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Conspiracies and the 2016 Presidential Election: An Analysis of Tweets through the Lens of Agenda-Setting Theory

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Darby Dicks

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Signatures of Honors Thesis Committee

Mentor: Vinita

Dr. Vinita Agarwal

Reader 1: Lance

Dr. Lance Garmon

Reader 2: Jennifer Cox

Dr. Jennifer Cox

Director: James J. Busc

James J. Busc

Signature

Print

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## ABSTRACT

The introduction of social media websites such as Twitter and Facebook provides users access to platforms in which they are able to express a broad variety of views. It has become increasingly difficult to ignore the expression of these views and beliefs, even the ones that might traditionally be considered niche. The theoretical perspective utilized in this research was agenda-setting theory, which postulates that news media are able to determine issue salience within the public consciousness. This thesis aims to understand (a) how Twitter users articulated conspiratorial beliefs about politics during the 2016 United States presidential election, and (b) how social media has changed the theory of agenda-setting by upsetting traditional dynamics between news media and consumers. User Tweets were collected from Twitter from five different dates between September 27 and November 7 2016, and theme analyzed based on the conspiratorial nature of the content as revealed by the beliefs expressed by individual users. Findings illustrate user beliefs that political forces both internal and external to the United States were conspiring to influence the outcomes of the 2016 election. This study indicates how users of platforms like Twitter can communicate individual belief systems in a way not previously possible under agenda-setting theory as it was previously defined, allowing users to interpret agendas set by news media and share those interpretations with specific audiences. The conspiratorial ideas expressed by Twitter users may point to specific anxieties and fears to be studied further in the future, in addition to a new understanding of agenda-setting theory in the digital age.

*Keywords:* agenda-setting theory, conspiracy theories, social media, theme analysis

Conspiracies and the 2016 Presidential Election:  
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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

There are some things that will never be fully and adequately explained, events that have accumulated over the years that the public will never truly understand. It may well be that accepting this is a necessary part of living among others in society, even if there is something captivating about the many mysteries of the world. In the quest to seek answers to these mysteries, conspiracy theories have long been used, perhaps as tools to try to reach a point of understanding, or to take back some semblance of control over events which at times seem orchestrated to take . Conspiracy theories for years have captivated the imaginations of people all over the world, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or age. Popular culture has helped to bring some such theories into the public eye over the past decades, illustrating stories of government cover-ups and shadowy organizations. The mysteries behind conspiracy theories are perpetually unraveling, inviting new ideas and interpretations, changing and developing with each iteration.

Conspiracy theories can be understood separately from other types of explanatory narrative forms by their connection to perceived nefarious governmental forces. Even conspiracy theories that deal primarily with creatures that are beyond human comprehension like aliens or the Bigfoot legend allude to the suspicion that somehow the American government knows something but is purposefully keeping that knowledge from the American public. The desire to connect unexplained or otherwise ambiguous events to unseen forces acting in ways that are intended to control or guide events makes conspiracy theories particularly attractive to study in terms of their political relevance. For example, the Kennedy assassination remains an event in American history that many consider to be shrouded in

mystery, with notable number still believing multiple people had conspired to commit the assassination (Swift, 2013).

Conspiracy theories recently came into the spotlight with the 2016 presidential election, which was marked by contentious claims made by presidential candidates and their supporters, with the term “fake news” gaining in popularity in late 2016 (Barthel, Mitchell, & Holcomb, 2016). This thesis will employ agenda setting theory to examine how social media was a major factor in the creation and spread of conspiratorial viewpoints to explain the ambiguous nature of the American political process, given the perceived salience of “fake news” during the election. The goal of this thesis is to examine the beliefs expressed by Twitter users through the lens of agenda-setting theory of communication, and how those beliefs indicated changes in the theory with the implementation of social media in the 21st century.

In order to examine the research goal, this thesis is laid out as follows: In the following section, I provide an overview of the literature consulted, focusing on agenda-setting theory, conspiracies, and social media evolution. Following that, I detail my process of data collection, the participants in this study, and my utilization of theme analysis. The subsequent Results section explains and illustrates the key themes that emerged from my theme analysis from my two guiding research questions: (a) (RQ1) what did Twitter user discourse reveal about user beliefs during the 2016 presidential election? and, (b) (RQ2) what did this discourse reveal about the conspiratorial nature of the users’ beliefs? Finally, I discuss the theoretical contributions of this thesis to agenda-setting theory in relation to social media networks, the significance of the themes to my research questions and goal, the limitations of my research, and my final conclusion.



## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to understand how conspiratorial thought was expressed on Twitter, this section will first define the agenda-setting theory and its application to modern communication methods, examine the role of social media within agenda-setting theory, and identify how conspiracy theories can create rifts between people and bonds between others. In this chapter, I will endeavor to examine how social media can facilitate such connections.

#### **Agenda-Setting Theory**

The agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) was originally conceptualized to understand media influence in the 1968 presidential election. It posits that news media inform the public about what issues are important and influences how those issues rank among one another. The 1972 study determined a strong correlation between the relative importance of specific issues and the emphasis placed on them by news media during the presidential campaign. For the purposes of this thesis, I will classify traditional media as mass media including television, newspapers, and news magazines that dominated the media environment of the 1970s. According to the theory, an individual's understanding of political events relies on mass communication channels, indicating that agenda-setting theory can influence how such events are perceived by the public (McCombs, 1968). Furthermore, the connection between news media and the American public has established shared opinions on specific issues within large groups of people, thereby shaping a an entire community (McCombs, 1997). The theory finds that groups of people who consumed information from the same or similar news sources under this model would have set of shared opinions and viewpoints as a result. The usage of the Internet to its current degree has added an additional

source from which individuals can receive and share information within these communities of shared beliefs (Matsa & Lu, 2016; Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley & Matsa, 2014).

The phenomenon of social media users converging over shared ideas and beliefs was evidenced by Twitter user discourse during the 2012 U.S. presidential election reflecting the agendas established by news media (Vargo, Guo, McCombs, & Shaw, 2014). During the 2012 presidential election, Twitter users were found to be more receptive to media that corresponded to their respective political stances, indicating the potential for individuals on social media to only consume information that agrees with their own viewpoints due to the fragmentation of news organizations (Davis & Dunaway, 2016; Muddiman, Stroud, & McCombs, 2014; Vargo, et al., 2014). In 2016 it is likely that a similar pattern was exhibited online, as evidenced by the divisive nature of the election and the division between the Republican and Democratic parties (Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, & Matsa, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2014). However, this study neglects to address those with niche viewpoints and political stances by focusing exclusively on dominant issues.

The many social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, among others, available to the American public provide a new platform to bring together voices from diverse locations, ethnicities, or gender identities that may not otherwise be heard in the same space. Through use of social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) and websites (including blogs and comments to news articles posted online), people can establish connections with one another based on shared beliefs and goals (Aaronovitch, 2010; Peck, 2015).

Online groups such as the Harry Potter Alliance encourage activism through an online community that has raised funds to send supplies to Haiti and donated thousands of books

(“What We Do,” 2015; Zuckerman, 2013). Activism online is not limited to the United States however, as illustrated by the *Ficha Limpa*, or clean record, campaign in Brazil (Breuer & Farooq, 2012). The online campaign was followed by 30,000 Facebook users less than a year after the campaign’s launch, and gathered over two million signatures on an online petition calling for passage of a bill that would ostensibly reduce corruption in the government. Another such common purpose or goal that was not political in its outlook but that brought a multitude of people together online was the creation of the urban legend of the Slender Man on a forum in 2009 (Peck, 2015). Peck notes that “legends are less about individual texts and more about communication – they are discourses on belief” (2015, p. 335). The collaborative nature of the legend shows that regardless of the subject matter, social media has the potential to bring people together with the common goal of creating a singular narrative. This is similar to previous identification of news media functioning in pace of folklore, and illustrates the extension of this idea on social media as well (McCombs, 1968).

It can be postulated that the agenda-setting theory remains an applicable framework for understanding how social media influence popular beliefs and attitudes during important events such as political elections. Due to the continuing relevance of agenda-setting theory in shaping political understanding among consumers of traditional news media, it is crucial to understand how conspiratorial ideology can shape the perception of events in popular discourse. The next section explores the place of conspiracy theories in the United States and how they were used online during the 2016 presidential election as explanations and interpretations of ambiguous political events.

