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**ADULT LEARNING AND REFLECTING ON POLITICAL NEWS:  
AN EXAMINATION OF THE PUBLIC PEDOGAGY OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

A Dissertation in

Adult Education

by

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## Abstract

This qualitative study sought to understand how social media, as a site of public pedagogy, influences how adults use reflection to learn from political news content. The theoretical frameworks of public pedagogy and social cognitive theory informed the analysis of results. The study focused on the experiences of ten social media users between the ages of 25 and 29 who consumed political news on social media and attempted to understand the factors that influenced how they used reflection as part of their learning process. Data were collected through semi-structured participant interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. Five primary findings emerged from this study. First, participants perceived that social media was a context for learning that provided broad access to unique content offering differing viewpoints. Second, when learning from social media participants needed to apply an abundance of caution when selecting content to consider. Third, the participants perceived that social media provided moments of inquiry and reflection, especially when friends or trusted sources post content or comments. Fourth, the participants perceived that the unmoderated nature of social media platforms shut down discussions about political news topics due to conflict, which appeared to limit their reflection process. Fifth, the participants perceived that they experienced cognitive overload, which influenced their reflection process when learning about political news topics on social media. This study confirms that the process of reflection is possible when consuming political news from social media, however, the social components of, and the cognitive overload experienced on social media greatly influence this important part of the process of learning.

*Keywords:* Social media, public pedagogy, reflection, political news, observational learning, cognitive overload

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

It was the evening of November 8, 2016. My husband and I were in the hotel restaurant in Albuquerque, New Mexico, at the American Association of Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE) annual conference. In the air was a sense of otherworldliness. The numerous televisions above the bar area were blaring the results of the United States' presidential election. In a state of disbelief, I bumped into my advisor at the time, Robin Redmon Wright. She had a stunned look in her eyes as she said with an emotional crack in her voice, "She's going to lose!"

It was a night many of us would not soon forget. The outcome of that election has changed the course of our nation. Even today, some years later, I wonder how it happened. What was so different about our society that would drive people to elect as President of the United States (U.S.) a real estate investor with no political or foreign policy experience, whose message was fueled by divisiveness over a competing candidate who was overwhelmingly more qualified? I wanted to know. I needed to know.

As an educator, I believe that a primary difference in our society today, compared to the 2012 campaign and election, is the growing influence that social media has on how adults learn – especially as it relates to how they learn from political news on social media. So, I decided to undertake an examination of this topic as the research study for my dissertation.

This chapter introduces and provides the foundation for a qualitative research study examining how social media, as a site of public pedagogy, influences how adult learners reflect on and learn from political news. The study will specifically focus on how an individual's perceptions of and interactions on social media influence their process of reflection on and meaning-making of political news.

This chapter includes a background of the issue and the purpose of the study, followed by a description of public pedagogy and social cognitive theory, which are the theoretical frameworks that guide the study. It will also provide an overview of the study design and methodology, and the reasons why this research is necessary to understand the learning that is happening through social media use, especially around political news, as well as the importance of this study to adult education.

### **Background to the Problem**

The 2016 U.S. Presidential election was one of the most hotly-contested and surprising elections in recent years. A major difference in the U.S. was the evolution of social media, especially from 2014 to 2017, as a source of news and information. These platforms have almost overtaken television as the primary source of news for much of the U.S. population, according to the Pew Research Center (2017). Part of everyday life for more than 68% of the U.S. population currently includes exposure to at least one social media platform (Pew Research Center, 2017).

Most people are not consciously aware of public pedagogy—the education and mis-education—that takes place as they engage in their daily life experiences, including exposure to many forms of mass media including social media platforms (Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Tisdell, 2008). A good example of the mis-education that can result from social media platforms is the 2018 Cambridge Analytica (CA) and Facebook scandal. Essentially CA was able to gain access to personal data and information for about 65 million Facebook users, which was illegally obtained (Magee, 2020; Meyer, 2018). This data was then used by both the Cruz and Trump 2016 political campaigns to create psychological profiles for about 30 million of those users. Based on the profiles developed by CA, the campaigns targeted Facebook ads and messages to sway the opinions and, most likely, the votes of millions of Facebook users (Magee, 2020,

Meyer, 2018). Facebook has also been the site that propagates the spread of so-called fake news (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). Some of the fake news and misinformation is actually disseminated by political campaigns, however, Facebook's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg's current position is that Facebook would not remove political advertisements that contain misinformation or false claims (Milman, 2019). This stance makes it very likely that Facebook users, in particular, will be exposed to misinformation that can mis-educate.

Through social media platforms, massive amounts of content, information and misinformation, including political content, are published every second, which can impede one's ability to apply an essential element of learning when consuming this information: the process of reflection. As more and more U.S. citizens learn from political news on social media, it behooves us to consider if reflection is even possible when consuming information from social media platforms. Therefore, this section begins with a brief review of political news on social media, then considers the role of reflection in the learning process, and how adults might be able to leverage reflection to learn from digital spaces such as social media.

### **Political News**

Tuchman (1978) described news as, "a window on the world" (p. 1). Through this proverbial window, a society learns about their institutions, their leaders, their culture, and the world at large. Citizens are informed about the political machinations of their government by political news. According to Gans (2010), political journalists support democracy by delivering news that reports "the actions and decisions of elected officials.... political disagreements and conflicts...[defends] democratic values" (p.10), and functions as watchdogs over the government as a whole. The idea is that an informed populace will be empowered and encouraged to actively participate in the democratic political process. However, there has long been a tension when



trying to reconcile how political news organizations could be unbiased and act in the public good when they effectively sell their audience's attention to advertisers to generate revenue (Bennett, 2016). This tension and the importance of political news to the U.S. democratic system underscores the importance of, not only what individuals learn from political news, but also, how they learn from political news.

Political news has long been disseminated via mass media such as newspapers, radio, and television. Unlike other types of content found in mass media, political news has typically been considered credible and authentic (Bennett, 2016). However, the way news is delivered has changed drastically. Bennett (2016) observed that in the early 1980s, news was disseminated via a limited number of outlets that barely differed in their message. Today, the news is accessed from a fragmented system that includes numerous television channels, online websites, and social media platforms. Many in the U.S. access political news through social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and YouTube (Pew Research Center, 2017). Within the context of these social media platforms, almost any sort of content can be portrayed as news, no matter the author, publisher, or whether it was subject to journalistic verification (Goetzman, 2014). Social media platforms are also able to distribute political news with a speed and scale not previously possible by more traditional forms of mass media (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). Further, users who access political news from social media have access to a much larger array of options than is generally available from traditional news sources and they have a greater amount of control over both the content selection and consumption processes (Winter, Metzger, & Flanagin, 2016). As a result, political news on social media is experiencing a credibility crisis (Shao et al., 2018).

## **Social Media**

The term social media is often equated to platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, or Instagram. According to Treem, Dailey, Pierce, and Biffel (2016), various definitions of social media typically include the idea that social media is Internet accessible, provides the ability for individuals to connect to and interact with content as well as other users, and enables users to both create and share content. However, even though these platforms claim to be about giving “people the power to build community and bring the world closer together” (Zuckerberg, 2017), their real purpose is to make money by selling users’ information, including shopping habits, hobbies, and friends, and by selling advertisements targeted to users.

Advertisements can only entice people to buy when people read, listen, or watch them. Therefore, social media platforms began to employ algorithms to determine what content to present to keep users engaged on that platform. The algorithms, which are computer instructions created by programmers to perform a series of steps, can be very basic or very complex and can process enormous amounts of data such as the data generated when using social media platforms (Ananny, 2016). Algorithms are also used to better understand each user’s preferences in order to present advertisements that align with those preferences. People expose their preferences for certain content when they click on links, like, share, or comment on content, and select whom they will follow or “friend.” With this information, highly-targeted content and advertisements, based on the outcomes of the algorithms, are presented to the user.

In essence, algorithms influence what is presented to each individual when they access their social media account. According to Fletcher and Nielsen (2018), most social media users do not have a clear idea about how algorithms serve to select and filter what they see. As a result, social media users may have an inaccurate perception of their own level of influence to

select what political news they will consume. Wright and Sandlin (2017) add this cautionary statement regarding their concerns about the power of selecting content when they note that “whoever has the power to control information technologies, to a large extent, can also control people’s everyday learning” (p. 7). Taking it further, Bandura (2001) stated that when an individual’s ability to be their own agent of learning is diminished, they lose what he considered the core or essence of being human.

Because social media companies can generate more revenue when more users are engaged on their platforms and looking at advertisements, they strive to encourage engagement on their platform by providing a near constant stream of new content. On average, there are 6,000 new tweets posted on Twitter, and over 74,000 videos viewed on YouTube every second (“Internet Live Stats,” n.d.). As Merriam and Bierema (2014) note, this “sheer volume is not only overwhelming but incomprehensible” (p. 199). This vast quantity of content on social media can lead to cognitive overload, which an individual can experience when their brain’s working memory is overloaded with information which impedes their ability to process the information (Carr, 2010). Therefore, unless individuals can manage the information overload by filtering out what they deem as unimportant, individuals may find it difficult to cognitively reflect on the content.

How users manage the amount of information found on social media in order to make sense of and formulate new knowledge from political news was the focus of research from Pentia and Tarafdar (2014). These authors found that their study participants needed to apply various strategies to categorize and prune the amount of information they consume in order to facilitate their ability to make sense of political news. However, the authors also noted that the cognitive overload that participants experienced could also obstruct their ability to make sense of political

news. Hocevar, Flanagin, and Metzger (2014) investigated how individuals evaluate the credibility of social media content given the vast amount of information accessible. Importantly, these authors found that individuals seeking to find information on social media do not take the time to critically evaluate what they find; but rather, use heuristic cues, or mental shortcuts, to minimize the cognitive effort required.

Another study, conducted by Bode (2016), focused on two of the most popular social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter, to examine the extent to which learning about political information occurs as a result of using these platforms. Here, Bode (2016) quantitatively measured by the recall of words or phrases to assess if learning took place. As a result of this study, Bode (2016) found that “learning can and sometimes does take place via social media” (p. 44). However, further research is required to better understand the methods one uses to form knowledge from political news content on social media.

Being able to navigate through the constant stream of political news available on social media platforms often requires the need to skim through content to avoid cognitive overload. However, will skimming allow one to truly pay attention to and reflect on content in a way that allows the time for meaning-making, knowledge construction, and learning? In the next section, the role of reflection in the learning process will be discussed.

### **Learning from Social Media**

Learning, according to Mezirow (1990), is a process that includes both meaning-making and interpreting one’s experiences from which meaning is made, which then guides their future action and understanding. The continuous process of interpretation of one’s experiences and comparing the resulting meaning against one’s existing frame of reference can result in

reinforcement of or challenge to the frame of reference. This process includes the practice of reflection and observational learning.

