prone to select tweets which were in agreement with the students’ predisposition regarding either the candidates or a particular election issue. This became profoundly apparent as a majority of tweets selected by students for their organizers were overtly hostile or overtly complimentary of a specific candidate. Student responses submitted in their Tweet Organizers is consistent with the notion of homophily and more precisely an echo chamber as students largely sought out tweets that supported a point of view that they already subscribed to (Yardi & boyd, 2010; Passe et al., 2017).

Lastly, some study participants did not state a reason for their selection of the Tweets they included in their Tweet organizers. Conversely, those students who did provide a reason for why they chose the tweets often cited the controversial or salacious nature of the tweet. Students' initial reaction regarding these tweets was typically along the lines of "I can't believe they would say something like that."

Content of Selected Tweets

Evidence obtained from the eight study participants indicated that students at times had difficulty comprehending the message of the tweet, which seemed to be rooted in a few areas. First, students would often not fully comprehend the content of a candidate's tweet because they lacked the necessary historical or political background knowledge to contextualize the candidate's message. For example, Student 6 evaluated a tweet posted by Donald Trump relating to the health records of presidential candidates stating, "I think that both candidates, Hillary and myself, should release detailed medical records. I have no problem doing so! Hillary?" Student 6's immediately asks "my thought is why would anyone care about medical records?" Student 6 continues by arguing that medical records should be kept secret, saying that medical records are "private stuff". While not as common as the releasing of tax records, Student 6's response neglects what has become somewhat of a common practice among major presidential candidates dating back to the 1970s (Pearce 2016).

Second, responses to the Tweet Organizer point to a difficulty among some students to delineate facts from the candidate's opinion. For example, Student 3 selected a tweet posted by Hillary Clinton claiming "Let's be clear: Islam is not our adversary. Muslims are peaceful and tolerant people and have nothing whatsoever to do with

terrorism,” and Student 6 noted that she chose “this tweet because I completely agree with what Hillary said.” Student 6 noted the nuance that is conveyed by Clinton by stating “Yes, there are some bad people out there that are Muslim, but that doesn’t mean that the rest of the people who practice that religion are bad.” However, it became clear that Student 6 saw Hillary Clinton’s tweet as fact as opposed to Clinton’s opinion. When Student 6 was prompted to make a determination whether the tweet is based on fact or opinion, Student 6 writes “It is factual because there is no form of opinion in the tweet,” this response fails to acknowledge that some do, in fact, believe that Muslims are an adversary of America.

Fact Checking of Tweets

In the Tweet Organizer, students were asked whether the content presented in each tweet was fact checkable. To this end, three websites were provided as possible resources for students to utilize as they attempted to determine the factual accuracy of the tweets. However, most students failed to indicate which website they used and of the thirty-seven tweets reviewed from study participants, zero students indicated which website they used for fact checking.

Students’ Final Opinion of the Tweets

At the end of each Tweet Organizer students were asked if their opinion of the content of the tweet had changed from their initial thoughts of the tweets after conducting their research. Evidence from the Tweet Organizers suggest that students’ opinion of the content of the tweet rarely changed as the result of having done research into the content of the tweet. Of the thirty-seven tweets reviewed from study participants only one student

reported having changed their opinion regarding a tweet. In most cases students responded with “my opinion is the same as before” or something similar.

‘I Don’t Know’

A significant number of student responses included some variation of “I don’t know” to many of the questions of the Tweet Organizer. In some cases this was the sole statement provided by students in response to a question in the Tweet Organizer but in other cases students seemed hedge their views or opinions by ending their responses with “I don’t know”. For some students this type of response was limited only to a specific tweet but for other students it became a common theme throughout all of the Tweet Organizers they completed.

4.3 Post-Study Survey Results

As a part of a summative assessment after the completion of the mini-project, students completed the same survey that they responded to at the beginning of the project. This follow up survey sought to capture possible change in students’ comfort levels with the candidates following their interaction with the candidates’ tweets. The results from this second survey were shared with students instructionally to allow them to see how their opinion changed or in some cases stayed the same.

Hillary Clinton

Data received from the follow-up survey revealed respondents (N = 89) became increasingly comfortable with Hillary Clinton’s overall character (see Figure 5) since the first survey. Shifts in the comfort level among respondents were most noticeable in those who stated they were *neither uncomfortable nor comfortable* and those who reported they were *extremely comfortable* with the overall character of Hillary Clinton. Among those

responding that they were *neither uncomfortable nor comfortable* with Hillary Clinton’s character, their responses mostly fell into the *other* category (see Figure 3). These responses signaled that respondents were unsure about Hillary Clinton for a variety of reasons such as:

1. “I feel like her opinions made a good point but I don’t [k]no[w] for sure.”
2. “I don’t really know honestly. She’s better than Trump but I don’t really trust her all that much either.”
3. “She’s alright I don’t really know how to feel about her, I mean I don’t have a reason to dislike her.”

How comfortable are you with the overall character of Hillary Clinton?