## Conspiracy Theories

In this section of the literature review, I will analyze conspiracy theories as narrative devices to understand how they were utilized by public figures during the 2016 presidential election. I will also critique the emergence of conspiratorial thought on social media as a specific form of agenda-setting in ways that are both similar to and different from traditional news media.

Perhaps one of the best known conspiracy theories in the United States asserts that the 1969 moon landing was a hoax. The official narrative that the Apollo 11 mission was successful is widely accepted as true; however, in the years following this pivotal event in American history there were still those who distrusted the United States government enough to discount these official statements. Claims made by the U.S. government of the veracity of the 1969 and 1972 Apollo missions were publicly speculated and discredited, prompting a statement from NASA itself on the matter, stating definitively that, “Even if NASA had set out to ‘fake’ the Apollo or any of its other programs, there is no possibility it could have done so” (Kaysing, 1976; National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 1977). The viewpoints that the moon landings of the 60s and 70s were faked were mired in the widespread anxieties among Americans stemming from the Cold War and the Space Race. While this atmosphere of tension may not have been the sole contributor to the popularity of these particular theories, it is possible that it was a critical factor. At the time of the theory’s popularity, there was a sense that “Government deception[...]has reaped a harvest of massive public distrust” (Kaysing, 1976, p. 5).

For the purpose of my thesis research, I will define conspiracy theories as beliefs held by individuals that an unseen and malevolent group has secretly conspired to undermine

and/or manipulate the will and desires of others. Conspiracy theories have been acknowledged to be continually gripping narrative devices throughout American history because of their potential to serve as outlets representing the collective fears and anxieties of the American people, much like the political atmosphere of the 60s and 70s. According to Knight's (2002) analysis of conspiracy in postwar America:

“Talk of conspiracy has become so widespread [...] because it gives voice to a far more general anxiety about the loss of individuality and autonomy in the face of the increasingly vast and anonymous bureaucratic forces” (p. 10).

In particular, I assert that this idea of “vast and anonymous bureaucratic forces” is especially visible around the time of a presidential election, making these times relevant for the study of agenda-setting theory alongside conspiracy theories. This is significant because presidential elections in the United States cover a diverse geographical area over a prolonged period of two years and include millions of people. Conspiratorial thought used during presidential elections can be used cast suspicion on political elites at the same time they provide explanations for ambiguous political events (McArthur, 1995; Oliver & Wood, 2014). Ambiguity, understood as “as the existence of two or more interpretations of the same cue” (Brun & Saetre, 2009) contributes to the uncertainty and suspicion with which political figures are viewed. This suspicion was evident in the general perceptions of the two major party nominees in 2016. For example, Hillary Clinton was a career politician seen by many as an embodiment of the American government establishment, exemplified by Trump’s statement that she was complicit in a power structure that had “rigged the economy against the working class” in the United States (Chokshi, 2016). In contrast, Trump was seen as an outsider to American politics, with the interests of the American working class voter at heart

(Cohn, 2016). Ultimately, this perception of the Democratic Party candidate solidified the mistrust of many citizens of the U.S. federal government while simultaneously shaping the views of the voting populace.

Another example of anxieties felt by American voters during the 2016 presidential election and their manifestation in news and social media was the issue of voter fraud. In this case, suspicion across the political spectrum fanned the fears of conspiracy theorists that individuals within the government or within the public sector were working together to undermine the will of the American people through forged ballots, mass voting by non-residents of the United States, or voter intimidation (Brangham, 2016; Gabriel, 2016; Kaleem, 2016). Political elites in these circumstances were thereby viewed by many as uncaring about the desires of the people and more concerned about party lines (Drezner, 2015; Robison & Mullinix, 2016). In addition, conspiratorial thinking in this case also helped to solidify public perception of Clinton as an untrustworthy career politician rooted within the elite, while Trump was seen by many as a political outsider without such connections.

However, while narrative forms on social and traditional media can bring people with similar belief systems together (Vargo, et al., 2014), they also have the potential highlight distinctions between different groups. In this regard, two classifications of conspiratorial thinking are particularly applicable to the 2016 presidential election in their divisive nature (McArthur, 1995). McArthur (1995) proposed two types of conspiratorial thinking as including (a) the belief that members of an oppressed or disadvantaged group are in their positions because of an organized effort to put them there, and (b) the use of conspiracy theories as political weapons. The first of these two points was suggested by rhetoric during the 2016 presidential election with the belief that the white working class, many of whom

have traditionally relied on the coal industry, had been purposefully ignored by politicians, including the Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton (Lane, 2016). Clinton was blamed directly by her political opponent Donald Trump in October 2016, who said that she was instrumental in creating a power structure that functioned against the working class (Chokshi, 2016). This claim in particular seems conspiratorial in nature, as it speculates Clinton had colluded with other unknown powers to undermine the will of the American people who themselves felt disenfranchised and disregarded.

The second of these two types of conspiratorial thought posited by McArthur (1995), that conspiracy theories can be used as political weapons, is also displayed by Trump's statement. McArthur also suggests that conspiracies should be viewed as warning signs of underlying social problems and that these problems should be subsequently addressed in order to limit the potential actions that may follow. Through the role of embodying social problems, conspiracy theories can provide a venue for investigation and explication into understanding how they exploit the fears of a given group of people. In connection with agenda-setting theory, conspiracy theories have the potential to aid researchers' understanding of these fears and their causes to empower individuals that perceive themselves as marginalized and unable to control the situation they find themselves in.

In my thesis, I aim to examine conspiratorial thought through the lens of agenda-setting theory in order to understand how this type of thought can determine issue salience independent of traditional news media. I believe this can contribute to the understanding of how social divisions are expressed online such that we can address these issues in times of turmoil and ambiguity such as the 2016 United States presidential election. Because of the

increased relevance of digital media as a public forum for political discourse, the next section analyzes the use of conspiratorial thought on social media.

### **Conspiratorial Thought on Social Media**

This section of the literature review will analyze the role of social media in providing a platform for public discourse around conspiratorial thought. In order to do so, I will discuss social media in relation to agenda-setting theory and traditional news media.

Agenda-setting theory in its original formulation by McCombs and Shaw (1972) placed more power with mainstream mass media than individuals, thus it was easy to discount or ignore conspiratorial ideas possessed by relatively small groups as fringe political views (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Along with the growth of digitally mediated public discourse, social media platforms have grown in popularity, enabling conspiracy theories to gain public attention in unanticipated ways. In 2016, Facebook was used by 79% of Americans online, in comparison to the 32% who use Instagram and the 24% who use Twitter (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016). Furthermore, in recent years social media has been adopted by 62% percent of adults in the U.S. as a source for news (Matsa & Lu, 2016). 66% of Facebook users receive news from the network; likewise, 59% of Twitter users receive news from the website, and a total of 38% of Americans get news from online sources including social media.

The moon landing conspiracy theories of the 1960's bear a striking resemblance to how conspiracy theories in 2016 played a large part in the creation of fake news on social media. Such fake news served to reinforce anxieties and fears in the American people exacerbated by the tension surrounding the presidential election (Bennett, 2016; Calabresi, 2016; Timberg, 2016) Fake news has been defined as "total fabrications" making claims that

can be verified as false by the Washington Post; as putting forward stories that are not credible and potentially biased by Fox News; and as “not true in any way” with the ability to gain viral status online by NPR (Borchers, 2017; Brown, 2016; Davis, 2016). For the goals of this thesis, I will be using NPR’s definition for the term “fake news” throughout this essay.

I assert that fake news has played into the unexpected circumstances of conspiratorial thought: the offline consequences of a large number of people propagating conspiratorial ideas. This has been supported by previous research in China following a nuclear power plant explosion in Japan (Sun, Liu, Zeng, & Xiong, 2015). The discourse surrounding event was identified as rumors rather than fake news, but these rumors did have a noticeable impact on Chinese markets. Rumors circulated online that salt produced in China around that time had been contaminated by the radiation from the explosion, triggering consumers to demand older salt which damaged the market. I define a rumor in this case as false and unverified information distinguished from a conspiracy theory because rumors do not necessarily involve forces unseen acting together against the best interests of the public. Conspiracy theories in such contexts symbolize a broader category into which rumors may be classified, in specific instances. The power of social media to inspire action based on rumors, conspiracy theories, and fake news was also demonstrated by the “#pizzagate” conspiracy theory. In late 2016 following the leak of John Podesta’s emails by WikiLeaks, a conspiracy theory spread on Twitter and 4chan implicating the Democratic Party in an alleged child-trafficking ring connected with the restaurant Comet Ping Pong in the District of Columbia (Fisher, Cox, & Hermann, 2016). While these claims were debunked by news media addressing fake news at the time, in December 2016 a man entered the restaurant with a firearm and the intent of investigating the conspiracy himself. Despite traditional news media

addressing the conspiracy theories and fake news surrounding this restaurant as false beforehand, the conspiracy had enough importance in the minds of social media users that it was able to gain a following which was then translated into action offline.