**Reflection.** Mezirow (1990) saw reflection as central to the process of adult learning; a process through which one examines and validates the assumptions used to justify their beliefs and resulting actions. He further suggests that reflection is also crucial to what he calls “communicative learning,” which entails “understanding the meaning of what others communicate concerning values, ideals, feeling, moral decisions, and such concepts as freedom, justice, love, labor, autonomy, commitment, and democracy” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 8). In addition, Kolb (1984) suggests that individuals can apply reflective observation as they examine situations by watching or listening to events. Eveland, Shah, and Kwak (2003) state that reflecting on political news means “the use of news information to make cognitive connections to past experience and prior knowledge, and to derive new implications from news content” (p. 363). This process of reflection, then, is focused on understanding what others are doing and why they might be doing it.

Further, reflection can be conceptualized as a multi-layered process whereby individuals first reflect on the actions of others and why they did it, then self-reflect on their own actions and why I did it (Von Wright, 1992). As these authors confirm, based on a constructivist epistemology, the simple recall of words or phrases does not constitute knowledge creation; instead, one needs to reflect on the current content in light of past experiences and knowledge to construct new meaning—in other words, to learn.

Many studies that seek to evaluate learning from social media have only measured the participants’ ability to recall information instead of conducting a full examination of the reflection process (Bode, 2016; Cacciatore et al. 2018; Dimitrova, Shehata, Stromback, & Nord,

2014; Edgerly, Thorson, & Wells, 2018; Park, 2017; Park & Kaye, 2018; Shehata & Stromback, 2018). However, the social constructivist view that learning is the result of making meaning from experiences and reflecting on how the resulting meaning aligns with one's existing schemas of understanding does not align with the idea that one's ability to recall information is a proxy for learning. Therefore, a gap in the current literature exists as many studies only focus on recall as a measure of learning when examining how adult learners reflect on political news found on social media.

**Observational learning on social media.** Because most people only have direct contact with a small segment of the greater social environment, Bandura (2002) suggests that “Conceptions of social reality are greatly influenced by vicarious experiences – what they see, hear, and read in the mass media – without direct experiential correctives” (p. 12). In other words, individuals can learn vicariously from observing the actions and resulting consequences from others' modeled behavior. Observational learning requires the learner to be motivated in some way, such that they apply their attention to what they observe. The basic concept is that learners are motivated and autonomously select the object of their attention, then use reflection to make meaning from what they observe.

This view of learning by vicariously observing the experiences of others can apply to all types of mass media, including social media. Because it would be challenging for each citizen to experience each political event directly, they could experience these events vicariously through political news on social media. With reflection on these vicarious experiences, one may be able to learn from political news on social media.

Observational learning on social media begins with the application of human agency to decide where one focuses their attention within the vast array of attention-seeking options.

However, as discussed previously, social media users do not make fully autonomous decisions about what political news to pay attention to or to consume. Instead, algorithms, or recommendations from friends or other social media users' activities that indicate a story is trending or the most widely read are more likely to determine where social media users focus their attention (Messing & Westwood, 2014).

The influence that other people have on one's learning on social media is examined in a study by Velasquez and Quenette (2018). These authors studied ways that observational learning from social media may change political participation behaviors and found that the participants' behavior was influenced through their interactions with content as well as with other users on social media. Recognition of the power that social media, as a site of learning, has on human behavior further underscores the importance of additional research into how social media influences adults' learning processes. Again, because social media can be a site for observational learning, it is essential to understand how adults use reflection to consider all attributes of the content they are consuming, including who or what may be influencing where they focus their attention on social media platforms.

As social media replaces traditional sources of political news, there is an urgent need to understand how this site of public pedagogy influences how reflection is used as part of the learning process. The empirical literature to date has focused on measuring outcomes, such as recall, political activation, or management of cognitive overload; but, both conceptual analysis and empirical research literature confirm that learning from political news on social media platforms does occur. Yet, there is a gap in the literature on social media that explores a key component of learning and knowledge construction – the use of reflection.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how social media, as a site of public pedagogy, influences how adults use reflection to learn from political news. The following research questions will be used to frame this study:

1. What are individuals' perceptions of social media as a site of public pedagogy and how might those perceptions affect how they learn about political news accessed via social media?
2. How does the social component of social media influence the reflection process and meaning they make from political news?
3. How does the cognitive overload inherent in social media influence individuals' process of reflection and meaning-making from political news?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Because this study aims to understand how adult learners reflect on political news accessed on social media, the theoretical framework for this study is based on both public pedagogy and social cognitive theory. Public pedagogy provides the basis to support the notion that social media can be an informal site of learning for education and mis-education from which meaning making can occur. Certain aspects of social cognitive theory that stem from Bandura's (2001a, 2001b, 2005) concepts relating to social modeling and observational learning, as well as individuals' agentic self-reflective capability, will be used to ground this study.

#### **Public Pedagogy**

Describing the idea of what "public" is as it relates to public pedagogy has been presented differently by many scholars (Biesta, 2012; Kelly, 2015; Sandlin, O'Malley, & Burdick, 2011; Sandlin, Burdick, & Rich, 2016; Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011). Most agree



that the idea of *public* generally aligns with Habermas's idea of the *public sphere* as opposed to being related to the concept of ownership, as in public parks or public schools. For example, Biesta (2010) noted that the term 'public' as it relates to public pedagogy does not refer to a physical location, but rather as a specific form of interaction. Habermas's own definition of the public sphere notes that it refers to a "realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (1974, p. 49). This view of the term *public* is repeated throughout the literature as most scholars suggest that examples where public pedagogy exists and can take place include museums, parks, the Internet and social media, traditional media, such as movies, television, and printed communication, sporting arenas, and even workplaces. In general, the literature supports the concept that public sites are where the masses are exposed to ideas, opinions, or conversations, and where individuals can behave in an unrestricted manner within the course of their everyday life (Biesta, 2012; Giroux, 2004; Kelly, 2015; Sandlin, Burdick, & Rich, 2016; Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011; Savage, 2010).

Public pedagogy, then, refers to the sites of education, mis-education, and learning that are beyond the realm of formal educational institutions and which are encountered in all areas of a society's culture (Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011). Within these various public spaces, creep the influence of global capitalism and corporatization through private/public partnerships and the influence of corporate sponsorship (Savage, 2010). Therefore, the term public as it relates to public pedagogy may actually only refer to either privately-owned or privately-sponsored sites that are widely accessible to a large segment of the general population.

Kelly (2015) describes public pedagogy as "the educative force of media, popular culture and society and the diverse ways in which culture functions as an educative entity" (p. 391). Reid (2010) notes that "social media have become important sites of public pedagogy, places

where we go to learn, and places where we learn indirectly as we come to understand ourselves in relation to others and our culture through social media interactions” (p. 194). In other words, individuals learn how to think, what to believe, and how to act in ways that fit into acceptable cultural norms through exposure to and subsequent learning from cultural texts, which includes forms of mass media, such as social media (Kellner, 2011).

Individuals may think that they have full autonomy to select what social media content, including political news content, that they want to consume. However, not only do algorithms often determine what content is presented to users, but so do the users’ friends or others in their social network (Breen, McLean, Cairney, & McAdams, 2016). As more and more social media sites, search sites, and other Internet websites are increasingly being driven through the use of algorithms, some scholars (Careless, 2015; Freishtat & Sandlin, 2010; Fuchs, 2017; Giroux, 2004; Reid, 2010; Sandvig, 2015; Wright, 2018; Wright & Sandlin, 2017), wonder if we can continue to consider the Internet as a public space, where public pedagogy exists as opposed to one that is constructed by corporations. This view of social media as public pedagogy forms the lens through which the data collected through this study will be analyzed.

### **Social Cognitive Theory**

Social cognitive theory, advanced by Albert Bandura (1986), suggests that learning occurs within social contexts through the dynamic and reciprocal interactions between the individual, their behavior, and their social context. According to Bandura (2005), social modeling, sometimes described as observational learning, is the process where “people pattern their styles of thinking and behaving after the functional ones exemplified by others” (p. 11). However, social modeling is not mindless imitation; rather, individuals apply cognitive and affective influences using their self-regulating capabilities to blend elements of current

knowledge with newly-observed behaviors to make meaning and develop their own new behaviors. The self-regulating capabilities stem from an individual's ability to influence their own thoughts and actions through self-examination and reflection (Bandura, 2005).

Social cognitive theory can be applied to understand how learning can be affected by social media, and Bandura (2001a) extends the concept of social modeling to what he terms symbolic modeling. According to Bandura (2001a), "a vast amount of information about human values, styles of thinking, and behavior patterns is gained from the extensive modeling in the symbolic environment of mass media" (p. 271). Social media blends the symbolic environment of mass media with the diffusion processes and influences that social networks bring to the meaning-making and learning process. As study participants describe their experiences, attention will be paid not only to their perceptions of social media as a site of public pedagogy, but also how the socialness of social media influences their processes of making meaning from political news accessed on social media.

### **Overview of Design and Methodology**

This study used a qualitative design which is employed when researchers seek to understand how individuals make meaning of certain phenomena within a particular context (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Because the study aimed to understand the participant's subjective experiences from their individual perspective as they make meaning of and interpret their experiences with political news on social media during their everyday life, a basic interpretative design was used.

Participants for this study were purposefully selected using snowball sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), first by using my network of contacts and posting a call for participants on all of the social media platforms on which I have an account. Then leveraging the initial group of

individuals as informants, additional potential participants were identified. The study participants were between the ages of 25 and 29, currently use social media to consume political news, and have shared or re-posted at least one political news items on social media. Additional details on participant selection are presented in Chapter Three.

Interviews can be used when the researcher is interested in an individual's experience of past events, especially those that cannot be replicated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In order to gather information that supports understanding of how social media as a site of public pedagogy changes how adult learners reflect on political news an in-depth, semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant to gather data. All interviews were audio-recorded. Each participants' interview lasted an average of 35 minutes. In addition to the data collected from the participant responses, immediately after each interview, I wrote a brief summary of my thoughts and feelings about each interview as field notes. Both the transcribed interview and my field notes became part of the data collection, which was uploaded into and coded using NVivo 12 Plus for analysis.