#	Response	%	Change (%)	Count
1	Extremely Comfortable	12.36	9.06	11
2	Somewhat Comfortable	19.10	(6.17)	17
3	Neither uncomfortable nor comfortable	25.85	8.26	23
4	Somewhat uncomfortable	22.47	(3.90)	20
5	Extremely uncomfortable	20.22	(7.25)	18
Figure 5	Total	100.00		89

Donald Trump

Data obtained from the follow-up survey indicated an incremental increase in the comfort level among respondents with regard to Donald Trump’s overall character when compared to the initial survey results (see Figure 4). Data indicates the biggest change among respondents between the first and second survey to be the percentage that were no longer *extremely uncomfortable* with Donald Trump’s overall character.

How comfortable are you with the overall character of Hillary Clinton?

#	Response	%	Change (%)	Count
1	Extremely Comfortable	7.87	2.38	7
2	Somewhat Comfortable	13.48	2.49	12
3	Neither uncomfortable nor comfortable	23.60	7.12	21
4	Somewhat uncomfortable	28.08	7.21	25
5	Extremely uncomfortable	26.97	(19.20)	24
Figure 6	Total	100.00		89

Changes in the way students felt about not only Donald Trump but also Hillary Clinton indicated they became more comfortable with each candidate after completing the min-project. In order to more fully flesh out the thoughts of the students regarding the candidates and the tweets they encountered, a focus group discussion was conducted and in the next section results from the focus group discussion is presented and analyzed.

4.4 Focus Group Discussion

Following the completion of the instructional and post-study survey phases of the study, students who opted to participate in the study were invited to a focus group discussion. The focus group discussion was designed to give participants the opportunity to clarify their thinking and allow me to ask clarifying questions. Four of the eight students who volunteered for this study chose to participate in the focus group discussion. For the purposes of reporting on the interactions of the focus group, I simply have referred to the focus group participants as ‘Student 1 through Student 4’ to ensure the privacy of the participants. The use of brackets in the focus group transcript and quotes indicate additions made to ensure clarity for the reader. Segments of the transcript from the focus group are presented in the form of block quotes throughout this section; refer to Appendix B for the transcript in its entirety.

Student responses during the focus group discussion supported some of the key findings drawn from an analysis of the survey results and content of the Tweet organizers. For example, one key recurring theme was the attention given to *controversial* or *salacious* tweets. When questions were posed to the group asking what made a candidate's tweet effective Student 1 responded with an example, "Umm... Donald Trump said that Obama was the founder of ISIS and the co-founder would be crooked Hillary. Definitely don't think that should be said but it definitely grabbed people's attention about what Donald Trump trying to say about them." The other three students signaled their agreement to Student 1's statement by nodding their head in agreement.

The *controversial* or *salacious* nature of tweets continued to be the basis of responses, as illustrated in the following excerpt how Donald Trump's tweets caught their attention.

Researcher: How did Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump's use of Twitter catch your attention? If you can, provide an example.

Student 1: I just know that people kept re-tweeting all of his, not necessarily dumb Tweets but things that didn't make sense maybe in our eyes but they would start paying more attention to what his stance was on things, just the basics.

Researcher: So, were the things that he was saying, the crazy things you said people were re-tweeting, were those things that caught your attention as opposed to some other things?

Student 1: Um yes, I don't pay attention to Twitter much so I'm not really into it but like when I would see people be like "this is what Donald Trump said that's crazy!" Then I'm like oh...

Student 4: Yeah, they'd put screenshots [of the Tweet]...

Student 2: So even if you don't have a Twitter people screenshot it and put it on Instagram, Facebook and like all the other social media sites.

Student 1: Then we all go on Twitter and look at all of his other Tweets.

Researcher: So when you were doing this project were these the type of things that got your attention through the project.

Student 1: Um, Yeah

Student 2: Yeah

Student 3: Yeah

Student 4: Kind of.

Researcher: Okay, can you give an example?

Student 3: One of mine was "If Hillary Clinton can't satisfy her husband what makes her think she can satisfy America?" I think that makes everyone doubt what she can actually do, and getting more attention for him.

During a related follow-up question later in the focus group, students were asked if during the project if the "crazy" things that were being posted became the basis for their selection of the tweet. All four students responded in agreement that the *controversial* or *salacious* nature of tweets became the guiding rationale for the students' including them in their Tweet Organizers. Additionally, Student 1 indicated before the in-class project she would tend to focus solely on the "crazy" things the candidates would say because

those tweets would be shared by others, but by the end of the in-class project Student 1 stated she was able to focus beyond just those “crazy” things and was able to place the content of the tweets in a factual context.

In another exchange students began to discuss the role of the echo-chamber effect, the spread of possibly false information and possible media bias in response to a question regarding how candidate tweets affect the way people talked about the election issues students focused on during the in-class project. In the following excerpt from the focus group discussion, students discuss how the conversation on Twitter about the election issues seemed to become quite one-sided.

Researcher: How do you feel Clinton’s and/or Trump’s use of Twitter affected how people talked about the issues? So remember we focused on 3 main issues, cost of education, immigration and overall candidate character. So, how do you feel with what you looked at how their use of Twitter affected how people talked about the issues?

Student 1: Um, so one of my Tweets was “1/2 of undocumented workers pay federal taxes which means they are paying more federal income tax than Donald Trump does.” And this is from Hillary Clinton, but I felt like the beginning that was just putting it into perspective to me like how that works, how everyone says immigration is bad and all this kind of stuff but when she said that it made me think that they are here and working so like and paying more than if Donald Trump pays. How is that not okay?