One explanation for why this translation of action can occur is that “the greater the gap between actions and their impacts, the more risks are produced” (Parish & Parker, 2001). Social media users fixated on a conspiracy theory might become detached from understanding the potential harm they could cause or the reality of the situation. In this case, the original conspiracy theory that the restaurant was a front for a human-trafficking operation was a powerful enough narrative to overshadow any of the news media’s attempts to disprove it. Parish & Parker also assert that belief in what some might consider to be irrational is a “feature of a specific, historical cosmological framework which reflects the cultural and historical conditions of the time.” Due to the highly tense nature of the 2016 presidential election, irrational and conspiratorial thinking flourished on social media to the point that fake news was generated on a large enough scale to become a solidified issue in news media and the public consciousness.

As illustrated by the above example, social media discourse can facilitate conspiratorial thought which in turn suggests that this type of thought has the potential to be expressed and consumed in the form of fake news on social media networks. In regard to agenda-setting theory, this dynamic has broken down how information is produced and consumed between news media and “consumers” as previously understood before the integration of social media into American society. With the corresponding rise of social media discourse concerning news coverage, fake news and conspiratorial viewpoints can be formed out of interpretations of real world events such as the nuclear explosion in Japan or

the emails released by WikiLeaks (Fisher et al., 2016; Sun, Liu, Zeng, & Xiong, 2015).

Based on these interpretations, new agendas can be formed and spread to audiences as they have fragmented along with increased political polarization (Mitchell et al., 2014; Pew Research Center, 2014). In this way conspiratorial thought has the potential to be created and spread in unprecedented ways through the facilitation of numerous social media platforms. In my study, I will focus on political discussions on social media during the 2016 presidential cycle utilizing Twitter because of its ability to facilitate a unique level of anonymity and political discourse among its users and the relatively “open” nature of the network as it allows individual users to “follow” or “unfollow” people, organizations, or issue-based hashtags based on their particular preferences.

My thesis seeks to understand user discourse during the 2016 presidential election focusing on individual beliefs about American political process and the conspiratorial nature of these beliefs. The research questions (RQs) posed in my thesis are:

- (a) (RQ1) what did Twitter user discourse reveal about user beliefs during the 2016 presidential election? and,
- (b) (RQ2) what did this discourse reveal about the conspiratorial nature of the users' beliefs?

The next chapter discusses the methods used for data collection and analysis, along with a description of the participants in this study and the procedures I employed to identify the inclusion and exclusion criteria for my data collection.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

In this section, I outline how data was collected for analysis, the characteristics of the participants, the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the final data set, and the data organization and analytic procedures that were employed.

#### Procedures

This thesis utilized data collected from the microblogging website Twitter, which allows people “to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent messages,” (New user FAQs). Twitter was chosen due to its popularity as a microblogging website and the ability of its users to maintain a level of anonymity (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016; Duggan & Smith, 2016). To collect relevant data, I used Twitter’s “advanced search” function to search for Tweets made using a specific hashtag pertaining to the 2016 presidential election that were also made within the target date range. The “advanced search” function allows users to search for Tweets by key words and phrases, hashtags, language, accounts, and other defining factors to view specific Tweets (Using advanced search). I chose to analyze Tweets made using the #election2016 hashtag because it was bipartisan and had the potential to be used by individuals regardless of their political viewpoints rather than only supporters of one presidential candidate. This particular function was useful because it allowed only Tweets to be collected that contained the target hashtag made within limited periods of time.

I also collected Tweets made on five specific days during the election. By using five days, I was able to collect data centered on significant points throughout the election. The five dates chosen were September 27, October 10, October 20, November 6, and November 7,

which were the three days following the presidential debates between Trump and Clinton and the two days before the election, respectively. I collected 530 Tweets from each of these days for a total of 2650 Tweets, and analyzed 138 of these for their conspiratorial nature.

The inclusion criteria employed to produce the final data set were: (a) Tweets had to be conspiratorial in nature (i.e. assert that forces were conspiring to undermine the general will of the people), (b) made on one of the five days previously stated, (c) include the hashtag #election2016, and (d) had to be relevant to the American presidential election. Exclusion criteria were Tweets from organizations, Tweets that were straightforward statements of political stances, retweets from verifiable sources, Tweets with content that could not be identified as conspiratorial, and Tweets that did not pertain to the 2016 US presidential election.

For example, a Tweet that was chosen to be included in the final data set came from a user that stated on October 20, 2016, “@HillaryClinton you owe everyone an apology for lies, cover ups and deception. #jailforhillary #Election2016.” The Tweet fit the inclusion criteria in that it contained the insinuation that Clinton was conspiring to purposefully deceive the general public, included the hashtag #election2016, was made on one of the days I collected data from, and focused on one of the primary candidates in the election. A Tweet that was excluded came from a user that said, “Some people hate #Trump, some people hate #Hillary, but can we all agree that either one will be a one-term president? #Election2016.” While this Tweet did fit the inclusion criteria of being made on one of the five dates analyzed, using #election2016, and pertaining to the presidential election, it was excluded because it was not able to be identified as conspiratorial in nature.

The collected Tweets, which were saved as image files using the Snipping Tool application, were organized in an Excel spreadsheet which documented how many Tweets were in each image file and how many of those Tweets were relevant to my research. I identified 12 Tweets of conspiratorial nature made on September 27 within the latest 530 Tweets, 30 Tweets on October 10, 34 Tweets on October 20, 33 Tweets on November 6, and 29 Tweets on November 7 for a total of 138 Tweets.

## **Participants**

Twitter is used by 24% of online adults in the United States and is the third most used social media website among adults after Facebook and Instagram (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016). Conspiratorial thought was examined among users of the social network because of their ability to share beliefs while remaining relatively anonymous, a feature that is made more difficult on other platforms like Facebook that encourage individuals to represent themselves accurately (What names are allowed on Facebook?). 66 percent of Facebook users were found to mostly have friends on the platform that they knew personally, while 48 percent of Twitter users follow mostly people they do not know personally, further contributing to the anonymity of the platform (Duggan & Smith, 2016). Additionally, it has been found that political discussions on Twitter are generally more opinionated than those on blogs and in the “mainstream press” (Pew Research Center: Journalism & Media staff, 2011).

An increasing number of Americans are also using digital platforms to consume news (Matsa & Lu, 2016). In 2016, 38 percent of Americans were found to get news online; however, television remains the primary medium relied on for news. Matsa and Lu’s study also indicates more than 60 percent of adults in the United States receive news from social media, with 44 percent getting news from Facebook and 9 percent getting news from Twitter

(2016). In contrast however, 34 percent of Americans said that they only partially trust information found on social media. Around 25% of both Facebook and Twitter users said they see a lot of political content on these social media platforms, but only 6 percent and 8 percent respectively post a lot about political issues (Duggan & Smith, 2016). Family and friends of social media users can also establish an echo chamber particularly among conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats. In this circumstance, the user will only receive information through social media representing one side of the political spectrum.

The participants in this research were the Twitter users whose Tweets were analyzed. According to the inclusion criteria, all participants were individual Twitter users, not organizations, who were expressing conspiratorial beliefs. The participants were also Twitter users who used the platform to share their beliefs about the presidential election, candidates, and other forces they identified as influential throughout the election. Individual users will be identified in this thesis by their Twitter “handles.”

### **Theme Analysis**

Once I had narrowed down the data based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, I separated the Tweets into groups based on overarching ideas according to theme analysis. The Tweets were analyzed with the inductive approach to theme analysis, in which data is coded and themes are parsed based on the information within the data (About thematic analysis). The theme analysis approach was used to become familiar with the data, code it, search for themes, review these themes, define and name them, and then write them down.