The goal of the interpretation of the data gathered from these descriptions was to find answers to the research questions that support the purpose of this study. As a result of the interpretative data analysis process described above, categories or themes began to emerge from the data. The constant comparative analysis method, which uses an iterative and inductive process to code and re-code data into categories and themes, was used to conduct the data analysis (Leech & Onweugbuzie, 2007). Member checks, triangulation, and use of an audit trail of research notes were used to confirm the thematic interpretations derived from the data analysis process (Hussein, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Assumptions of the Study**

There were several assumptions for this study which are noted below:

1. All social media platforms used by the study participants allow some mechanism for the user to interact with the content.
2. Social media platforms used by the participants in this study will not have significantly changed their functionality throughout the study period in a way that deterred the participants from using the platforms.
3. Study participants' understanding of social media was not unduly influenced by recent events.
4. Study participants were able to convey the social media experiences that influenced their learning and were able to be specific and truthful about those experiences.
5. Access to political news on social media did not significantly change throughout the study.
6. Education and mis-education occurs through the sites of public pedagogy, which include forms of mass media including social media.
7. The learning process is dependent on some level of reflection.
8. The revenue generation mechanisms used by producers of mass media, including social media, is often ambiguous.
9. Financial support and ownership of media producers comes from a variety of sources that may not be clear to media consumers.
10. Advancements in technology, including the use of social media and mobile devices, have shifted people away from traditional news sources and have changed the way people access and consume political news.

### **Limitations and Strengths**

Like all studies, this study has certain limitations and strengths which are:

1. As with any qualitative study, this study cannot be considered generalizable as the narratives of the participants describe their own, individual experience.
2. Initial study participants learned about the study from my social media network. Because many of the connections in my network are fellow educators, colleagues, personal friends, or family members, there may have been selection bias, as these participants may be less impartial when sharing their experiences.
3. The study participants were largely college educated with most having at least a Master's degree and were therefore more educated than an average group of ten individuals. Further, it is possible that, due to their educational level, they tended to reflect more on all content they consume.
4. This study was dependent on the voluntary participation of individuals who access political news on social media. As a result, selection bias may have been present, as they may have had more positive views of social media than those who are new to these platforms.
5. The study was limited to understanding the meaning-making process relative to political news content on social media and may not be generalizable to other types of content found on social media.
6. Social media could be contested as a site of public pedagogy, given that these platforms are owned by corporations.

7. Participants may have felt hesitant to be forthcoming about their experiences if they have limited knowledge about political news or social media algorithms, as they may view this as a personal shortcoming.
8. Because the participant interviews were conducted with audio only, none of the participants' nonverbal communication were included in the data collected.

Even with the above-noted limitations, this study has multiple strengths. First, this study makes an important contribution to the paucity of studies focused on how adults learn from political news on social media, especially given the decreasing use of more traditional forms of political news. As a result, this study provides insights concerning the education and mis-education that results from consuming political news on social media and the use of reflection in light of algorithmic-driven content. This study is unique as it focuses on learning from political news on social media, a topic that is consequential to one of the foundations of the U.S. democratic system – civil engagement in the political system. Lastly, this study brings increased awareness to the influence that social media has on reinforcing or deteriorating the cohesiveness of a broader society.

### **Significance of Study**

Within the field of adult education, there is a lack of research that examines how individuals' understandings and perceptions about the functions of social media, as a site of public pedagogy, and how these functions can influence their meaning-making process. There is even less known about how this understanding influences the specific process of reflection on and meaning-making of political news accessed on social media. As Bode (2016) notes, "social media may be the new social and cultural force to complicate our understanding of the process of lifelong political learning" (p. 45). While there are studies that examine how individuals use

social media, including how they manage information overload on social media to enable sense-making (Pentia & Tarafdar, 2014), and whether or not individuals learn political information from social media (Bode, 2016), less is known about how individuals' use of social media influences their meaning-making process of political news, in particular. Other studies that aim to assess if social media contributes to political knowledge use multiple choice questions as the sole measurement of learning (Cacciatore et al., 2018; Dimitrova, Shehata, Stromback, & Nord, 2014; Shehata & Stromback, 2018). However, this type of assessment may only be evaluating the participant's recall ability, not whether or not they constructed new knowledge. Lastly, Shehata and Stromback (2018) note that "learning news from social media may be a rather different experience" (p. 18) compared to traditional sources of news. As social media becomes even more prevalent in today's world, understanding the influence these platforms have on adult learning about any topic, not just political news, has broad implications for all societies today.

As noted, approximately 68% of American adults use some form of social media, and almost half of all Americans get their news from Facebook, the most prevalently-used social media platform on the planet (Pew Research Center, 2018). In addition, there is a good deal of research and literature that supports the idea that social media seems to have contributed to the shift in adult's political views towards more polarized perspectives and away from a willingness to engage in democratic discourse, which are open discussions of various points of view in a way that respects all participants (Ananny, 2016; Anson, 2016; Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Lee, 2016; Messing & Westwood, 2014; Sandvig, 2015; Yeo, Xenos, Brossard, & Scheufele, 2015). Further, social media use is, as Bode (2016) states, "an important new flow of political information in American politics" (p. 42). Pennycook and Rand (2019) posit that social media users are more susceptible to accepting fake news headlines if they



do not reflect on them. These points, together with the paucity of research in this specific area, creates the need for adult educators to better understand social media as a site of public pedagogy and how individuals make meaning from political news found there. This study is, therefore, significant for the field of adult education as it addressed these detailed questions and created the foundation for further research in this realm.

Finally, as an adult educator and a concerned citizen, this study has personal significance to me. This study has enhanced my understanding of the education and mis-education that results from reading political news on social media. I hope to be able to contribute to the field of adult education by encouraging others to conduct further research into this important site of learning. I also hope that by sharing the findings from this study, other educators will better understand the influence social media news has to educate and mis-educate in ways that can profoundly influence our political system.

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter One introduces the study, the background of the problems learning from political news on social media, a purpose statement, an overview of the theoretical framework that guides the research, and an overview of the research methodology. This chapter also includes a definition of key terms, assumptions underlying the research, limitations, and strengths of the study, and a statement of the study's significance.

Chapter Two provides an in-depth discussion of the literature pertaining to the study. This discussion includes a review of the literature associated with the theoretical frameworks of public pedagogy and social cognitive theory with an emphasis on observational learning, personal agency, and application to mass media. Included in this chapter is a review of the pertinent literature on social media in adult education and public pedagogy.

Chapter Three explains the research methodology. This chapter includes the rationale for choosing qualitative research as well as the basic interpretive design. It includes information on my background, selection of the participants, data collection and analysis, and the verification procedures which will be used.

Chapter Four will present the findings from the participant interviews. Chapter Five will provide a review of the major issues being studied, followed by a discussion of the findings with respect to the theoretical framework and the current literature on social media in adult education. Implications for practice and further research will be included.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following list includes the definition of the terms as they are used in this research study.

1. **Public Pedagogy** is the informal learning that happens at times unconsciously when an individual is exposed to “extrainstitutional spaces and discourses” (Sandlin, O’Malley, & Burdick, 2011, p. 338) including popular culture
2. **Learning** is, from a constructivist perspective, “the construction of meaning from experience” (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 36).
3. **Mis-education** is harmful, poor, or incorrect education.
4. **Reflection** is the continuous process of interpretation of one’s experiences and comparing the resulting meaning against one’s existing frame of reference which can result in reinforcement of or challenge to the frame of reference (Bandura, 1986; Driscoll, 2005; Mezirow, 1990; Seibert & Daudelin, 1999).

5. **Meaning-making** is, from a constructivist perspective, “a process of constructing meaning” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 291) which serves as the basis for learning.
6. **Social media** platforms are “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (boyd, & Ellison, 2007, p 211).
7. **Algorithms** are made up of computer instructions which are created by programmers to perform a series of steps. Facebook created a complex algorithm called EdgeRank which considers every interaction users perform on the platform in order to determine what content to present to keep users engaged on the platform (Bucher, 2012)
8. **Political news** is information about current political events as expressed on social media. This information can include journalism from large media organizations as well as articles that may contain opinion, bias, or general political messaging.  
  
Participants considered a wide range of political messaging to be political news.

### **Summary**

This chapter has introduced the topics that are the focus of the study and presented a review of the areas that will be discussed in the subsequent chapters. Included here was an overview of the background of the problem, a statement of the purpose of the study as well as the questions that guided the research. In addition, a summary of the theoretical frameworks, a synopsis of relevant literature, definitions of important terms, assumptions upon which the study

was based, as well as a list of strengths and limitations were presented. A detailed analysis of the relevant literature will be presented next in Chapter Two.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Reddit, and YouTube have overtaken television as the primary source of news for much of the U.S. population, according to the Pew Research Center (2017). However, most people are not consciously aware of the learning —of the education and mis-education—that takes place as they engage in their daily life experiences, which includes exposure to many forms of mass media such as social media platforms (Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Tisdell, 2008).

Because social media has become an essential source of news, the purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how social media, as a site of public pedagogy, influences how adults use reflection to learn from political news. The research questions that will guide this study are:

1. What are individuals' perceptions of social media as a site of public pedagogy, and how might those perceptions affect how they learned about political news accessed via social media?
2. How does the social component of social media influence the reflection process and meaning they make from political news?
3. How does the cognitive overload inherent in social media influence individuals' process of reflection and meaning-making from political news?

This chapter will present a comprehensive review of the theoretical framework for this study, in addition to an evaluation of pertinent research regarding the influence of social media as public pedagogy on reflection on political news. There are four primary sections in this chapter, the first of which provides a brief review of political news followed by an overview of

social media platforms and how political news is presented on these platforms in order to situate the study. Following this will be sections that discuss the theoretical perspectives of the study related to social constructivism, social cognitive theory, and public pedagogy. The last sections will present social media as a form of public pedagogy and review findings from relevant empirical research on social media as public pedagogy that influences adult education. This chapter will end with a conclusion that will support the importance of the study and how the study will address the existing gaps in the empirical research to date.

### **The Context of News on Social Media**

Tuchman (1978) described news as a frame, and as, “a window on the world” (p. 1). Individuals in a society learn about their institutions, their leaders, their culture, and the world at large through the window of news. However, the way news is created, disseminated, and discussed has changed drastically. Bennett (2016) observed that in the early 1980s, the news was disseminated via a limited number of outlets that barely differed in their message. Today, the news is offered by a fragmented system that includes numerous television channels, online websites, and social media platforms. The following sections present a more detailed examination of political news and social media which has emerged as the most accessed source of news for the majority of the U.S. population (Pew Research Center, 2018).

#### **Political News**

Political news in the U.S. was envisioned as a significant foundation of democracy. It is through political news that citizens are informed about the political machinations of their government. According to Gans (2010), political journalists support democracy through political news that reports “the actions and decisions of elected officials...political disagreements and conflicts...[defends] democratic values” (p.10), and functions as watchdogs over the government

as a whole. The idea is that an informed populace will enable and encourage people to actively participate in the democratic political process (Gans, 2010). Bode (2016) notes that “informed thinking comes from access and exposure to political information, which then results in political knowledge gains” (p. 25). However, there has long been tension when trying to reconcile how political news organizations could be unbiased and act for the public good when they generate revenue by effectively selling their audience’s attention to advertisers (Bennett, 2016). This tension and the importance of political news on the U.S. democratic structure underscores the importance of not only what individuals learn from political news, but also how they learn from political news.