Researcher: Did that spark any other questions? So when you saw that Tweet, did that create any other questions that you wanted answers to?

Student 1: Well, it made me think like what are we not looking at and what is the media putting out there and what is actually is happening? The media I feel like would just twist the words and say “oh immigration is bad” and telling us everything like that but there may be some positives to it like, you know, how are they helping us or what can we do to help them? So just like basic questions like that, things that are behind the scenes.

Student 4: Yeah, I feel like everyone saw it one sided. Like everything they said about immigration and that kind of stuff, [unintelligible] if they are here and are working and aren't doing any harm, I don't see why they should have to stay [leave].

Researcher: Ok so, when you're talking about one sided, are you talking about, on Trump's side the Tweets on immigration are quite one-sided as a negative thing, an issue that we need to deal with whether it be the wall or whatever versus maybe Hilary providing the opposite end?

Student 4: Yeah, like he, all his supporters only saw the issue one-sided. Like what she [Student 1] said about them [immigrants] paying taxes and him paying taxes.

Researcher: Okay.

Student 3: I think that people get blindsided about what they want to believe and because it is on Twitter you don't have to show your identity, so people just start saying stuff and other people start believing it and it just keeps going. (p. 2-3)

Unpacking Student 3's response regarding her observation during the in-class project is critical, because Student 3 specifically notes the way people develop blinders (Student 3

refers to people being blindsided, but it seems reasonable she meant to describe blinders) regarding their belief on a given issue. Student 4 voiced support and agreement with Student 3 but described the discussion about election issues as one-sided. Student 3 recognizes not only the echo-chamber effect but also the possible ramifications as it can turn into the posting and sharing of potentially false information. Student 3's observation here is further illustrated by her concern later in the discussion in which she questions the reliability of information found on Twitter. Student 3 states "It's [Twitter] not reliable, but you could see how people would be on it [Twitter] but if you didn't have any background information you're not going to get it from Twitter (p. 6)."

Additionally, one student points out the reliability issues she sees from other media sources. Student 1's exchange illustrates the importance of critical media literacy, as Student 1 has begun to demonstrate the budding skills of identifying the relationship of ideology, power and domination that Kellner and Share argues young people need to be successful in critically engaging today's new media (2007). In this exchange Student 1 cites a tweet posted by Hillary Clinton in which Clinton seeks to compare the amount of federal income taxes paid by undocumented workers to the amount paid by Donald Trump. Student 1's responses points to a mistrust of the traditional media. Student 1 responded during the focus group;

Researcher: Did that spark any other questions? So when you saw that Tweet, did that create any other questions that you wanted answers to?

Student 2: Well, it made me think like what are we not looking at and what is the media putting out there and what is actually is happening? The media I feel like would just twist the words and say "oh immigration is bad" and telling us

everything like that but there may be some positives to it like, you know, how are they helping us or what can we do to help them? So just like basic questions like that, things that are behind the scenes. (p. 2)

While it is unclear exactly which specific form of media Student 1 is referring to in her response, it is reasonable to assume that she is referring to main stream media outlets such as CNN, Fox News and MSNBC. Nevertheless, Student 1 points out the tweet from Hillary Clinton regarding the amount of taxes paid by both undocumented workers and how Donald Trump caused her to question why, in her opinion, the media claims immigration is a bad thing. Student 1's response points to a belief the student has that the media might be engaging in nefarious activity, either through the withholding of critical information or through the intentional spreading of false information to support a media bias against certain immigration policies.

Student 1's experience might in-part further validate a recent study that found that a decade's old approach to teaching students to determine the credibility of sources through the use of checklists is not working well (Breakstone, McGrew, Smith, Ortega, & Wineburg, 2018). Instead the authors suggest teaching skills of lateral reading in which students would investigate and research the trustworthiness of the source of information on the web to identify hidden bias (Breakstone et. al., 2018). Lateral reading contrasts from what the authors say the "checklist" model encourages which is reading vertically, which leads students to search within a given source to determine its credibility (Breakstone et. al., 2018).

Issues with credibility percolated further into the focus group discussion as students were asked about how well prepared they felt they were to use Twitter to make

decisions as a voter. Several of the students indicated while they had reservations about using Twitter for obtaining information needed for making choices as a voter, it was not due a to feeling they lacked the skills needed to make those decisions but rather they deemed information presented via Twitter unreliable. Below is an excerpt of this conversation:

Researcher: How prepared do you feel to use Twitter as a means for gaining information needed to make a decision as a voter?

Student 2: um..I feel like I wouldn't use Twitter as a way to get information maybe because of [unintelligible] but not to get information um as in this project because in this project we used fact checking and I just figured out that most of the time they were wrong like all of it was wrong, so like, if it was wrong on those certain Tweets I can't imagine all the other ones. So it's not where I would get my information.

Student 4: It's not reliable, but you could see how people would be on it but on it but if you didn't have any background information you're not going to get it from Twitter.

Student 1: I think you should pay attention to other things, there are more important things out there you should be paying attention not on Twitter like on TV or whatever but also you could get information on Twitter but it's not that reliable.