For example, I first became familiar with the Tweets I collected on November 5, 2016 by looking through them and sorting them based on their conspiratorial content. I coded each Tweet for its subject matter and who or what the Tweet was targeting. After coding the data,

all of the included Tweets on November 5 were noted for overarching ideas they concerned, such as the source of an influence in the 2016 presidential election. I reviewed the possible themes that were noted and sorted all of the Tweets collected based on the beliefs expressed and the conspiratorial idea contained within each Tweet. Once I had reviewed these themes, I defined what each of the themes meant: for instance, the theme named “Internal Influences” encompassed the expressed ideas that forces within the United States political system were affecting the election unbeknownst to the public. When the Tweets from November 5 and the other dates had been organized according to the defined and named themes, I wrote about their connection to one another and their relation to my research questions, found within the Results section.

Each of the themes I identified had a minimum of ten Tweets with at least two different examples. Themes were also identified according to the research question being addressed. RQ1, which addresses the user beliefs being expressed, had the two themes of external and internal groups influencing the election. RQ2, which aimed to isolate the beliefs of conspiratorial nature, had three overarching themes of candidates undermining one another, Russian forces colluding with presidential candidates, and candidates lying to the public to gain political advantages.

The following chapter will detail the findings of my research guided by my RQs and these identified themes.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

In this study, Twitter users were found to have expressed their beliefs that internal and external influences were affecting the 2016 presidential election. Additionally, Tweets collected in the final data set expressed conspiratorial thought in relation to these beliefs. The three conspiratorial themes identified in this thesis were that candidates were conspiring to hide information from the public, were working with other political figures and organizations to delegitimize other candidates, and Russian forces were colluding with a candidate throughout the election.

The first research question (RQ1) asked what Twitter user discourse during the 2016 presidential election revealed about user beliefs. In the collected data, Twitter users most prominently indicated beliefs that the presidential election was in danger of being influenced by sources within and outside of the American political arena. Users highlighted their beliefs that the election could be influenced internally by the two major presidential candidates lying directly to the public, political groups undermining opposing candidates, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation's reopened investigation into Clinton's emails directly before the election. Twitter users also seemed to believe that the entities of media bias and Russian involvement would be two forces external to the United States political process that could unfairly advantage one candidate over another. The first theme identified encompasses internal forces that Twitter users perceived to be influencing the election.

#### **Internal Influences**

Internal influences were defined as forces directly involved in the United States political process, and in the analyzed data primarily encompassed political figures and

organizations. Individual users indicated their beliefs that political candidates were lying to the public to influence the election, were working to undermine one another, and that the FBI had been involved to sway voters one way or another. While each of these topics was covered in some way by traditional news media during the election, Twitter users asserted their own interpretations of these ambiguous political events. These beliefs illustrate how agendas set by news media can be reinterpreted and changed on social media by individuals who might come together over similar ideology.

Many individual Twitter users within the collected data expressed their beliefs that the Democratic and Republican presidential nominees were lying to the public. Tweets pertaining to Trump indicated user beliefs that he had hidden information about his businesses from public knowledge. User @rebeccabw stated that “people who have nothing to hide share their tax returns when running for president of the United States,” referencing Trump’s refusal to release information pertaining to his tax returns. Similarly, another Tweet made by user @yasmina\_ss stated that “#DonaldTrump Failed to Disclose Foreign-Owned Business on Financial Disclosure,” along with the corresponding hashtag “#taxreturns.” Both Tweets allude to the users’ beliefs that Trump was not being entirely truthful about his business ties, indicated by his failure to publicly release his tax returns.

Tweets made about Clinton suggested beliefs that she was involved in corrupt practices or was in some way directly hiding information the public as well. Two different Tweets made by separate users stated the beliefs that Clinton was complicit in corruption, collusion, “Lies, cover ups and deception,” and her election would indicate that, “Any common crook can be president.” Another Tweet stated the user’s belief that during the first presidential debate, Clinton had been wearing a device underneath her outfit and was

concealing an illness from the public or was actively cheating during the debate. Each of these Tweets expressed beliefs to explain sometimes ambiguous information provided by news media and the candidates themselves. In the case of these Tweets, those explanations point toward the knowing deception of the American public for the purposes of political gain.

Other Tweets made on the dates analyzed indicated user beliefs that political groups and individuals were purposefully working to undermine opposing candidates. These Tweets were largely aimed at Clinton and her supporters, suggesting that she and her campaign were trying to influence the election in multiple ways. One Tweet analyzed suggested that President Barack Obama, a vocal supporter of Clinton throughout her presidential campaign, was “encouraging illegals to vote, and in the process, negating the votes of legal American citizens.” Another Tweet suggested Clinton opposed voter ID laws because of such encouragement from Obama. Other Twitter users communicated their beliefs that Clinton and her campaign had worked against candidate Bernie Sanders to ensure that he would not be a presidential nominee. One of these users included a WikiLeaks link in their Tweet, stating that a Clinton insider and DC lobbyist had said “Bernie needs to be ground to a pulp... Crush him as hard as you can.” An additional Twitter user included a link to an Infowars video suggesting Clinton would attempt to steal the presidency if she was not elected. This would ultimately undermine her political opponent if she was to take the presidency but Trump had been elected. The discourse about these separate ideas reveals common beliefs among Twitter users that Clinton was in some way attempting to take office by dubious means, particularly by harming the candidacy of her political opponents. The connection of several of these Twitter users to outside sources like WikiLeaks and Infowars

is also illustrative of audiences coming together around specific sources' interpretations of political events and using those interpretations to express their own beliefs.

Multiple Twitter users indicated their belief that the FBI was an additional internal influence on the 2016 presidential election. Users indicated their beliefs that the reopened investigation into Clinton's emails was dubious, and the FBI was lying about their findings or was trying to sway voters. One user stated that "#FBIDirectorComey just helped the undecided vote" due to the actions of the FBI. Several users also stated their disbelief that the FBI had been able to analyze all of Clinton's emails during the reopened investigation, suggesting that the FBI was lying in some way about the investigation. One Tweet compared the several month period of time the FBI had taken to analyze under 100,000 emails, but the much shorter period taken to examine over 500,000 emails. Other users believed that the FBI Director had been working with the Clintons and was potentially acting in her favor by dropping the investigation. On November 6, one user stated that "James Comey must be fully investigated for connections to the Clintons," and another asked if Comey had an agreement with Clinton. These Tweets imply a mistrust of both Clinton and the FBI, speculating the Bureau's reasons for reopening the investigation and its possible effects on the election. While this event did receive coverage from traditional news media, it is the individual interpretations of this political event that illustrate agendas being set for these individuals and the provision of social media for an outlet on which to discuss their interpretations.

This theme illuminates Twitter user beliefs that forces within the United States political arena – presidential candidates, their corresponding political parties, and the FBI – were participating in unfair practices in order to gain advantages throughout the election. The

next theme will identify the sources outside the U.S. political process that Twitter users believed were influencing the election as well.

### **External Influences**

Users also indicated their belief that external forces were affecting the election process. External influences were identified as forces that were not a part of the United States political sphere, exemplified by the Tweets pertaining to Russian influence and media bias. The topic of Russian influence was covered by traditional news media throughout the election; by contrast, the potential for media bias received little coverage from large news outlets. On social media, both topics received attention from Twitter users. The first subtheme

Twitter users made reference to their beliefs that Russia was influencing the election as well. Generally, users indicated that they felt Trump was colluding with Russia to undermine the democratic system and the will of the American people. User @HernyTheOne stated that “As a #Republican, I would take 4 yrs of #Clinton foreign policy than 4 yrs of #Putin foreign policy in the White House #Election2016.” Similarly, @pqpolitics tweeted that the presidential election would be a choice between “240 years of American democracy or Russian fascism.” Twitter user @JakeCommentary questioned Trump’s lack of acceptance that Russia was responsible for the hacking of the Democratic National Committee. @Rebecky2point0 suggested that Trump could be working directly with Putin, communicating the user’s belief that the two were working toward similar goals. User @2RamSubramanian’s Tweet that “Putin is going to take away a lot more than a Twitter account” indicates the belief that if Russia were in some way influencing the United States election, there could be consequences for the American government and the American people.