As various forms of mass media that provide political news have evolved, news outlets have struggled to retain the attention of their viewers and readers through the traditional channels of television, radio, and newspapers. In order to continue to be relevant, most news outlets have embellished their traditional presence with websites and social media feeds, including video, audio, and written content, that is “more accessible, more timely, and more detailed and data-driven than ever before... [by providing] minute-by-minute and second-by-second breaking news” (Nielsen, 2017, pp. 3-4). In these cases, the social media company does not produce the news content; instead, the news is still produced by news publishers and then accessed through the social media platforms (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018).

As a result of the shift to present political news on social media, many people in the U.S. access political news through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and YouTube (Pew Research Center, 2017). This reasonably new mechanism to distribute political news has dramatically changed the interaction among the creators and the publishers and the consumers of political news. Using social media, individuals are now able to immediately

interact with news producers, as well as other consumers of the news (Bennett, 2016). These interactions include liking, sharing, commenting on, or reposting what has been posted as political news.

Given that political news is vital to a democratic society, examining how people learn about politics from the news warrants attention and research. Further, social media platforms are now the source of political news for the majority of people in the U.S. (Pew Research Center, 2018b). Considering how this relatively new medium presents political news and how it impacts learning is important because, as McLuhan (1964) noted, “it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action” (p. 108). Therefore, examined next is the medium of social media as a site to obtain political news.

### **Social Media**

Today, many people are familiar with the term social media and equate it to platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, or Instagram. According to Treem, Dailey, Pierce, and Biffel (2016), various definitions of social media typically include the idea that social media is Internet accessible, provides the ability for users to connect to and interact with content, as well as other users, and acts as the mechanism for users both to create and share content on a particular social media platform.

These platforms include the term “social” in their label, but it can be challenging to discern how these platforms apply the concepts of sociality. According to Fuchs (2017), there are three views of what it means to be social in the context of social media. First, social media is social, because it was created within the social context of humans in a particular society. Second, it is social because the behavior exhibited on these platforms are ascribed meaning by others in society. Third, it is social because there is thought to be cooperation to create shared



content. Another view of the term social as it relates to social media is the process used to develop these platforms. Unlike other software packages that are developed and then shipped to consumers, social media platforms are developed in a way that allows users to interact and the developers to learn how they use the platform. This concept is termed *perpetual beta* – a reference to software that is always in a state of development (boyd, 2009).

While many aspects of social media platforms can be social, including the ability for users to interact, share, and even generate content, many social media users are only consumers of content and refrain from any overt interaction, such as posting comments or liking a particular news post. These passive users, often referred to as lurkers, are still part of the social component of social media as they serve as an audience for content producers (Treem, Dailey, Pierce, & Biffel, 2016). Also, many users of Facebook, the most popular social media platform based on the number of users, use the platform to connect with old friends, classmates, or acquaintances much like paging through an old yearbook (boyd, 2009).

Even though social media platforms may function according to the above-listed concepts of sociality and may claim to be about giving “people the power to build community and bring the world closer together” (Facebook.com, n.d.), their real purpose is to make money by selling advertisements targeted to users. The primary reason why most social media platforms allow users to sign up for free is that the users are, in essence, paying with their personal data and information (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). This concept has given rise to what some have termed the attention economy, where the users’ attention is the commodity being sold (Freishtat & Sandlin, 2010).

Social media platforms use complex algorithms to better understand each user’s preferences in order to present advertisements that align with those preferences. Utilizing these

platforms, users share their preferences for specific content by clicking on links, liking, following, sharing, or commenting. The algorithms, computer instructions created by programmers to perform a series of steps, can range from simple to very complex instructions and process enormous amounts of data (Ananny, 2016). Algorithms used by social media platforms gather information about users, their preferences, affiliations, friends, relatives, and their relatives' and friends' preferences. The algorithms use sophisticated models to generate assumptions about the users, including what they may need and what they might be interested in purchasing, reading, and sharing. With this information, the user is presented with highly-targeted advertisements, news, and other content generated by other users. However, according to Fletcher and Nielsen (2018), most social media users do not have a clear idea about how algorithms serve to select and filter what they see.

Advertisements can only entice people to make a purchase when people view, listen, or watch them. Therefore, social media platforms began to employ algorithms to determine what content would be of interest to the users to keep them focused on that platform. Facebook, the most widely used social media platform (Stastica, 2018), created a complex algorithm, called EdgeRank, which considers every action or interaction users perform on the platform, in order to determine what content to present to keep users engaged on the platform. As a result, what users see on Facebook “depends on a set of inscribed assumptions [made by Facebook and programmed into their algorithms] on what constitutes relevant or newsworthy stories” (Bucher, 2012, p. 1168). Also, within the constant stream of content, news editors will feature or reduce the prominence of individual news stories, based on the most read, most viewed, or most liked stories (Coleman, Anthony, & Morrison, 2009).

Because earning revenue from advertisements is the focus of social media platforms, they need to keep as many users as possible engaged; as advertisers pay based on the number of people who may view or click on their advertisements (Facebook.com, 2018). Therefore, a near constant stream of new content is required to keep the users' attention. In fact, on average, there are 6,000 tweets posted on Twitter per second, and over 74,000 YouTube videos viewed each second (Internet Live Stats, n.d.). As Merriam and Bierema (2014) note about media, this "sheer volume is not only overwhelming but incomprehensible" (p. 199). This overwhelming volume of content on social media can lead to cognitive overload, when the brain's working memory is overloaded with information, which can impede one's ability to process information.

Pentia and Tarafdar (2014) conducted research to investigate how users manage the amount of information found on social media in order to make sense of and formulate new knowledge from political news. In order to facilitate their ability to make sense of political news, the study participants needed to apply various strategies to categorize and prune the amount of information they consume. The cognitive overload that participants experienced could also obstruct their ability to make sense of political news, according to the authors. In a similar vein, Bode (2016) examined the extent to which learning about political information occurs through the use of Facebook and Twitter, two of the most popular social media platforms. In this study, the author focused on learning as quantitatively measured by the recall of words or phrases. Based on this perspective, Bode (2016) notes that the "opportunity for learning from political information to which social media users are exposed is a real one" (p. 42). She continues by stating that "social media may be a new social and cultural force to complicate our understanding of the process of lifelong political learning" (Bode, 2016, p. 45). Learning and meaning-making cannot be measured merely by the recall of data from among an ocean of

content on social media. However, what both of these studies suggest is that some form of political learning does occur from social media and that future research is required to understand better the methods one uses to form knowledge from political content on social media. It is this research imperative that sets the context for this study. Within this context, this study will be conducted using the broad theoretical framework of social constructivism, and, more specifically, social cognitive theory, and public pedagogy, all of which will be discussed in the following section.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Constructivism and Learning**

There are several views of the theory of constructivism related to learning. However, the overarching premise is that, unlike the idea that a person is a subject waiting to be endowed with knowledge from an external source, learning occurs as a person constructs knowledge through social and psychological processes as they attempt to make sense of their experiences. Constructivism is a form of pragmatism and centers around the idea that individuals seek to construct knowledge that will enable them to operate in their everyday lives as well as to participate in the cultural norms of their society (Bentley, 2003). Constructivists also believe that constructed knowledge may not result in what might be considered correct or truthful (Driscoll, 2005). Constructivists recognize that there is no neutral perspective in knowledge construction. All knowledge is constructed in light of existing perceptions, biases, and societal position (Kincheloe, 2005).

In the following section, the concepts of constructivism from three of the primary scholars of constructivist theory, Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky, will be examined. Included is a summary of social constructivism.

## **Foundations of Constructivism**

Constructivism is based on the epistemological theory that individuals construct knowledge as they try to make sense of their experiences in light of their current understandings (Driscoll, 2005; Dron & Anderson, 2015). Because the creation of new knowledge is dependent on what is already known, constructivists believe that individuals must constantly negotiate new meanings that may change their existing understandings. These newly constructed meanings allow individuals to make sense of new experiences and to appropriately adapt their actions and behaviors (Bentley, 2003). The student is at the center of the learning experience in the constructivist perspective, deciding what, when, and how the learning will take place. As such, constructivists consider education as a process of social interaction that occurs during one's daily life (Schrader, 2015).

John Dewey was a follower of pragmatism who believed that any information accepted as knowledge is only considered knowledge as long as it adequately provides a coherent understanding of the world that can serve as a basis for action. In other words, knowledge and, indeed, truth, is only provisional. As one's understanding of the world changes, so too, does their understanding of what is true change.

Dewey believed that all learning happens through the individuals' participation "in the social consciousness of the [human] race" (1982, p. 540). Like others of his day, Dewey was highly influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution. He saw education as an organic connection between the student as a human and their personal experience within their environment and thus placed importance on both the psychological and sociological processes. From a sociological perspective, Dewey (1982) viewed language as the "tool through which one individual comes to share the ideas and feelings of others" (p. 541). As much as Dewey (1938) believed that real

education takes place through experience, he also cautioned that not all experiences should be viewed as equally educative. His concern was that a mis-educative experience would distort or even arrest growth from future experiences. Even though Dewey was considered a constructivist, his views were primarily focused on how an individual learns, rather than how that learner then contributes knowledge as part of the social collective.

Continuing along a similar epistemological understanding as Dewey, Piaget also focused on the interaction of experience to create knowledge. Piaget's (1970) simplistic statement that "in order to know objects, the subject must act upon them" (p. 104), explains his understanding of how the relationships between subjects and objects support knowledge creation. It is through this interaction that learning happens as a result of "construction and qualitative reorganization of knowledge structures" (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000, p. 228). Piaget (1984) explains his idea of intelligence as "beginning with simple actions on the sensorimotor level, actions that then become interiorized and come to be represented symbolically" (p. 168) and can be reversible such as how the action of addition also supports the logic of subtraction. In other words, once one understands the outcome of an action as well as the outcome of the reverse of the action, that result of the action becomes an understanding which can be conveyed externally to others via language or symbols. Through this continued process, one begins to construct knowledge.

Piaget believed that individuals were born with certain reflexes that allowed them to interact with their environment. As the individual developed, they began to construct mental schemas that allowed for adaptation to the environment. The concept of adaptation, the continuous process of self-construction based on created knowledge, is the basis of constructivism. Adaptation occurs through the processes of assimilation and accommodation. As new knowledge is constructed, it may create a discrepancy with existing understandings;

therefore, the individual will need to either adjust their perceptions to assimilate the knowledge or change their cognitive understandings to accommodate the knowledge (Kincheloe, 2005; Lutz & Huitt, 2004). Through the process of adaptation, learners will appropriate the knowledge as their own and begin to alter their identity in response (Kafai, 2006).