Researcher: So what I understand from you, it's not a matter of whether you're prepared to use Twitter; it's that you don't feel Twitter is reliable for that

information regardless. It's not necessarily due to not knowing how to analyze the information but you just felt like it wasn't reliable. (p.5-6)

However, Student 1 and Student 2 reported that their concern over the reliability of information on Twitter was not fully illuminated until after the in-class project. When asked whether they had the same issues with credibility with information found on Twitter before the project Student 2 explained "For me probably not, I mean again, I didn't really pay attention to Twitter but I...not believed everything I saw but I looked at it and was like, oh that would be a fact" (p. 6). Student 4 was not alone in declaring that as a result of the in-class project they had gained new found knowledge and awareness with regards to information they were exposed to via Twitter. Student 1 reported "Yeah, like when I heard we were going to do this [in-class project], I was kind of wondering what we were going to find on Twitter but I found some stuff I thought I should know as a U.S. citizen" (p.6). Further, in response to a follow up question Student 1 explained she not only learned about the positions of the candidates but also reconsidered her prior attitude of indifference toward candidates and their messages (p.6). She defined her apathetic attitude toward election related issues as the result of the belief that what the candidates were saying, or in this case posting on Twitter, had any impact on her because she was not old enough to vote (p.6). Student 1 stated that she now feels that everyone should pay attention to the position of candidates for public office.

Reflection is believed to be an important ingredient of the learning process and the participants in the focus group not only reflected on what they had learned throughout the in-class project but also provided valuable insight into how students make sense of campaign messages posted via Twitter (Lew and Schmidt, 2011). Students' responses

during the focus group supported many of the themes that were identified in other parts of the study. The focus group pointed out that it was the controversial or salacious nature of the tweets that gained most of their attention during the in class project. Additionally, this trend continued in the examples they selected during our focus group discussion. For instance, each of the tweets cited by students during the discussion was of controversial or salacious nature to varying degrees despite having more mundane examples available to them in a copy of their Tweet Organizers. Participants in the focus group concentrated almost exclusively on Donald Trump's controversial or salacious tweets.

Further, students questioned the reliability of the information posted via Twitter but indicated the in-class project provided valuable knowledge that students can use as voters. This is particularly noteworthy as a student later described how prior to the in-class project she was more inclined to accept the information she would see on Twitter from candidates as fact. When asked whether they were skeptical of the reliability of information on Twitter prior to the in-class project Student 2 responded "For me probably not, I mean again, I didn't really pay attention to Twitter but I...not believed everything I saw but I looked at it and was like, oh that would be a fact."

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Preparing young people to “choose wisely” as they assume the role of citizen is a fundamental expectation of the American education system. For educators this is certainly a daunting task, but this thesis aims at fleshing out an important first step for every educator, and that is, where exactly are students at in their learning? Chapter five will present limitations to this study, summarize the results of this descriptive case study, present recommendations for future research, and offer recommendations to educators regarding the intersection of social media and civic and political participation. The following research questions framed this study:

RQ1. Based on the social media posts by the candidates, how comfortable are students with the candidate?

RQ2. How do 10th grade students make sense social media posts of candidates for president?

The nature of this study led to the identification of a number of limitations. First, generalization is quite limited because the data obtained and analyzed came from just eight students who volunteered to participate in this study. While a limited description of findings for all of my students are included here, the eight study participants tended to be more academically and civically active and aware than a typical student in my U.S. History course. Thus, this study’s findings may not account for students with differing ability levels, differing levels of contextual historical or political knowledge or even differing levels of access to social media. Additionally, this study is limited by students’ varying ability to articulate their thoughts both in written form (i.e. two surveys and Tweet Organizer) and in verbal form during the focus group interviews.

Summary of Results

Data analyzed and presented in Chapter Four led to the identification of a few primary patterns of how students make sense of political messages presented via Twitter. First, students struggled with homophily and more precisely the echo chamber effect/*Daily me* as described by multiple theorists (Yardi & boyd, 2010; Kahne & Middaugh, 2012). It became quite clear that students sought out and paid particular attention to tweets from the candidates that best matched their previously held point of view and rarely changed their overall view of the content of the tweet following conducting research relating to the content of the tweet.

Second, a limited knowledge of the political or historic context that underpin the content of the tweet created a barrier for students to fully understand and situate the political messages they were exposed to. Lack of background knowledge seemed to lead students to view tweets in an episodic manner. Barriers related to background knowledge was not lost on some of the study participants, for example Student 4 stated “it’s [Twitter] not reliable, but you could see how people would be on it but on it but if you didn’t have any background information you’re not going to get it from Twitter,” Student 4’s response further demonstrates that students recognize the need for relevant background information to be able to make sense of the messages they are exposed to on social networking sites such as Twitter.

Third, students tended to train their focus on tweets from the candidates that were controversial or salacious in nature. This pattern was evident not only in study participant’s tweet organizer but was present and reinforced by all four study participants during the focus group interview. When asked whether a given tweet’s controversial or

salacious nature (or what they referred to as ‘crazy things’) was one of the methods for selecting tweets for review during the in-class project.

Last, it is important to note that students are aware of the issues regarding credibility of information posted on social media sites such as Twitter and are quick to identify that in some cases they lack important contextual knowledge to help them best make sense of the information they are exposed to. This awareness among students offers a positive first step in equipping them with the skills they will need in the years to come.