The Tweets pertaining to the belief in Russia's involvement in the 2016 presidential election also communicate a perceived urgency or danger to the United States as a country, and that the political event would be crucial for the maintenance of democracy. News coverage of Russia's involvement in the U.S. election was inconclusive at the time (Lichtblau & Myers, 2016; Calabresi, 2016; Bennett, 2016), but Twitter users indicated their own interpretations that the Russian government truly was interested in exerting control in the U.S. by working with a presidential candidate.

While the American media exists within the United States and many individual outlets have political affiliations, news media as a whole exist as spectators and mediators between political officials and the public, outside of the political events themselves. Twitter users during the 2016 presidential election communicated their beliefs that news media were biased toward specific candidates and as a result they could not be trusted. Like the perceived urgency presented by the possibility of Russian interference in the election, user @Story\_Mode suggested that the “corporate media whose is [sic] biased for Hillary Clinton” were a danger to the American public. The graphic included indicate the user’s belief that news media were no longer unbiased and trustworthy, but were trying to control the information provided to the public. User @KipSiller indicated their own belief that Americans did not have unbiased news sources that would inform citizens about what they needed to know about the election. This Tweet also suggests criticism of the lack of media coverage of information leaks from the Democratic National Committee as a response to another Tweet suggesting that news media should focus on covering emails contained within the leak. Several users pointed to specific news organizations they believed were biased in their coverage of presidential debate taking place on October 19, 2016. Users

@MarianneKurz and @annie7589 indicated their belief that MSM was biased for Clinton, and as a result their election coverage was erroneous. @CajunTechie stated their belief that people were confused during the election “Because we have no one we can trust for reliable information. The media is full of liars.” The mistrust in traditional news media shared by these Tweets show how these users felt the election could be influenced by the issues news media chose to highlight and which to ignore. These Tweets also might have served to express how Twitter users felt their own views and political interpretations were not adequately represented by news media, resulting in the issue of media bias gaining salience on social media but not traditional media.

The theme of external influences identifies how Twitter users felt that sources outside of the United States political process, including Russian interference and media bias, were working against their best interests during the 2016 presidential election. The next section will seek to answer RQ2 and identify the conspiratorial beliefs expressed by the analyzed Tweets.

### **Conspiratorial Nature of Beliefs on Twitter**

The second of the two research questions investigated in this study asked what Twitter user discourse revealed about the conspiratorial nature of the users’ beliefs during the 2016 presidential election. As suggested by the beliefs identified in answering RQ1, users indicated conspiratorial ideas that candidates were working to legitimize one another, outside influences were attempting to gain power within the United States political system, and candidates were purposefully lying to the public in order to deceive them. The findings in this section indicate that Twitter discourse involved conspiratorial thought as interpretations of events that received news media coverage. The first of the conspiratorial ideas identified

on Twitter during the analyzed time period discusses the delegitimization of presidential candidates throughout the election process.

**Delegitimizing Candidates.** Multiple individual Twitter users expressed their perception that throughout the election, presidential candidates were working to delegitimize and undermine the candidacy of others. While some of the aspects relating to this issue like voter fraud did receive some news media coverage, Twitter users seem to have further interpreted the actions of candidates to an extent not represented by news media. These interpretations pointed to candidates as conspiring against one another, regardless of a lack of mainstream media coverage on this topic. Twitter users indicated their beliefs that widespread voter fraud encouraged to benefit one individual candidate would undermine “legitimate” votes from legal United States citizens. User @Chamberlain\_3’s Tweet stating former President Barack Obama encouraged voter fraud during the election shows the user’s belief that illegitimate votes would be a critical issue that could influence the future elected president. User @ProFamilyIL communicated the belief that “The liberal media wants you to believe that voter fraud isn’t a significant problem. IT IS,” and @LarryCmobjna Tweeted that “The only possible explanation for being ant Voter ID is that you are pro voter fraud.” All three of these users show their concern over the issue of illegal voting during the election, and their perceived connection between the Democratic Party and voter fraud. These specific beliefs are indicative of users’ feelings that members of the Democratic Party and news media were working together to lie to the public about the severity of voter fraud, and even encourage non-citizens to vote. These beliefs hinge on the idea of a conspiracy to allow and even encourage illegal voting in order for one candidate to gain an unfair advantage, thus

negating votes cast legally which would ostensibly have been an expression of the will of the American people.

Several individual users also indicated their beliefs that Clinton and the Democratic National Committee worked deliberately to undermine Sanders as a presidential candidate during the election process. Users @ChaseBilton suggested their belief that Clinton had “cheated [Sanders] out of being a presidential nominee,” while user @SWulf2817 indicated their belief that Clinton’s campaign was complicit in undermining Sanders during his campaign. Additionally, other users condemned the American political system itself. User @SAL636 stated that “#debatenight proves that #Election2016 will NOT be rigged. There’s no need. @TheDemocrats already got rid of the only serious contender,” indicating the belief that the Democratic Party was to blame for ousting Sanders. Another user, @GunAtheist, identified the electoral system as “rigged,” and that the system was to blame for choosing candidate Hillary Clinton over Bernie Sanders to be the Democratic Party’s presidential nominee. These individual Tweets show a shared belief that Sanders had purposely been undermined by the Democratic Party and Clinton, and as a result they were unable to trust Clinton as a presidential candidate or the electoral system as a whole. The suggested conspiracy illustrated by these beliefs implicates the political system of the United States as corrupt, explicitly favoring one candidate over another and willing to intentionally undermine the one less favored.

The issues of voter fraud and voter suppression did receive news media coverage during the election in part because of allegations made by Trump, garnering discussion on Fox News, MSNBC, and CNN (Suen, 2016; Watkins & Chason, 2016; Childress, 2016; Patterson, 2016a). The coverage of voter fraud allegations on news media platforms may

have contributed to the conspiratorial beliefs indicated on Twitter surrounding election rigging and unfair political practice. Twitter user discourse focused on the role of the Democratic Party in undermining Sanders as a presidential candidate which differed from later analysis that inflated media coverage of Trump worked against both Democratic Party nominees (Patterson, 2016a). Social media allowed users to interpret the issues as they were discussed by news media and put forth their beliefs of the various causes for delegitimization, illustrating the continuing agenda-setting ability of traditional news media as well as the new agendas that can be formed out of interpretations made on social media.

This theme identified user interpretations of complex political events as candidates working to delegitimize one another throughout their campaigns. The subsequent theme identifies Twitter user suspicion that Russian forces were conspiring to exert power within the United States through the presidential election.

**Power Grabs.** Other users illustrated their belief that Russian forces were involved to influence the election in order to gain power within the United States government. While claims of delegitimization during the 2016 presidential election were largely aimed at the actions of Clinton and the Democratic Party, other users communicated their beliefs Trump was cooperating with the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, and that Putin was attempting to gain power within the United States government. User @burgessct speculates on the potential of both presidential nominees to be involved with Russian powers. Despite the user's implication of both candidates working with powers outside of the United States, there is an obvious belief of Russian influence in the election in some way. Another user, @2RamSubramanian, also showed the belief that Putin would influence the United States without specifying an individual presidential candidate, but indicating a general conviction of

Russia's interference in American politics. Other users communicated their beliefs that Trump was the candidate who was most likely cooperating with Putin and Russian interests. User @HernyTheOne indicated their view that if Trump were elected, Putin's foreign policy interests would be represented by his actions in the United States government, which could present a problem to American democracy. Similarly, user @Rebeccy2point0 stated "Hillary needs to quit now so Trump can work out a deal with Putin."

Additional users pointed out Trump's denial of Russian hacking that took place during the election period. @JakeCommentary questioned why Trump would not accept that the hacking of the Democratic National Committee originated from Russia, despite the former Director of the National Intelligence Agency's statement that it had. @mrobbinsnyc also mentioned this point, stating that "Trump refuses facts from govt and industry experts, avows no evidence of Russian hacking." Both of these users expressed their beliefs that Trump had ulterior motives in his refusal of statements made by officials about Russian involvement in the hacking of DNC information. This belief implies his knowledge of Russia's influence in the election. Furthermore, user @trentonkarlson tweeted an article stating "U.S. intel officials probe ties between Trump adviser and Kremlin," indicating that the user at least believed the investigation was being conducted. The suggestion of potential ties between Trump's campaign and the Kremlin in Russia show that if such ties existed, they would be of concern to American voters. An additional Twitter user @RkCreekWerewolf indicated their belief that "Constitutional order itself" was at stake in the 2016 presidential election in response to an article stating that Vladimir Putin was Trump's "spiritual running mate."