Like Piaget, Foucault was a constructivist in that he did not believe that knowledge and truth were out there waiting to be discovered. Instead, he believed that meaning, and therefore, knowledge and truth were constructed through discursive formation and practices. Discourse can be thought of as a way of producing and representing knowledge about a particular topic that is not purely linguistic, but rather, encompasses both language and practice. Individuals create meaning from discourse and, from these meanings, accept certain knowledge as truths. When the same discourse that conveys a particular truth occurs across various cultural texts, such as movies, books, newspapers, discursive formation is the result. These formations are what reinforces specific meanings as truth. Further, because of the power of societal norms, certain discourses can be excluded, and the resultant potential for new truths can be thwarted (Hall, 2013; Payne & Barbera, 2013; Storey, 2013).

In summary, constructivism posits that truth is relative and that knowledge is constructed as a result of the relationship between the knower and that which can be known. However, each knower or learner has different past experiences and is embedded in their social context, both of which influences how they interpret and make meaning from language and experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Social constructivism, advanced by Vygotsky, which will be examined next, seeks to understand the influence of the social context on how knowledge is created.

**Social constructivism.** Another theorist that focused on development and learning topics that also apply to adult education was Vygotsky. While Vygotsky agreed with Piaget that there

are biological influences in the area of cognitive development that impact learning, he extended the concept of constructivism to emphasize that learning is a highly-social process that focuses on the use of language, traditions, symbols, and artifacts (Bentley, 2003; Schrader, 2015).

According to Lutz and Huitt (2004), Vygotsky's view of social constructivism emphasized that social interaction plays an integral part in cognitive development and impacts what is learned as well as how and when learning takes place. In Jaramillo's (1996) review of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, he notes that Vygotsky "posits that social experience shapes the ways of thinking and interpreting the world" (p. 135). This so-called social experience includes learning based on socially-negotiated meaning-making that permeates one's culture. The extension of Piagetian-based constructivism, which focused on active interaction with objects and with others in the learning context to include culture as the primary foundation for how and what is learned, forms the basis for social constructivism (Driscoll, 2005).

Within every culture, meaning is conveyed through communication, which uses socially-agreed upon mechanisms of language and symbols. Bruner (1986) notes that "meaning is what we can agree upon or at least accept as a working basis for seeking agreement about the concepts at hand" (p. 122). Communication enables the process of collaboration and social negotiation to allow individuals to test their understanding of cultural knowledge against others for validation. Even in a social constructivism framework, individuals who may be seen as learning alone use the language, signs, and symbols that were obtained through social interactions. Vygotsky (1962) stated,

Inner speech is not the interior aspect of external speech – it is a function in itself. It still remains speech, i.e., thought connected with words. But while in external speech thought



is embodied with words, in inner speech words die as they bring forth thought. Inner speech is to a large extent thinking in pure meanings. (p. 149)

In this way, the concept of social constructivism is still seen to be at play in learning environments that rely in large part on the use of inner speech, such as reading or viewing news from social media, yelling at televised programs, or imagined conversations with absent people (Barone, Maddux, & Snyder, 1997; Droan & Anderson, 2014; Schrader, 2015).

Because socially-mediated communication underpins social constructivist learning theories, it is important to note how the immediate access to vast amounts of information from a now globally-connected Internet is redefining culture as well as communication methods. As Bandura (2002) observes, it is essential that individual knows how to access, process, and evaluate the flood of information available via the Internet, in order to apply cognitive functions for knowledge construction. Therefore, one can consider that the use of reflection to make meaning from Internet-accessed information is an essential aspect of the knowledge construction and learning process.

**Meaning-making and reflection.** According to Mezirow (1990), “to make meaning means to make sense of an experience” (p. 1). Dewey (1910) explained that the “consequences of a belief upon other beliefs and upon behavior” (p. 5), are so critically important that individuals are driven to consider the rationale behind their beliefs; in other words, to engage in what Dewey termed reflective thinking. When adults employ reflective thought, they, in effect, suspend their judgement (Dewey, 1910). Put differently, as one interprets their experiences through the meaning-making process, one begins to form beliefs about what is true and real. Once constructed, these beliefs guide the individuals’ actions and decision-making processes. Learning, as defined by Mezirow (1990), is the process that encompasses meaning-making and

interpretation of experiences, which then guide action and understanding. Bandura (1986) offers a more detailed explanation of the learning process when he states “learning is largely an information-processing activity in which information about the structure of behavior and environmental events is transformed in symbolic representations that serve as guides for action” (p. 86). Bandura’s concept of symbolic representations embodies the social constructivist framework of learning, which includes the importance of socially-mediated communication, which is conveyed through language, signs, and symbols.

The process of meaning-making and interpretation that results in learning forms one’s frame of reference, which Mezirow (1990) describes as “a set of assumptions that structure the way we interpret our experiences” (p. 1). In other words, as individuals encounter, make meaning of, and interpret experiences, they begin to create their own schema or framework against which all subsequent experiences are interpreted. The development of this schema is greatly influenced by one’s social context and is created starting with the socialization process of childhood (Mezirow, 1990). As Jordi (2011) notes, the meaning-making process is relational, as it includes relations between different elements of one’s consciousness, relations between one’s personal and social selves, and relations between one’s self and others individually and collectively. The continuous process of interpretation of one’s experiences and comparing the resulting meaning against one’s existing frame of reference can result in reinforcement of or challenge to the frame of reference. This process includes the practice of reflection.

Learners assess new meaning, which they interpret from all experiences, whether personally or vicariously experienced, against their existing interpretations of past experiences through the process of reflection. According to Seibert and Daudelin (1999), “reflection involves the mental activity of taking an experience from outside a person, bringing it inside the

mind, filtering it through past experiences, examining it and trying to understand it” (p. xx). Likewise, Driscoll (2005) provides her concept about reflection when she states that “with reflection, learners come to realize how a particular set of assumptions or worldview shapes their knowledge” (p. 401). Mezirow (1990) saw the process of reflection as central to the process of adult learning; a process through which one examines and validates the assumptions used to justify their beliefs and resulting actions. Lastly, specific to the use of reflection from news information, Eveland et al. (2003) describes this process as making “cognitive connections to past experience and prior knowledge, and to derive new implications from news content” (p. 363). All of these scholars appear to agree that it is through the process of reflection that individuals can challenge the belief schemas they have formed as a result of making meaning from their life experiences. Conversely, non-reflective learning can occur when one takes claims of truth for granted and accepts these claims without consideration (Mezirow, 1990).

The use of reflection in the learning process assumes a constructivist approach to learning as one can only benefit from reflection if one assumes the world can be viewed in different ways. In other words, as Von Wright (1992) aptly states, learning with reflection assumes “we can view our conceptions as conceptions which may be compared and ordered (p. 63). Von Wright (1992) builds on this view to include the social context when he suggests that when “trying to understand another person’s point of view forces one to reflect on one’s own” (p. 66). Using this social constructivist basis, reflection can be applied when learning how to solve problems that one faces in their everyday life.

Mezirow (1990) suggests that reflection is also crucial to what he calls “communicative learning,” which entails “understanding the meaning of what others communicate concerning values, ideals, feeling, moral decisions, and such concepts as freedom, justice, love, labor,

autonomy, commitment, and democracy” (p. 8). Through communication, individuals validate their behavior within a society, and with reflection, individuals examine the responses of others to determine if the behavior is accepted and legitimized in the society (Raelin, 2001). Similarly, Kolb (1984) suggests that individuals can apply reflective observation as they examine situations by watching or listening to events. This process of reflection is focused on understanding what others are doing and why they might be doing it.

The emphasis on communication and other’s responses as the modes to convey acceptable behavior can be effective when all participants in the communication are within a single, cohesive society. However, social media platforms provide access to content and communication from numerous, different societies from every part of the Internet-connected globe. Therefore, when examining the meaning-making and reflection process on social media, one needs to consider that the highly disparate use of language, images, and symbols could easily result in misconstrued meanings and subsequent actions.

According to Von Wright (1992), reflection on the actions and intentions of others often precedes another form of reflection: self-reflection. Bandura (1986) asserts that self-reflection “enables people to analyze their experiences and to think about their own thought processes...[to]...judge the adequacy of their thoughts...and change them accordingly” (p. 21). Based on the perspectives of the different scholars mentioned here, then, the process of reflection can be conceptualized as a multi-layered process whereby individuals first reflect on the actions of others – why did they do it – and then self-reflect on their actions – why did I do it (Von Wright, 1992). This dynamic process of evaluation and interpretation of actions and intentions of both others and self, which are embedded in social context, enables the evolution or solidification of one’s frame of reference and worldview.

The process of reflection can be difficult for a researcher to capture and measure. For example, an essential aspect of the reflection process is the timing: when do individuals reflect and is it a conscious act? Raelin (2001) suggests that reflection can occur before, during, or after an experience. The reflection that occurs before an experience is termed by Bandura (1986) as forethought and can also be viewed as planning, as when one is preparing a particular approach to an upcoming situation. When an individual reflects during an experience, they engage with their internal dialog as they inquire and interpret their current experience (Seibert & Daudelin, 1999). Reflection can also happen after an experience occurs when the individual takes a retrospective look back on the experience. Another challenge researchers may face is the ability to capture the process of active reflection, which Seibert and Daudelin (1999) describe as “thinking that occurs during the process of learning” (p. 64). These authors also state that active reflection is an “internal dialogue involving moments of inquiry and interpretation” (Seibert & Daudelin, 1999, p. 75).

These challenges may explain why many studies that seek to evaluate learning from social media have only measured the participants’ ability to recall information as a proxy for the process of reflection (Bode, 2016; Cacciatore et al. 2018; Dimitrova, Shehata, Stromback, & Nord, 2014; Edgerly, Thorson, & Wells, 2018; Park, 2017; Park & Kaye, 2018; Shehata & Stromback, 2018). However, merely measuring one’s ability to recall information does not align with the social constructivist view that learning is the result of making meaning from experiences and reflecting on how that meaning aligns with one’s existing meaning schema. Without reflection learners may accept that the political news they consume valid and truthful. Only focusing on recall as a measure of learning presents a gap in the current literature when seeking to examine how adult learners reflect on political news found on social media.