Recommendations for Future Research

Franklin Roosevelt’s (FDR) succinct argument in 1938 that education acts as a sentry for the continued success of democracy continues hold true and even a new relevance today (1938). FDR discusses the importance of preparing future citizens to “choose wisely” but entrusts the how to prepare them to researchers and educators. In the section below I put forward recommendations related to future research and study of the intersection of civic education, social media and young people.

1. This case study sought to determine how high school students made sense of political messages via Twitter and while the results described herein will inform my instructional approach it does not provide the substantive sample size needed to make generalizations to a broader population.
2. Once a more generalizable conclusion can be made about how high school students make sense of such information all stakeholders can begin to reevaluate curricular recommendations for educators as it relates to media literacy.

Breakstone et al. in a recent article argues that the current standard (the use of checklists) for teaching students how to determine the trustworthiness of sources

is ineffective in today's media reality (2018). Additional research is needed to further explore this conclusion and further develop a possible framework for providing educators with research-driven method to better prepare students to make sense of the information they are presented with online.

Recommendations for Educators

As an educator I always cherish the opportunity to learn about and from the experiences of other educators. Below I offer recommendations for preparing students for their future as a citizen. While informed by the literature, these recommendations are the result of what I believe to be an essential reflective process to ensure I am the type of educator my students so rightfully deserve. I hope these recommendations prove fruitful for others by better informing their practice.

1. For most educators the instructional principle of scaffolding is rudimentary and likely instinctual but it is essential for young peoples' development of critical skills such as detection of bias not only in sources but also one's own bias, and identifying reliable sources. Teaching these skills cannot be completed in a singular lesson or small unit, rather I believe that these skills must be taught and built upon throughout the curriculum. While I recognize the curriculum is already bursting at the seams I feel there is an urgent need and a way to integrate these skills within the existing curriculum. For example, as social studies educators, the skills we teach through the historical method are broadly transferable to more contemporary sources. However,

students are unlikely to identify the transferability of these skills thus it is incumbent on us to help connect these dots for our students.

2. Students seemed to have difficulty placing tweets within the historical and political context in which they are framed, and addressing this gap in knowledge will also require a greater integration into the curriculum. One key opportunity is to integrate a weekly current event that is targeted toward key issues.

These two recommendations have informed and were the guiding principles to a redesigned weekly current event assignment which can be easily integrated into a future min-unit over upcoming elections. I have outlined a jigs-saw activity in-which students interact with prevailing election issues through their weekly current event assignments. These current event assignments are used as a way to build the contextual background knowledge students would need prior to analyzing social media posts by candidates for public office.

After selecting no more than three or four issues, I would identify students who might be interested in a given issue to become “student experts” for their peers. These student experts, after conducting background research into their topic, would present their current event each week related to the election issues they selected and provide their peers with up-to-date information and developments related to the issue. Below, I provide a diagram that illustrates a framework for building upon the contextual knowledge gained by the students into evaluating political messages posted by candidates to Twitter. The ultimate goal is for students to be able to comprehend the campaign issues and critically engage the candidates’ position on those issues in order to “choose wisely”.