Each of these different users communicate their individual beliefs that the Russian president was involved in influencing the United States election, and was possibly working directly with one campaign in order to exert that influence to the detriment of the United States political process. These beliefs suggest the idea of a conspiracy between a foreign power, Russia, and Trump's presidential campaign. Users indicated that if such collusion was taking place, it could undermine the American election system, and by extent the millions of voters across the United States. At the time Russian interference was being discussed by these users on Twitter, there was no proven evidence to back their claims; however, in 2017 what was once a suspicion has now become an issue of prominence within traditional news media. While there was a level of speculation about Russian influence in the news media during the election, news outlets have since taken a more definitive stance that a Russian "propaganda machine" was at work to promote general distrust of the American government (Timberg, 2016; Dougherty, 2016). In this case, it appears that social media served to allow individual interpretation based on news media coverage of what was then an ambiguous issue. This may not be a challenge of issue salience, but rather an example of how agendas set by news media can be taken and reinterpreted on social media in the form of conspiracies in order to explain complex political goings-on.

This theme shows how Twitter users illustrated their understanding that the Russian government was attempting to gain power within the U.S. as a means of explaining the ambiguous Russian forces suspected to have a stake in the 2016 election. The next theme identified discusses Twitter user perception that presidential candidates were lying to the public throughout their campaigns with the intention of deceiving voters.

**Lying to the Public.** Tweets made throughout the date range examined indicated that Twitter users felt that the Democratic and Republican presidential nominees were not being truthful or disclosing all necessary information to the public in order to gain political advantages. Many users seemingly felt that Clinton was involved in illegal business practices or was colluding with individuals for political gain. Following the first presidential debate on September 26, several individual users tweeted about their belief that Clinton had cheated during the debate in order to perform better than her opponent Trump. User @Fingersflying tweeted an article stating that “Hillary Clinton Got Debate Questions in Advance,” while user @healthcoach365 speculated that “#Hillary was #wired for answers at the #debate.” Both of these Tweets indicate user belief that Clinton was cheating for the first presidential debate, but also allude to the idea of deception on a greater scale involving multiple people.

A number of individual Twitter users also tweeted about their belief Clinton was implicit in illegal activities throughout her political career that she had used for her own personal gain. User @catbellyiswarm tweeted “#ImVotingBecause the Clinton Regime has got to end! You don’t buy a Presidency.” A Tweet made by @JavierSorianoNY suggested that the Clinton Foundation was a corrupt organization that should be investigated by the FBI, and that Clinton personally had benefitted from donations made to the Foundation. These users communicate their belief that the Democratic presidential nominee was able to advance politically through monetary ties, implying that she would have been working with others who either gave or received money.

Discourse from other Twitter users suggested that Trump was lying to the public by not being fully honest about his business ties. Throughout the election period, Trump was questioned about releasing his tax returns which would disclose information about his

businesses, which he declined to do. Previously mentioned user @rebeccabw stated that “people who have nothing to hide share their tax returns when running for president of the United States,” and user @yasmina\_ss tweeted “#DonaldTrump Failed to Disclose Foreign-Owned Business on Financial Disclosure.” These Tweets both show the users’ belief that Trump was intentionally hiding information from the public by not releasing crucial documents, thereby depriving the public of the ability to make fully informed decisions in the election.

The individual concerns about the candidates’ trustworthiness expressed on Twitter largely seem to have reflected news media coverage during the election. A tenth of news media coverage of Clinton was found to have “revolved around allegations of wrongdoing,” specifically in terms of the emails she sent while secretary of state and alleged scandals from her past, while eight percent of news media coverage of Trump focused on his personal character and three percent of coverage concerned his qualifications and leadership (Patterson, 2016b). In this instance, social media discourse seems to have followed news media trends, but more focused on these “allegations of wrongdoing” than other issues that received substantially more coverage such as general campaign information and polls. This indicates that the issues traditional news media presented throughout the campaign did influence Twitter user discourse by establishing issue salience, but that conspiratorial thought served to exacerbate these issues in interpreting the events of the election and the motivations of each presidential candidate.

The “Lying to the Public” theme identifies the conspiratorial nature of Twitter user suspicion of dishonest candidates who aimed to deceive voters. The following section will

discuss the theoretical contributions of this thesis, its significance, limitations, and my final thoughts.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

My thesis research sought to identify how Twitter users expressed their beliefs about the 2016 presidential election and how those beliefs were conspiratorial in nature. My findings suggest the emergence of three themes identifying the influences on the 2016 U.S. presidential election as perceived by Twitter users. The first theme, “Delegitimizing Candidates” suggested that candidates were delegitimizing one another throughout their campaigns. This belief was illustrative of the conspiratorial nature of how users were interpreting media coverage of issues pertaining to individual candidates as indications that they were involved in unfair practices to gain advantages over one another. The second theme, “Power Grabs” indicated how users interpreted news media discussion of potential Russian interference during the election as indicative of a ploy for Russian forces to gain power within the United States government. The third theme, “Lying to the Public” suggested that presidential candidates were lying to the public and illustrated how Twitter users had interpreted the various scandals around Clinton and Trump involving their business practices and personal lives as proof that they were hiding necessary information from the public. My study illustrates how agenda-setting theory and its components are supported, modified, and extended through the analysis of the conspiratorial nature of the Tweets made through the 2016 presidential election. The connection between the conspiratorial viewpoints and the beliefs from which they stem shows an interesting change in agenda-setting theory in how agendas can be reinterpreted and changed in a way that appeals to specific audiences online.

While many of the Tweets analyzed in my study contained subject matter that had received some amount of traditional news media attention in major news outlets such as the Washington Post, the conspiratorial nature of the Tweets was foregrounded in this study through social media users' interpretation of the events, and how these interpretations were amplified and perpetuated through agendas set by traditional media. My findings reveal how social media, particularly Twitter, provided a platform on which users were able to share their interpretations and the interpretations of others that reaffirmed previously held beliefs, thereby supporting a key tenet of agenda setting theory. In this instance, agenda setting theory argues that news media have the ability to influence what issues people care about. In the context of social media, the agenda interpretations reinforce and at times amplify the agendas set by traditional news media by providing explanations that further rather than negate the original agendas. As my research reveals, social media platforms such as Twitter, support and provide communities that amplify fringe viewpoints, thereby allowing them to be created from information originating from news media. I assert that such individual viewpoints can perhaps be understood as "micro-agendas" when viewed through the lens of agenda-setting theory that have the potential to contribute in some way to mainstream discourse. In this manner, social media has disrupted the dynamics of agenda-setting theory. Individual beliefs and conspiratorial viewpoints identified throughout the election on Twitter indicate users' views both reflected and challenged traditional news media. The research presented by my thesis indicates that agenda-setting theory is still applicable to the interaction between media outlets and the general public in the digital age, but also points to the ability of social media channels to set agendas independent of traditional news media. The original theory applied to traditional news outlets like television and newspapers drew a

connection between media coverage of specific issues and public understanding of issue salience (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In the 21st century, the Internet and social media platforms have introduced additional news outlets into this realm of agenda-setting, and given individual voices the ability to reach others with similar viewpoints.

### Theoretical Contribution

My thesis suggests that social media functions differently from traditional news media in terms of agenda-setting ability. While news media for the most part focuses on information with factual basis, social media invites individuals to interpret that information, particularly when it is ambiguous or difficult to understand. The ability of individuals to interpret agendas set by traditional news media and set agendas based on their interpretations have added a new aspect to the theory. Agenda-setting theory is supported by this finding, but modified by the actions of others in response to agendas set by news media. For example, around ten percent of the news coverage of Clinton during her campaign focused on scandals related to her and “allegations of wrongdoing” concerning emails sent and received on her private server (Patterson, 2016b). In response to this news media coverage, individuals on Twitter voiced conspiratorial viewpoints indicating their beliefs that Clinton was a corrupt candidate with dubious monetary ties. In addition, about eleven percent of news media coverage of Trump centered on his leadership qualifications and his character (Patterson, 2016b), which in turn prompted Twitter user discourse about his reasons for campaigning and the nature of his business ties. While the media coverage of these issues was relatively small, accounting for around a tenth of news media coverage for both candidates, the data collected within this thesis indicates that it did garner a response online. The interpretation of these issues by individuals on Twitter illustrates the persisting agenda-setting power of

traditional news media, as well as social media's ability to enable individual responses to and interpretations of the issues covered.