This social constructivist concept of using reflection in the meaning-making and learning process is also evident in Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD concept supposes that experts can guide novices to develop new skills and ways of thinking as they challenge novices to become aware of and able to consider ideas and concepts beyond their current schemata of interpretation. In this way, more knowledgeable others (MKOs) within a social context allow people to see beyond their existing frame of reference using the process of reflection (Barone, Maddux, & Snyder, 1997). The process of guided-reflection may also be supported through the use of technology. Kori, Pedaste, Leijen, and Maeots (2014) reviewed the literature to determine if there was evidence that technology tools used in formal education settings supported reflection. They evaluated literature that leveraged three types of reflection support: technical tools alone such as blogs, technical tools with predefined reflective questions, and technical tools that included guidance from an expert human. Based on the analysis, the authors found that tools such as blogs, videos, and predefined reflective questions did increase reflection. However, the most significant impact on the use of reflection occurred when the reflection process was guided by a human expert. This concept of an expert guiding a novice aligns to Bandura's social cognitive theory as evidenced by the concepts of observational learning from social models and human agency. One point of difference is that, unlike Vygotsky's conception of an expert, Bandura's social models are not limited to those considered to be experts. A more detailed discussion of this theory and these concepts follows.

### **Social Cognitive Theory**

The basis for social cognitive theory rests in social cognitive psychology as explained by Barone, Maddux, and Snyder (1997), and is informed by two primary tenants. First, the social

context of psychological processes is embedded in all human psychology as humans are, by nature, social creatures. Second, cognitive processes are influenced through one's participation in the social world and are built upon communication and language (Barone, Maddux, & Snyder, 1997). Applying social cognitive psychology, Bandura (1986) formulated a social cognitive theory which suggests that human functioning can be explained through the dynamic and reciprocal interactions between the individual, their behavior, and their environment, including their social context. The interactions between these three important components are the schematic basis for what Bandura (2001) termed *triadic reciprocal causation*.

As Bandura (2005) defines it, social cognitive theory “provides an agentic conceptual framework within which to analyze the determinants and the psychosocial mechanism through which symbolic communication promotes personal and social changes” (p. 76). This theory seeks to explain how individuals learn and develop their values, beliefs, and knowledge, and how these elements drive and control behaviors. Every display of behavior is moderated by the social reactions that are elicited by that behavior which, in turn, influence one's values and beliefs. The social environment provides examples of modeling, persuasion, and opportunities to observe others. The learning that occurs as a result of these social interactions will also moderate behavior and can alter the individuals' values, beliefs, and knowledge. In this way, the three components of the individual, their behavior, and their environment influence, and are influenced by, each other resulting in human learning and construction of knowledge.

According to social cognitive theory, there are two basic modes through which individuals learn; first, by directly experiencing rewards or consequences of their actions in a behavioristic manner, and, second, from social modeling in a constructivist manner. Bandura (2005) states, “that much of what we learn is through the power of social modeling” (p. 10).

Learning through social modeling is not simply blindly copying the behaviors one observes, rather it involves “abstracting the information conveyed by specific exemplars about the structure and the underlying principles governing the behavior” (p. 13). Inherent in the process of learning through social modeling is the idea that learners are agents of their learning and they exhibit self-regulatory and self-reflective cognitive and affective capabilities. These importance tenets of social cognitive theory underscore what Bandura (2001) termed the *agentic perspective* of social cognitive theory.

The fundamental tenet of human agency, which will be introduced here and further explained below, is what Bandura (2001) describes as “the essence of humanness” (p. 1). He also observed that individuals are not mere onlookers of their life experiences; rather, they are agents and producers of their circumstances. “By regulating their motivation and activities, people produce the experiences that form the functional neurobiological substrate of symbolic, social, psychomotor, and other skills” (p. 4). In other words, each determines, via their human agency, not only what events and social models to observe and pay attention to in their social environment, but, also, what meaning they will make from those and how this meaning will be applied to future decision-making and actions.

As noted previously, human agency and observational learning from social models are important concepts in social cognitive theory. Each of these areas will be examined next, along with further discussion regarding how social cognitive theory can be used to explain learning from sources of mass media including social media.

**Human agency.** According to Bandura (2005), human agency indicates that one has intentional influence over the way one functions and one’s life circumstances. The concept of agency incorporates several important features, including intentionality, use of forethought, self-



regulation, and self-examination. It is important to note that, in order to comprise human agency, each of these features must be present as together they combine to form a complex way of being. Further, according to Biesta and Tedder (2007), agency is not an innate characteristic or power that one possesses, instead, it describes the quality of how one engages within their social context at any one moment in time.

In the context of social cognitive theory, intentionality indicates a proactive commitment to perform a future action, which is driven by some form of motivation (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). However, it is important to recognize that future actions that one intends to perform are based on an envisioned expected outcome, which may or may not occur. One reason for this is that “most human pursuits involve other participating agents” (Bandura, 2001, p. 7). In other words, individuals do not operate in a vacuum but are influenced by the actions of others within their shared social context. To better understand possible outcomes, individuals may also use forethought, which is the ability to guide actions based on a current, cognitive representation of the future. Through this process of envisioning outcomes, individuals can self-regulate their behaviors to produce the desired outcome and to avoid undesirable outcomes (Bandura, 2001).

In addition to the use of intention, forethought, and self-regulation to determine one’s actions and behaviors, human agency also infers the application of self-examination and reflection to assess the adequacy of one’s thoughts and actions. In addition to the previous discussion of reflection, Bandura (2001) noted that, when using self-reflection, “individuals address conflicts in motivational inducements and choose to act in favor of one over another” (p. 10). Further, the process of self-examination requires one to reflect on “the soundness of their thoughts and actions, the meaning of their pursuits, and make correction adjustments if necessary” (Bandura, 2005, p. 10). Simply put, individuals reflect on the different motivational

influences and possible outcomes to select which action to take. Then, they will examine the results of those actions and, if necessary, decide to change their actions if the desired outcome was not achieved. Even with the use of self-reflection and self-examination, in order to feel that one can affect changes to their thoughts and actions, they must hold the belief that they can do so. In other words, they must possess self-efficacy.

Merely believing that one can act does not necessarily drive them to perform that action. Instead, self-efficacy, when paired with motivation, enables human agency. For Bandura (2005), motivation is not only “governed by material incentives, but also by social incentives” (p. 20). These social incentives might include obtaining a sense of belonging, such as a member of a specific political group. As it relates to learning from political news, Edgerly, Thorson, and Wells (2018) comment that individuals who are motivated will learn more from political news than those who may be exposed to political news incidentally.

Even though human agency enables individuals to influence and shape their own lives, it does not imply that individuals are not influenced by their social context. Instead, according to Bandura (2005), personal agency “operates within a broad network of sociostructural influences...[in which]...people create social systems to organize, guide, and regulate human activities...[and that]...impose constraints and provide resources and opportunity structures for personal development and functioning” (p. 10). Because individuals operate within a social structure, application of human agency alone will not enable an individual to have complete and direct control over social and institutional practices. As noted previously, each produces and is a product of their social environment, and it is learning from social models and observational learning that creates this reciprocal process.

**Observational learning from social models.** According to Bandura (2005), observational learning is the process where “people pattern their styles of thinking and behaving after the functional ones exemplified by others,” (p. 11) who are considered social models. These models are not necessarily experts or authorities, but are instead, any person whom others choose to use as models. Bandura (1986) also notes that “the capacity to learn by observation enables people to expand their knowledge and skills by information exhibited and authored by others” (p. 47). Recall from earlier sections that making meaning from what one experiences within their social context is the basis for social constructivism. Included in one’s experiences are what one sees, hears, and reads through a range of possible media, in addition to what one experiences directly (Bandura, 2004). Following this same concept, individuals can learn vicariously from observing the actions and resulting consequences from others’ modeled behavior. By observing others, individuals form a schema about behavioral outcomes that is employed when considering future actions (Bandura, 1986). Emotional reactions can also be learned through modeled emotional experiences including learning what to fear, what to hate, and what to like (Bandura, 2004).

Without the ability to learn vicariously from observing social models, it would be almost impossible for an entire society to be enculturated with a common set of values, practices, and language. As Bandura (2004) states, “in observational learning, a single model can transmit new ways of thinking and behaving simultaneously to countless people in widely dispersed locals” (p. 271). Likewise, it would be challenging for each citizen to experience each political event directly. However, they could experience these events vicariously through political news.

The process of observational learning starts by application of human agency to decide where one focuses their attention within a vast array of attention-seeking options. As Bandura

(1986) notes, observing modeled behavior not only informs one's basis for action but it also "draws the observers' attention to the particular objects or environmental settings that others favored" (p. 50). As a result of paying attention to how social models interact with specific objects and how they act within certain environments, individuals learn the consequences of these actions. However, paying attention does not mean simply absorbing what is observed. Instead, Bandura (1986) stresses that paying attention "involves self-directed exploration of the environment and construction of meaningful perceptions from ongoing modeled events" (p. 53). Further, according to Pajares, Prestin, Chen, and Nabi (2009), "observed behaviors could be reproduced only if they are retained in memory, a process influenced by symbolic coding, cognitive organization, rehearsal, and cognitive skills" (p. 6). This way of conceptualizing the act of paying attention implies the use of human agency as an important aspect of one's social constructivist context.

Human agency is not the only factor that determines what social models are available to be observed. Instead, there are numerous social structures that "determine what can readily become known to members of a given social system" (Bandura, 1986, p. 55). Access to certain types of schools, a variety of social settings, or institutions, as well as access to specific Internet content, can significantly inhibit one's ability to observe a variety of social models.

One broad social structure that is a primary source of observational learning is the mass media. In this context, the term mass media is any cultural text that is spread through global communications, generally using some form of technology on a grand scale and with almost instant speed. Television, radio, and social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are examples of mass media in use today.

**Influences of mass media.** Social cognitive theory can be applied to understanding how learning can be affected by mass media, such as social media platforms. Because most people only have direct contact with a small segment of the greater social environment, Bandura (2002) suggests that, “Conceptions of social reality are greatly influenced by vicarious experiences – what they see, hear, and read in the mass media – without direct experiential correctives” (p. 12). Further, according to Bandura (2001), “a vast amount of information about human values, styles of thinking, and behavior patterns are gained from the extensive modeling in the symbolic environment of mass media” (p. 271). In short, mass media leverages the electronic diffusion of social models through which large numbers of individuals can engage in observational learning. Even those not exposed to mass media are influenced by others who have adopted ways of being from mass media. This idea further strengthens and reinforces the effect of observational learning from mass media (Bandura, 2001).