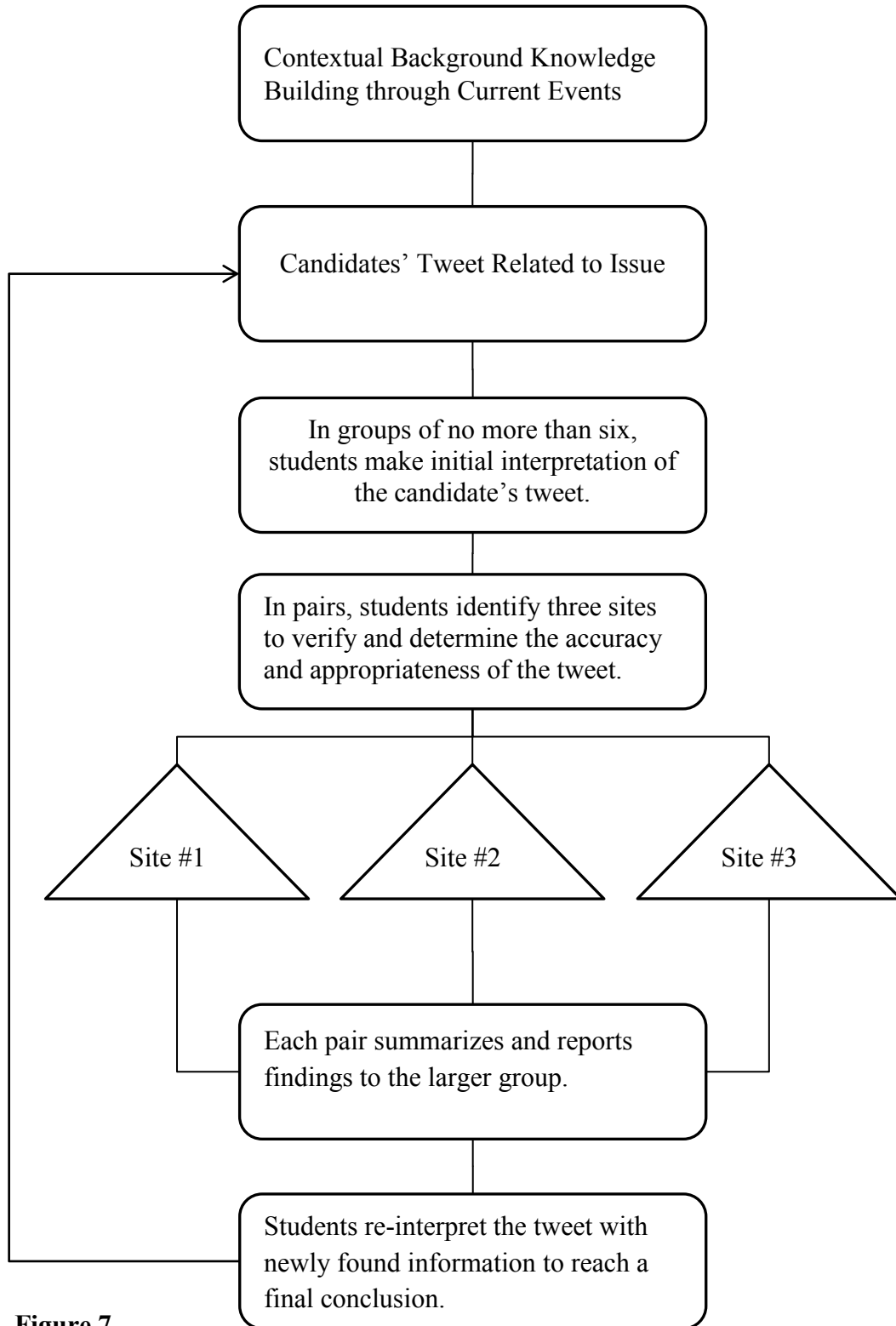


Figure 7

In closing, FDR's challenge to educators to equip our young people to 'choose wisely' is certainly not easy, but if researchers and educators alike are committed to this goal and pursue it with the urgency it demands we can be confident our young people will be well-prepared to assume the awesome responsibility of being a citizen.

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Appendices

A. PRE/POST Survey

5/14/2018

Qualtrics Survey Software

Default Question Block

Please enter your first and last name.

Please indicate your comfort level regarding the statement below.

	Extremely comfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable	Somewhat uncomfortable	Extremely uncomfortable
How comfortable do you feel with Hillary Clinton's position on cost of college tuition/student debt?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Based on your response to the question above, why do you feel this way?

Please indicate your comfort level regarding the statement below.

	Extremely comfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable	Somewhat uncomfortable	Extremely uncomfortable
How comfortable do you feel with Hillary Clinton's position on immigration?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Based on your response to the question above, why do you feel this way?

Please indicate your comfort level regarding the statement below.

	Extremely comfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable	Somewhat uncomfortable	Extremely uncomfortable
3. How comfortable are you with the overall character of Hillary Clinton?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Based on your response to the question above, why do you feel this way?

Please indicate your comfort level regarding the statement below.

	Extremely comfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable	Somewhat uncomfortable	Extremely uncomfortable
How comfortable do you feel with Donald Trump's position on immigration?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Based on your response to the question above, why do you feel this way?

Please indicate your comfort level regarding the statement below.

	Extremely comfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable	Somewhat uncomfortable	Extremely uncomfortable
How comfortable do you feel with Donald Trump's position on the cost of college tuition/student debt?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Based on your response to the question above, why do you feel this way?

Please indicate your comfort level regarding the statement below.

	Extremely comfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable	Somewhat uncomfortable	Extremely uncomfortable
How comfortable are you with the overall character of Donald Trump?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Based on your response to the question above, why do you feel this way?

B. Blank Student Tweet Organizer

Date	Candidate	Text of Tweet	Related Issue	Fact Checkable?
	<input type="checkbox"/> Hillary Clinton <input type="checkbox"/> Gary Johnson <input type="checkbox"/> Jill Stein <input type="checkbox"/> Donald Trump	"Type exact text of Tweet, include all hashtags within the Tweet" or describe video or image.	<input type="checkbox"/> Immigration <input type="checkbox"/> Cost of College Tuition/Student Debt <input type="checkbox"/> Candidate's Character	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> FactCheck.org <input type="checkbox"/> PolitiFact.org <input type="checkbox"/> VoteSmart.org
What are your initial thoughts about the content of the Tweet? Why did you choose it? Does the candidate make a claim about an issue or their opponent? Do you agree, disagree or unsure of your opinion? Why?				
Does the Tweet seem to be based more in <i>facts</i> or <i>opinion</i> ? Does the Tweet seem to be more positive or negative in nature? Explain.				
Was the Tweet factual based on the information you found? Do you feel you still need more information? Explain.			After researching the content of the Tweet, do you still have the same opinion of the Tweet as you did above? Do you feel this Tweet will help the candidate gain supporters?	

C. Focus Group Discussion Transcript

Researcher: I want to tell each of you again how much I appreciate your participation in this study and how impressed I am with the work you have done with this project. So far, I have reviewed and analyzed your Tweet organizers. A focus group is a group of people who are assembled to participate in a guided discussion regarding a particular topic. The purpose of this focus group is to help me ensure I understand your thinking through the project and provide you an opportunity to clarify and explain your thinking with regards to the project you completed. Remember, your participation or lack thereof has zero impact on your grade or my opinion of you. Also, you are free to stop your participation in this study or focus group at any time.