Fragmentation of news media based on political viewpoints also factors into the understanding of agenda-setting theory in relation to social media. Individual social media users tend to be more receptive to media content that reaffirms their own political viewpoints (Vargo, et al., 2014; Muddiman, Stroud, & McCombs, 2014; Davis & Dunaway, 2016). Much like individuals can choose which news media outlets to receive information from based on political leanings, they are also able to find individuals on social media with similar sets of beliefs. Conspiratorial ideas on Twitter are thus able to reach audiences who are receptive to those beliefs as explanations for events covered by traditional news media. The conspiratorial nature of these interpretations might be particularly attractive to specific groups of people who are willing to accept them as agendas separate from those provided by news media. A potential result of media coverage of Clinton's emails may have been the aforementioned beliefs of individuals on Twitter that Clinton was a corrupt presidential candidate. Another result may have been the growth in popularity of the #Pizzagate conspiracy theory. The suggestion by news media that information coming from WikiLeaks, particularly the emails they had released, was damning evidence of political misconduct was potentially one of the causes of further interpretation of these emails in the #Pizzagate conspiracy theory with the purpose of damaging the reputation of members of the Democratic Party. Twitter, in addition to other social media platforms like Reddit, provided individuals with the means to gather and interpret these emails themselves, all with a common goal based on their perception that members of the Democratic Party were involved in illegal child trafficking. In this case, news media was able to set an agenda and social

media provided a place for individuals to interpret and alter that agenda based on their own beliefs. The acceptance of this agenda culminated in the case of the #Pizzagate conspiracy theory in Edgar Welch arriving at the restaurant implicated in the theory in order to search for evidence of the conspiracy (Fisher, Cox, & Hermann, 2016). Although there was no factual evidence to back up the theory, there were real-world consequences.

The ability of individuals to gather online based on a shared interpretation of political events relies heavily on who possesses agenda-setting ability in the digital age. Previously, news media outlets were one of the few sources with a wide enough platform to reach a large audience spanning demographics, which made news media an authority on what issues people should care about and why. Social media has now given some of that power over to individuals and organizations online with less transparent motives than traditional news media. With Twitter specifically, which does not necessarily encourage users to provide factual information about themselves, individuals have the freedom to create identities for themselves and use those identities to their own benefit. Virtually anyone has the potential now to set an agenda with the use of social media. Given that McCombs and Shaw (1972) did not specify how many individuals needed to be affected by agenda-setting theory for it to be considered evidence, if a Twitter user can change just one person's perception on the salience of an issue then they have demonstrated agenda-setting ability. The instance of the collaborative effort to create an urban legend online (Peck, 2015) lends to the idea that social media and Internet users have the ability and authority to share information with others with similar beliefs and interests, regardless of who those users are. As with conspiratorial ideas propagated online, narratives spread through social media have the potential to play on fears that are based in reality, such as concerns about Russian interference with American

democracy. Social media has provided the necessary tools for users to create and set agendas without reliance on generally recognized authority like news media.

### **Significance**

This research is significant in its contribution to understanding agenda-setting theory in relation to the political climate in the 21st century. The prominence of social media within the daily lives of American citizens necessitates an understanding of how this media format plays a role in establishing issue salience and the position of individual users within this interaction. This research illustrates an upset to the initial dynamics of this theory, presenting the ability of individuals to set their own agendas and the agendas of others based on their interpretations of news media. Previous research (Vargo, et al., 2014) has indicated that agendas set by news media can be reflected on social media as well, but the research presented in this thesis is indicative of how conspiratorial thought can factor into individual interpretation of issue salience. Social media users have the ability to set agendas within audiences that are receptive to their beliefs, regardless of the identities of the individuals involved in the discourse.

Within the context of the 2016 presidential election, my research illustrates the fragmentation of audiences on Twitter in addition to audiences of news media (Vargo, et al., 2014; Muddiman et al., 2014; Davis & Dunaway, 2016). Different individual users were shown to have communicated similar beliefs and interpretations of political events, often expressing clear political stances. This suggests that Twitter users were consuming media that provided information that had been interpreted in a specific, sometimes conspiratorial way, additionally evidenced by Twitter users mentioning sources like Infowars and WikiLeaks for information. The conspiratorial interpretations of political events may have

gained popularity in 2016 because of media fragmentation and the ability of individuals to set agendas within groups of people who are receptive to those agendas. Social media presents a unique opportunity for individuals to set their own agendas and reinforce beliefs based on unverifiable interpretations of factual information, especially during times of political turmoil.

### **Limitations**

This research had several limitations. The first limitation was the amount of Tweets I was able to collect. Analyzing 2,650 Tweets from five individual days, while representative of the data gathering procedures I followed and the corresponding constraints, still comprised a relatively narrow data pool. Collecting a larger number of Tweets from a wider date range could yield more Tweets of conspiratorial nature that focused on a broader range of issues than the ones discussed within this research. Increasing the number of Tweets gathered would help future researchers in a more comprehensive analysis of the complexities suggested by the themes and sub-themes identified in my research.

The second limitation of the research conducted within this thesis was the date range data from which was collected. While the dates chosen were relevant to major events during the election, owing to the large number of Tweets produced under the hashtag during those dates, they had to be limited based on the set events of the presidential debates and the days leading up to the election. During this time period, however, a number of events did occur such as the FBI investigation into Clinton's emails and the released footage of Trump making derogatory statements about women in 2005 that could have been highly discussed topics on social media. As a result, this research was limited to analyzing set events during the campaign and not some of the other incidents that may have had salience on social media.

Future research can aid generalization of the findings of my thesis by analyzing a larger dataset.

A third limitation is that the data in this study was only analyzed for beliefs and their conspiratorial nature, not the larger issues those beliefs could indicate. In many cases, beliefs that the will of the American people as a whole would be undermined during the election suggests anxieties that the will of the individual user themselves would be undermined or their voice would go unheard. Future studies in this area should analyze specifically how fears and anxieties can be indicated by user discourse online in times of political or social turmoil, and what role conspiracy theories play in exacerbating these feelings. While future research using only Twitter as a social network could be useful to analyze, given the popularity of Facebook among adult Internet users (Greenwood et al., 2016) it could also be revealing to include additional social media networks in future research.

## **Conclusion**

Conspiratorial thought has long existed in American society, and will likely continue to fascinate believers and skeptics alike in the foreseeable future. Studies of conspiratorial thought have particularly noted their use to explain ambiguous and complex political events, and sometimes even to indicate underlying social issues (McArthur, 1995; Oliver & Wood, 2014). The application of agenda-setting theory to conspiratorial thought as it is demonstrated on social media reveals a changing media landscape. In the digital age, social media platforms can facilitate interpretation of agendas set by news media and allow people to connect with one another over shared beliefs, which has the potential to encompass conspiratorial ideology as well. The themes analyzed in this thesis indicate individual expression and the search for understandable explanations on social media in response to the

many complex aspects of the 2016 United States presidential election. Social media might provide a source for users to find voices that echo their own ideologies when they feel that traditional news media fails to provide adequate information pertaining to the agendas they set.

For better or for worse, social media has fundamentally changed how information is consumed in the United States. Traditional news media still have agenda-setting ability, but the interaction between news media and the public has been altered by the introduction of the Internet and social media. This study of 2016 presidential election illustrates this interaction and its many implications for the future. As social media continues to be adopted into the daily lives of Americans, agendas set by news media can continue to be interpreted and reinterpreted, changed along with individual users to fit their own needs and beliefs. While McComb and Shaw's vision of agenda-setting theory might never fully disappear, it will be altered as individual consumers gain more ability to set their own agendas and attract others with similar views about the world.

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## Appendix A

### Criteria and Date Range Selection Process

I initially planned to collect articles from Facebook that could be identified as fake news posted between July 19, 2016 and November 8, 2016. July 19 was chosen as the beginning date for this range as it was the day that Mr. Trump and Mrs. Clinton became the two major party representatives, and the end of the range was November 8 which was the day of the presidential election. I chose to use Twitter instead of Facebook to collect Tweets of conspiratorial nature in addition to fake news.