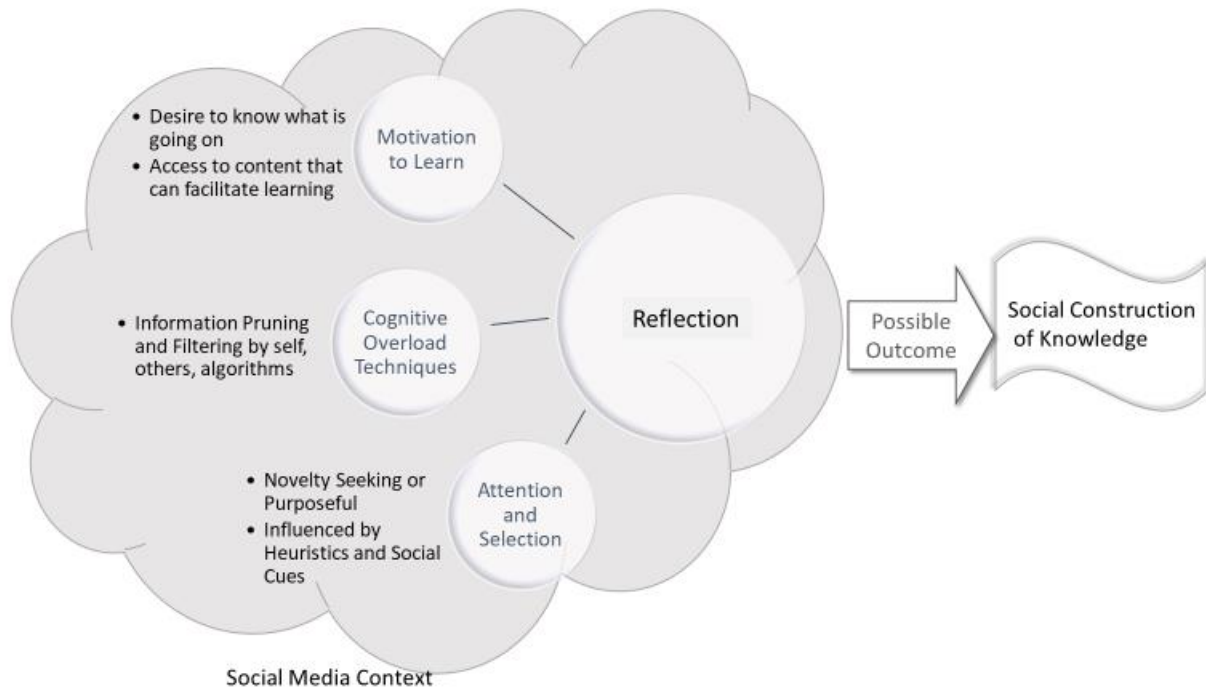
Political news has long been disseminated using mass media, such as newspapers, radio, and television. Unlike other types of content found in mass media, political news has typically been considered credible and authentic. However, within the context of social media, almost any sort of content can be news, no matter the author or whether it was subject to journalistic verification (Goetzman, 2014). Social media platforms are also able to distribute political news with a speed and scale not previously possible using more traditional forms of mass media (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018).

Another way that social media platforms differ from traditional forms of mass media as a source of political news is the ability for users not just to choose a particular source of political news, but to choose the individual news story from a wide variety of sources. In many cases, individuals select news stories based on recommendations from friends or other social media

users' activities that indicate a story is trending or the most widely read (Messing & Westwood, 2014). These new social influences in mass media, along with the sheer amount of content now available, can make it increasingly difficult for individuals to decide where to focus their attention.

Bandura (2002) observed, "Constructing knowledge through internet-based inquiry is a complex task. Knowing how to access, process, and evaluate this glut of information is vital for knowledge construction and cognitive thinking" (p. 5). Determining how to deal with the massive amount of information available on the Internet and social media requires the ability to manage information and cognitive overload. When too much information is received, individuals are unable to pay attention to and process the information (Pentia & Tarafdar, 2014). Therefore, unless individuals can manage the information overload by filtering out what they deem as unimportant, individuals may find it difficult not only to recall the information but to reflect cognitively on the content. Being able to navigate through the constant stream of political news that is available from the mass media of social media platforms requires the need to skim through content. While the use of social and heuristic cues are often used to select content on social media this selection process is often subject to "problems of crowd behavior" (Winter, Metzger, & Flanagan, 2016, p. 673). Therefore, will skimming and selecting content based on certain cues allow one to truly pay attention to and reflect on content in a way that allows the time for knowledge construction and learning? Alternatively, will we, as Carr (2009) prophesizes, "come to rely on computers to mediate our understanding of the world" (p. 97)? As social media becomes more and more accessible using smartphones, it has become engrained in the daily lives of so many people and has become an important site of education and mis-education.

To summarize, Figure 1 offers a simplistic view of ways the elements of social cognitive theory can be applied to understanding how individuals can prepare for reflection on political news from social media. Each of the three elements, motivation, attention, and cognitive overload techniques along with the process of reflection requires the application of human agency.



*Figure 1 Reflection Preparation on Social Media*

With reflection on one's vicarious experiences, one may be able to learn from political news on social media. However, this synthesis of the examination of learning from political news on social media using social cognitive theory does not deeply consider whether social media can be considered an open, public site of learning. Therefore, examining social media as an educational site aligns with the second theoretical framework for this study, public pedagogy, which will be examined next.

## **Public Pedagogy**

Reid (2010) notes that “social media have become important sites of public pedagogy, places where we go to learn, and places where we indirectly learn as we come to understand ourselves in relation to others and to our culture through social media interactions” (p. 194). In order to confirm Reid’s assertion, one must first understand what is meant by public pedagogy. To better understand this term, one must examine what is meant by the term “public” as it relates to public pedagogy.

Many scholars sought to describe the idea of what is “public” as it relates to public pedagogy (Biesta, 2012; Kelly, 2015; Sandlin, Burdick, & Rich, 2016; Sandlin, O’Malley, & Burdick, 2011; Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011). Rather than being related to the concept of ownership, as in public parks or public schools, most agree that the referenced idea of public generally aligns with Habermas’s idea of the public sphere which is “not to be understood as a physical location, but first and foremost as a certain form of interaction” (Biesta, 2010, p. 686). This perspective is reiterated throughout the literature as most scholars consider museums, parks, the Internet and social media, traditional media, such as movies, television, and printed communication, sporting arenas, and even workplaces as examples of areas where public pedagogy exists and can take place. A common idea in the literature is that public is what and where the masses are exposed to within the course of their everyday life which exists outside the traditional institutions of education (Biesta, 2012; Giroux, 2004; Kelly, 2015; Sandlin, Burdick, & Rich, 2016; Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011; Savage, 2010). Further, Dayan (2005) views the idea of publics as “a coherent entity whose nature is collective....characterized by shared sociability, shared identity and some sense of that identity” (p. 46). Using these understandings, one can view the many concepts of public as sites of pedagogy, where informal teaching and



learning, and education and mis-education can take place. Applying a social constructivist lens, it is the exposure to and interaction with public sites that influences learning and the creation of knowledge.

However, Savage (2010) contests that a genuinely public space exists that everyone can access and where everyone's voice can be heard. Instead, he proposes there are multiple and disparate public spaces that are segregated based on socio-economic class. Roberts and Steiner (2010) note that "there is no public without the private citizens who constitute it" (p. 21). In other words, everything that is thought of as public is owned by one or more individuals. Theaters, sports stadiums, museums, mass media outlets, social media platforms, and even so-called public parks, are owned by individuals, corporations, or municipalities who determine what information is presented there and how those spaces can be used. Therefore, the term *public* as it relates to public pedagogy may, in reality, only refer to privately-owned sites that are widely accessible to the general population.

In the following sections, public pedagogy will be defined and discussed. An examination of social media as a site of public pedagogy will follow this discussion.

**Definitions of public pedagogy.** There are a variety of ways that public pedagogy is described or defined in the literature. The term, public pedagogy, was credited to Giroux and "is based on his foundational view that culture can and does operate in pedagogical ways" (Hickey-Moody, Savage, & Windle, 2010, p. 227). Some authors focus on the learning that takes place through popular culture (Giroux, 2004; Hickey-Moody, Savage, & Windle, 2011; Kelly, 2015; Sandlin, Burdick, & Rich, 2016; Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011). While the term popular culture is difficult to define, it can be thought of as texts and practices that are created and consumed to create meaning of culture (Wright & Sandlin, 2009). Other views of public

pedagogy consider how popular culture is used within institutional or formal education programs (Burdick, 2011; Hickey-Moody, Savage, & Windle, 2011; Sandlin, O'Malley, Maudlin, & Sandlin, 2015). Still others view public pedagogy as the creation of a communicative media that is made available publicly (Biesta, 2012; Zorrilla & Tisdell, 2016). Kelly (2015) offers a definition that sees public pedagogy as “an area of research that examines the educative force of media, popular culture and society and the diverse ways in which culture functions as an educative entity” (p. 391). Schubert (2010) uses the term ‘outside curriculum’ to describe public pedagogy, which he views as the educational curriculum of learning that happens within the home, with peer groups, at work, and through the mass media. With these various, and at times conflicting views of public pedagogy within the literature, it can be difficult to grasp what public pedagogy means exactly. Despite the different perspectives, a consistent viewpoint from the literature will be applied to this study: public pedagogy is an analytic lens used to investigate the the learning process that occurs from the education and mis-education as individuals engage in all areas of a society’s culture (Biesta, 2012; Wright, Sandlin, & Clark, 2011).

The meaning of culture which forms the basis for public pedagogy can be challenging to grasp. According to Giroux (2004), culture provides narratives, metaphors, and representations that, “exercise a powerful pedagogical force over how people think about themselves and their relationships to others” (p. 78). Hall (2013) viewed culture as being “concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings – the ‘giving and taking of meaning’ – between the members of a society or group” (p. xviii). Culture, then, is a social phenomenon that is the shared accumulation of all of the knowledge, beliefs, and values expressed as attitudes, behaviors, and emotions conveyed through communication (Guy, 1999; Jarvis, 2008). Culture is replicated many ways including through exposure to cultural texts, such as those presented via

mass media, the creation of meaning based on a shared interpretation of the texts, and subsequently, through interactions with others in the society based on those shared understandings such as through vicarious observation of social models (Bandura, 1986; Hall, 2013).

One of the primary purposes of learning from one's culture is to socialize individuals into the values and ways of being of a particular society. It is through education, both formal and informal, that individuals come to learn the cultural values and norms of the society in which they live (Guy, 1999, Jarvis, 2008). Individuals learn what is viewed as important, valuable, and desirable within the society as well as what is not (Guy, 1999). As Jarvis (2010) notes, "we learn whenever we are conscious, although we are not always aware we are doing so" (p. 63).