(Provide each participant a copy of their work to serve as a refresher of what they wrote during the study.)

I'm going to ask a few questions that I hope will ensure my correct understanding of your thinking during the project. This focus group will take roughly 20-30 minutes and I encourage you to respond to each other as I ask questions about your responses during the project.

Researcher: What made a candidate's tweet (use of Twitter?) effective? If you can, provide an example.

Student 2: Umm...Donald Trump said that Obama was the founder of ISIS and the co-founder would be crooked Hilary. Definitely don't think that should be said but it definitely grabbed people's attention about what Donald Trump trying to say about them.

Researcher: Ok so, the negativity Donald Trump used in some of his Tweets were effective because it gained the attention of others whether it be one way or another.

Researcher: How did Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump's use of Twitter catch your attention? If you can, provide an example.

Student 2: I just know that people kept re-tweeting all of his, not necessarily dumb Tweets but things that didn't make sense maybe in our eyes but would they would start paying more attention to what his stance was on things, just the basics.

Researcher: So, were the things that he was saying, the crazy things you said people were re-tweeting, were those things that caught your attention as opposed to some other things?

Student 2: Um yes, I don't pay attention to Twitter much so I'm not really into it but like when I would see people be like "this is what Donald Trump said that's crazy!" Then I'm like oh...

Student 4: Yeah, they'd put screenshots [of the Tweet]...

Student 1: So even if you don't have a Twitter people screenshot it and put it on Instagram, Facebook and like all the other social media sites.

Student 2: Then we all go on Twitter and look at all of his other Tweets.

Researcher: So when you were doing this project were these the type of things that got your attention through the project.

Student 1: Um, Yeah

Student 2: Yeah

Student 3: Yeah

Student 4: Kind of.

Researcher: Okay, can you think of an example?

Student 3: One of mine was "If Hiliary Clinton can't satisfy her husband what makes her think she can satisfy America?" I think that makes everyone doubt what she can actually do, and getting more attention for him.

Researcher: Alright, do you have any other examples you want to share?

Student 1: No.

Student 2: No.

Student 3: No.

Student 4: No.

Researcher: How do you feel Clinton's and/or Trump's use of Twitter affected how people talked about the issues?? So remember we focused on 3 main issues, cost of education, immigration and overall candidate character. So, how do you feel with what you looked at how their use of Twitter affected how people talked about the issues?

Student 2: Um, so one of my Tweets was "1/2 of undocumented workers pay federal taxes which means they are paying more federal income tax than Donald Trump does." And this is from Hiliary Clinton, but I felt like the beginning that was just putting it into perspective to me like how that works, how everyone says immigration is bad and all this kind of stuff but when she said that it made me think that they are here and working so like and paying more than if Donald Trump pays. How is that not okay?

Researcher: Did that spark any other questions? So when you saw that Tweet, did that create any other questions that you wanted answers to?

Student 2: Well, it made me think like what are we not looking at and what is the media putting out there and what is actually happening? The media I feel like would just twist the words and say “oh immigration is bad” and telling us everything like that but there may be some positives to it like, you know, how are they helping us or what can we do to help them? So just like basic questions like that, things that are behind the scenes.

Student 4: Yeah, I feel like everyone saw it one sided. Like everything they said about immigration and that kind of stuff, [unintelligible] if they are here and are working and aren't doing any harm, I don't see why they should have to stay.

Researcher: Ok so, when you're talking about one sided, are you talking about, on Trump's side the Tweets on immigration are quite one-sided as a negative thing, an issue that we need to deal with whether it be the wall or whatever versus maybe Hilary providing the opposite end?

Student 4: Yeah, like he, all his supporters only saw the issue one-sided. Like what she (Student 1) said about them (immigrants) paying taxes and him paying taxes.

Researcher: Okay.

Student 1: I think that people get blindsided about what they want to believe and because it is on Twitter you don't have to show your identity, so people just start saying stuff and other people start believing it and it just keeps going.

Researcher: We already kind of got to this but what about either candidate's Tweets about immigration stood out to you the most? We already talked about the one-sidedness but was there anything else that stood out to you?

Student 2: I have another Tweet from Hilary Clinton about immigration. “Parents and teachers are worrying about what they call the Trump effect, they report that bullying and harassment is on the rise in school targeting students of color, Muslims and immigrants.” So I felt like she was definitely playing on the other side and Trump was on the other side. I feel like she has given me a wide range of her opinions, maybe she doesn't necessarily like immigration but she is willing to help make it a better program, that's what I got from her and this Tweet.

Student 4: Yeah, like when she said “Let's be clear Islam is not our adversary, Muslims are peaceful people and have nothing to do with terrorism.” She is seeing them as a whole and not what a few people did [unintelligible].

Researcher: So you feel like she wasn't generalizing. Okay.

Student 4: Yeah.

Researcher: Anything else?

Researcher: How well did each candidate use Twitter to convey their stance on the issues we studied?

Student 2: Umm...I thought they were trying to do work but sometimes it reflected negatively on themselves.

Researcher: Okay, so they were able to get their stances across but in some cases it ended up reflecting negatively on them?

Student 2: And like, they want to be president and you know, take over the country...

Student 4: ...there are better things to do than to be on Twitter.