The first hashtag analyzed was #fakenews between July 19 and November 8, and I noted that the meaning of “fake news” seemed to have changed drastically between this time period and February 2017 when I began considering my data collection methods. A lot of the retweets between these dates came from reputable sources such as the New York Times and BBC discrediting articles promoting unsupported claims as factual. This hashtag did not seem like it would be particularly useful to my research because most of the Tweets were focused on spreading awareness of fake news instead of actually disseminating news that could be considered fake. Some of the other relevant hashtags to my research used along with #fakenews were #biasedmedia, #riggedmedia, and #factcheck2016.

#factcheck2016 seemed to turn up more usable Tweets than #fakenews. In relation to agenda-setting theory, facts themselves had become an issue of salience within the public consciousness, evidenced by the focus on fact checking statements made by politicians and an apparent concern over the veracity of specific statements made by high-profile individuals. There seemed to be more focus on specific issues within this hashtag than #fakenews, such as multiple users commenting on the sexual assault allegations made against Mr. Trump in early November 2016.

The last hashtag examined during early research was #biasedmedia. The hashtag seemed to be used primarily by Mr. Trump's supporters to accuse and attack Mrs. Clinton for her connections and stances on certain political issues, as well as targeting CNN for their allegedly biased election coverage. Also of interest were the Tweets mentioning WikiLeaks providing John Podesta's emails to the public, and individual interpretation of the information therein. Other relevant hashtags made along with #biasedmedia were #corruptmedia, #riggedmedia, and #dncleaks.

**Appendix B****Table of Usable Tweets**

Date	Usable Tweets
September 27, 2016	29
October 10, 2016	33
October 20, 2016	34
November 6, 2016	30
November 7, 2016	12
<b>Total usable Tweets:</b>	<b>138</b>

**Appendix C****September 27 Data Chart**

Image Number	No. of Tweets	Usable Tweets	Subject	Object
9	3	1	Debate cheating	Clinton
11	4	1	Election rigging	Clinton/Dems
17	4	1	Undermining Sanders	Dems
23	3	1	Debate cheating	Clinton
32	5	1	Debate cheating	Clinton
64	4	1	Trump business	Trump
69	4	1	Debate cheating	Clinton
78	5	1	Voter fraud	Election system
79	5	1	Debating cheating	Clinton
82	3	1	Russian influence	Trump
114	4	1	Undermining Sanders	Dems
116	6	1	Debate cheating	Clinton

**Appendix D****October 10 Data Chart**

Image	No. of Tweets	Usable Tweets	Subject	Object
Number				
1	4	1	B. Clinton sex. assault	Clinton
8	3	1	Clinton corruption	Clinton/Dems
9	4	1	Media bias	Media
10	6	1	Election rigging	Dems
23	5	1	Trump sexual assault	Trump
32	4	1	Russian influence	N/A
34	6	1	Election rigging	Trump/Clinton
38	6	1	Clinton corruption	Clinton
42	3	1	Clinton corruption	Clinton
44	5	1	WikiLeaks	Clinton
49	6	1	Clinton policy	Clinton
50	4	1	Media bias	Clinton/media
51	2	1	Clinton policy	Clinton
66	4	1	Clinton corruption	Clinton
69	3	1	Russian influence	Trump
74	5	1	Media bias	Media
75	4	1	GOP corruption	Reps
80	5	1	WikiLeaks	Clinton
88	5	1	WikiLeaks	Clinton/media

91	5	1	Clinton policy	Clinton
100	5	1	Clinton corruption	Dems
104	4	1	Russian influence	Trump
106	4	1	GOP corruption	Trump/Reps
107	5	1	Clinton corruption	Clinton
109	4	1	Clinton policy	Clinton
112	4	1	Debate commission	Clinton
115	6	1	Clinton corruption	Clinton
120	7	1	Clinton corruption	Clinton
126	2	1	WikiLeaks	Clinton

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### Appendix E

#### October 20 Data Chart

Image Number	No. of Tweets	Usable Tweets	Subject	Object
4	3	1	Clinton corruption	Clinton
7	4	1	Trump campaign	Dems
11	5	1	Trump campaign	Dems
15	4	1	Clinton corruption	Clinton
17	4	2	Clinton corruption	Clinton
			Clinton corruption	Clinton
23	4	1	Clinton corruption	Clinton
26	4	1	Obama emails	Obama/Dems
30	3	1	Obama	Obama
31	3	2	Clinton emails	Clinton
			Influencing voters	Clinton/Dems
35	7	1	Russia/Hacking	Trump
39	2	1	Influencing voters	Clinton/Dems
48	4	1	Clinton corruption	Clinton/Dems
57	3	1	Clinton/Media bias	Clinton/Media
59	3	1	Russia	Trump
60	5	1	Clinton corruption	Clinton/Media
63	7	1	Clinton campaign	Clinton/Brazile
70	3	1	Voter fraud/Media bias	Voting system

74	5	2	Media bias	Media
			Media bias	Media
90	3	1	Clinton corruption	Clinton/Obama
93	7	1	Clinton campaign	Clinton
96	6	1	Voter fraud	Dems
97	3	1	WikiLeaks	Clinton/Dems
99	6	1	Media bias	Media
102	4	1	Election rigging	Obama
109	7	1	Clinton corruption	Clinton
110	4	1	Media bias	Media
115	4	2	Media bias	Media
			Media bias	Media
117	7	1	Media bias	Media
118	5	1	Clinton campaign	Brazile/Kaine
126	7	1	Voter fraud	Dems

**Appendix F****November 6 Data Chart**

Image Number	No. of Tweets	Usable Tweets	Subject	Object
1	4	1	FBI	FBI
5	3	1	Undermining Sanders	Clinton/Dems
6	7	1	FBI	Clinton/Dems
9	9	1	FBI	FBI
12	6	1	Clinton corruption	Clinton
13	3	1	WikiLeaks	Clinton
16	5	1	Voter fraud	Clinton/Dems
19	5	1	FBI	FBI
25	5	1	FBI	Clinton/FBI
34	4	1	FBI	FBI
37	4	1	Clinton corruption	Clinton
41	3	1	Clinton corruption	Clinton
42	8	1	FBI	FBI
46	3	1	Voter fraud	Voting system
48	6	1	Clinton corruption	Clinton
54	4	1	FBI	FBI
			FBI	Clinton/FBI
55	6	1	Clinton	Clinton
67	3	1	FBI	FBI

69	7	2	Media bias FBI	Media FBI
70	5	1	FBI	FBI
78	6	1	Clinton corruption	Clinton
85	3	2	Voting system FBI	Voting system FBI/GOP
86	5	2	Russia/Emails Clinton corruption	Clinton/Trump Clinton
87	3	1	FBI	FBI
109	8	1	Voter fraud	Voting system
117	6	1	Russian influence	N/A
122	4	1	FBI/GOP	FBI/GOP
124	5	1	FBI/Clinton	FBI/Clinton
126	6	1	FBI/Clinton	FBI/Clinton

**Appendix G****November 7 Data Chart**

Image Number	No. of Tweets	Usable Tweets	Subject	Object
1	3	1	Clinton corruption	Clinton
3	3	1	Clinton emails	Clinton
4	7	1	Trump business	Trump
5	6	1	Clinton policy	Clinton
10	7	1	Trump campaign	Trump
12	3	1	Clinton corruption	Clinton
17	4	1	Voter fraud	Clinton/Dems
22	6	1	Clinton policy	Clinton
25	8	1	Undermining Sanders	Dems
29	4	1	FBI/Clinton	Clinton
30	4	1	FBI/Clinton	Clinton
34	8	1	Undermining Sanders	Clinton
40	4	1	Clinton emails	Clinton/Dems
42	2	1	Media bias	Dems
44	3	1	Trump taxes	Trump
45	6	1	FBI/Clinton emails	Clinton
46	5	1	Election rigging	Clinton
52	5	1	Clinton corruption	Clinton
55	5	1	Clinton corruption	Clinton

60	5	1	Media bias	Dems
65	5	1	Russian influence	Trump/Reps
72	2	1	FBI/Clinton emails	Clinton
75	8	1	Media bias	Media
83	3	1	Disenfranchisement	Voting system
93	6	1	Russian influence	N/A
94	4	1	Clinton dishonesty	Clinton
97	9	1	Media bias	N/A
113	4	1	Clinton dishonesty	Clinton
116	4	1	Clinton corruption	Clinton

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