Student 1: Yeah

Student 2: Yeah

Student 4: Yeah

Student 1: And like that is reflecting on them, sometimes I don't think they are thinking of what they are posting...like I don't know, they act like high schoolers, I feel like in some cases when they should be acting like a president.

Student 3: I think Hillary is trying to is trying to make a point about what she is saying but Trump was going everywhere and writing about what he wanted to hear.

Student 4: Yeah.

Student 2: I feel like he would put what he felt and turn around and change it because the public's eyes are different than his.

Researcher: So, you think maybe, in some ways his tweets or whatever he said about the issues changed based on public opinion on what he said.

Student 1: I agree with that...I saw one time, I don't remember what, he said something a while back but then up top it was completely different. He just changed it because...

Student 4: No one agreed with him...

Student 2: I also feel like, if no one agrees then he will come back on Twitter and say "oh my opinion is right."

Researcher: So he is defensive?

Student 4: Yeah.

Researcher: Can you find an example of what you are talking about?

Student 4: I have one, “At the request of many, and even though I expect it to be a very boring two hours, I will be covering the Democrat debate live on Twitter”

Researcher: Okay so, he is looking to please the public by live Tweeting the democratic debate.

Student 2: I have another one “Hillary Clinton has been given tens of millions of dollars by countries that treat women horribly and countries that kill gays.” So I feel like, I don’t know what was said before this or what led up to it but I feel like she had said something about these countries but he felt he needed to point out that they do things like that.

Researcher: So he is attributing, perhaps, to her something she didn’t necessarily have anything to do with?

Student 4: Yeah.

Student 1: I have another one, and it says “#crookedhillary is unfit to serve” but that’s all it says so he didn’t give any detail about it, I feel like he is trying to go against her.

Researcher: So he is trying to attack her credibility.

Student 1: Yeah.

Researcher: How, if at all, did the candidate’s Tweets influence your thinking about a given issue?

Student2: Um...I felt like coming into this I had a stance on certain things, maybe not everything, but certain things I had a stance on but um...I feel like that was swayed a little bit because maybe Donald Trump agreed with what I had but the way he went about it made me think maybe I shouldn’t think this because that is not how I would...[unintelligible] that’s not how I want to portray that given stance.

Researcher: Okay so, maybe you might agree with some of his positions but the method in which he goes about trying to talk about it is not what you would like.

Student 1: I agree with that.

Student 1: I also feel like I’ve been saying some of the things they say on Twitter make him look childish. Why would you put that on Twitter?

Student 4: Yeah.

Researcher: Okay, does that influence or change how you thought about the issues, how does that change the way you looked at the issues?

Student 1: Like, he put “#crookedhillary is unfit to serve” I just feel like that is childish...like maybe if he had a point, like why she was unfit to serve.

Researcher: So you saw it as a character issue?

Student 1: Yeah

Researcher: How prepared do you feel to use Twitter as a means for gaining information needed to make a decision as a voter?

Student 2: um..I feel like I wouldn't use Twitter as a way to get information maybe because of [unintelligible] but not to get information um as in this project because in this project we used fact checking and I just figured out that most of the time they were wrong like all of it was wrong, so like, if it was wrong on those certain Tweets I can't imagine all the other ones. So it's not where I would get my information.

Student 4: it's not reliable, but you could see how people would be on it but on it but if you didn't have any background information you're not going to get it from Twitter.

Student 1: I think you should pay attention to other things, there are more important things out there you should be paying attention not on Twitter like on TV or whatever but also you could get information on Twitter but it's not that reliable.

Researcher: So what I understand from you, it's not a matter of whether you're prepared to use Twitter, it's that you don't feel Twitter is reliable for that information regardless. It's not necessarily due to not knowing how to analyze the information but you just felt like it wasn't reliable.

Researcher: Now, do you think you felt that before we did the project?

Student 2: For me probably not, I mean again, I didn't really pay attention to Twitter but I...not believed everything I saw but I looked at it and was like Oh that would be a fact.

Student 1: Yeah, like when I heard we were going to do this, I was kind of wondering what we were going to find on Twitter but I found some stuff I thought I should know as a U.S. citizen.

Researcher: What do you think you learned that you thought you should know as a U.S. citizen?

Student 1: I think their stance on everything, I didn't pay much attention to anything they were saying, I didn't think it really affected me much because I don't have the right to vote but it does. I think we should all pay attention.

Researcher: Did you guys follow politicians?

Student 4: Before this project, I can say I didn't. And we did this and I thought maybe I should follow them and since then I have.

Researcher: Then how did your interaction, like before the project, how would have your interaction with these political tweets have been, what would that have looked like?

Student 1: Like, I only saw stuff that was, like, posted what was on my timeline I guess. And people would only post one-sided, so they would only post bad about Trump or bad about Hillary so I wouldn't pay much attention. But after we did this I actually saw real facts and not just the crazy stuff they posted.

Researcher: Okay do you feel as though the crazy stuff they posted gained the most attention.

Student 1-4: Yes.

Researcher: Would you say, when you selected tweets for your project, is that one of the ways which you went about that?

Student 1-4: Yes.

Student 1: Yeah, most of mine about candidate character or college tuition.

Student 2: I think mine were most about what pertained to me, I mean immigration has something to do with me but and college tuition and candidate character is what I was going for.

Researcher: Okay, I think that's all I have for you.