Through this informal and often incidental and unrecognized learning, adults ascertain who they should be and how they should act regarding their race, class, gender, and sexuality, among other socially-mediated categories, based on how these identities are presented as 'normal' via the public pedagogy of culture and popular culture in particular (Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011). In other words, individuals use the cues found in their society to learn how others are represented and identified. Individuals can then adopt some or all of these behaviors and attitudes as they continue to develop and evolve their own identity. In this way, informal learning through popular culture is considered public pedagogy as it presents both the ability for learning and teaching (Hayes & Gee, 2010). S99

The emphasis on identity development is central to many studies that seek to examine the influence of public pedagogy. As Wright (2018) notes in her review of popular culture, adult learning, and identity development, "Adults are learning and shaping their worldviews through engagement with and active participation in the collective consciousness around popular culture"

(p. 975). Examples include Nakagawa and Arzubaga's (2014) examination of how social media is used to teach and learn racism; Thornham's (2009) study of how video games are sites of learning about play in adulthood; Andersson and Olson's (2014) analysis of how young adults learn to be politically active from conversations on social media; Wright and Sandlin's (2009) investigation of how women's identity is influenced by a female lead in a popular television show; and Sandlin and Walther's (2009) examination of moral identity formation through an online social movement focused on voluntary simplicity.

As adults are steeped in culture, they are exposed to what Raymond Williams (1967) termed "permanent education," where they learn the mores, values, and norms of society through communication. Today, much of this permanent education is presented via numerous types of media, specifically mass media, in which any cultural text that is spread through global communications, generally using some form of technology on a grand scale, and with almost instant speed. Television, radio, and social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are examples of mass media in use today. Piotrowski and Ruitenbergh (2015) confirm that "media consumption is an important site of study of the processes of political socialization and education" (p. 3). The meanings circulated via various types of mass media "also regulate and organize our conduct and practices – they help to set the rules, norms, and conventions by which social life is ordered" (Hall, 2013, p. xx). In other words, individuals learn how to think, what to believe, and how to act in ways that fit into acceptable cultural norms through the exposure to and subsequent learning from the cultural texts of popular culture (Kellner, 2011; Wright, 2018).

When individuals learn about culture through public pedagogy, they are not guided by an instructor or pedagogue specifically; instead, when viewed through a social constructivist lens,

they undertake their own education by making meaning from their mediated or non-mediated experiences, and then reflecting on the alignment of new experiential meaning to their existing meaning schema (Sandlin, Burdick, & Rich, 2016; Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011; Wright, 2018). This agentic view of learning through public pedagogy, which aligns to social cognitive theory, supports Storey's (2015) view that everyone is an active participant in culture as they choose the objects of their attention, make meaning from interactions and observations, and attribute value or insignificance to those meanings. However, this unguided, informal site of learning focuses less on cognitive rigor than more traditional modes of formal education. Yet, what is learned from one's culture, via mass media, in particular, is viewed as more influential and lasting than what is learned through formal education (Wright & Sandlin, 2017). This imperative speaks to the reasons why adult educators need to understand the process through which individuals learn from today's prevalent forms of mass media.

The political news media is one particular area of importance in today's environment of non-stop news. Piotrowski and Ruitenber (2015) present the concept of public political pedagogy to describe the relationship between political news media and the education that results from political news consumption. The authors suggest that this education is not only aimed at informing the public about political issues, but it also contributes to learning ways to be political. In another related view, Kelly (2011) suggests that learning from in-depth political news stories about specific social policies can be considered public policy pedagogy. These scholars set the stage for leveraging public pedagogy as an analytic lens to examine the education and mis-education stemming from political news, most of which are technology-mediated forms of education.

As in all forms of teaching, both mediated and non-mediated, there is an opportunity to both educate and mis-educate. With this in mind, many public pedagogy scholars lean on Giroux's view that popular culture aims to reproduce a hegemonic worldview (Giroux, 2004; Reid, 2010; Sandlin, Burdick, & Rich, 2016; Sandlin, O'Malley, & Burdick, 2011; Wright, 2018). This concern further emphasizes the need to understand how learners leverage reflection to make meaning within a site of public pedagogy. Often, individuals experience moments of learning that cause interruption or disjuncture, that allows one to consider other ways of being (Ellsworth, 2005; Jarvis, 2010). It is the process of reflection that allows one to question not only one's self, but also the current and historical social circumstances that have influenced one's way of being (Edwards, Ranson, & Strain, 2002). Edwards, Ranson, and Strain (2002) posit that true lifelong learning requires the capacity for sustained reflexivity to engage with what they consider the "dislocations of the contemporary condition" (p. 533). One of today's almost inescapable sites of non-mediated learning that may serve as a site of public pedagogy and that could be viewed as the arbitrator of our contemporary condition is social media.

### **Social Media as Public Pedagogy**

With the advent of the Internet and, subsequently, social media, public spaces have developed that are "new sites of pedagogy marked by a distinctive confluence of new digital and media technologies" (Giroux, 2004, p. 75). Traditional mass media, such as television, movies, and newspapers push communication out to the masses without an immediate way for the public to engage with the content. This one-way communication stream created what was considered "The Daily Us" as the society was brought together through exposure to limited sources of news that all conveyed much of the same information (Bennett, 2016). Today, mass media is marked by two significant changes: convergence and personalization, which not only change what

content is consumed and how or where it is consumed, but also how it is created and who is consuming which content.

The concept of a convergence culture as it relates to both the technology of the media and the resultant cultural changes has been deeply examined by Henry Jenkins (2006). Within this converged culture, passive media consumption is replaced by active participation, and media content is shared and influenced by multiple media platforms (Freishtat & Sandlin, 2010; Giroux, 2004). For example, today, individuals can consume political news from websites, streaming video, or social media platforms. In fact, many news journalists use social media like Twitter trends as the source for news (Bouvier, 2017). This dynamic flow of information between, among, and within media systems has not only changed the relationship individuals have with media, but has also enabled them to become the producers of media (Reid, 2010). Another critical change in mass media is the ability for personalization, which has shifted the “The Daily Us” to “The Daily Me” (Bennett, 2016, p. 1). Now, for example, individuals can decide not just the source of their political news, but which individual story from that news site they will consume. Individuals can choose to follow or like, sometimes called upvoting, to self-select content that will appear in their social media feeds. These interactions, along with viewing histories, also inform algorithms which determine other content that may be of interest to users, thus keeping their attention on the platform to view advertisements.

Political news consumption has also become more personalized and targeted, and no longer serves as a venue for journalists to simply push out what they determine is news. Instead, citizens are now able to monitor and select the news that they believe matters to them and their lives (Piotrowski & Ruitenbergh, 2015). With greater access to alternative sources of news, individuals can be exposed to fringe content that was previously outside of the mainstream

sources of news (Giroux, 2017; Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014; Piotrowski & Ruitenberg, 2015). As Jenkins (2006) notes, these shifts in technological convergence and personalization have changed how culture operates to result in what he terms a “convergence culture” (p. 22).

As the mass media and the ways individuals interact with it change, there is an even greater need to examine the influence of this converged media, especially social media, as a site of public pedagogy. Messing and Westwood (2014) suggest that recognizing social media as a pervasive mode of public pedagogy will require a great deal of research and evaluation as to how and which adults are influenced by what they learn via social media. Interestingly, one can view social media as both a public and private site of pedagogy. Through the private selection of content, individuals make public their preferences. This blurring of the private and the public could be viewed as creating a hybrid site of pedagogy that is not fully public nor entirely private (Reid, 2010; Shao & Wang, 2017).

As noted, one of the most popular social media platforms is Facebook, which was launched in 2004. Because of the enormous growth of this and other social media platforms, scholars began to examine Facebook as a site of public pedagogy within a few years of its launch. In their examination of the platform, Freishtat and Sandlin (2010) concluded that Facebook did serve as a site of public pedagogy and described it as “a cultural space where normative behavior is established and policed diligently” (p. 517). Careless (2015) also views social media as sites where the “sociocultural practice of communicating with others and sharing knowledge” (p. 51) can take place. In examining the habitus of social media, Papacharissi and Easton (2013) note that users “move through online spaces as new and crowded fields of meaning-making” (p. 177). In short, social media is serving as what Fuchs (2017) terms a techno-social system in which distributed communication created by any actor is enabled



through technology both to allow and restrict access to information that individuals consume and from which they create knowledge. These views solidly place social media as a site of public pedagogy.

There is little doubt that mass media as a site of public pedagogy has changed and that social media has been a large part of this change. However, can the learning from social media be examined in the same way as traditional forms of mass media? One crucial difference in social media is the amount of content that is currently available, and that grows exponentially all of the time. As Piotrowski and Ruitenberg (2015) note, “time limitations have been reported to be the single greatest barrier to citizen’s engagement with information about public issues” (p. 9). Therefore, one area of focus in the public pedagogy of social media research is related to understanding the impact of information and cognitive overload.

What is not well examined in the existing literature is the how adult learners reflect on political news when that news is consumed on social media. Eveland, Shah, and Kwak (2003) state that reflecting on political news means, “the use of news information to make cognitive connections to past experience and prior knowledge, and to derive new implications from news content” (p. 363). As these authors confirm, based on a constructivist epistemology, simple recall of words or phrases does not constitute knowledge. Instead, one needs to reflect on the current content in light of past experiences and knowledge to construct new meaning—in other words, to learn. Consequently, there remains an important gap in the literature, which this study will attempt to fill. Further emphasizing the critical nature of this study are the concepts of education and mis-education which will be examined in the following section.

## Education and Mis-Education from Social Media

The concept of mis-education is often traced back to Woodson's (1933) book, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*. His view was that education could be used to control an individual's actions by controlling how that person views themselves. Because curricula used in both formal and informal sites of education, such as social media, are created by those with power, it is only their worldviews that are perpetuated. In regards to the use of social media, Wright and Sandlin (2017) state that "whoever has the power to control information technologies, to a large extent, can also control people's everyday learning" (p. 7). According to Tisdell (2008),

media have the power to both educate, when people critically reflect on the messages they are getting through the media, and to 'mis-educate,' when viewers are passive consumers who don't think much about the images and messages that they are receiving (p. 49).

From these perspectives, the concept of mis-education does not just indicate education about incorrect information, but rather it suggests that education can be used in a way that reinforces a hegemonic social order, especially when the learners fail to reflect on what is being communicated.

Any evaluation of the education and mis-education that results from social media must consider how these platforms are driven to profit from advertisements. Indeed, one can imagine that content that increases user attention on the social media platform would be given preference over content in which few have interest. For this reason, social media content is viewed by some as co-opted by corporations through not only sponsored or suggested content, but also through the use of algorithms that determine what content is presented to which users (Sandvig, 2015). In an examination of the ethics of algorithms, Ananny (2016) defines algorithms as "institutions

because of their power to structure behavior, influence preferences, guide consumption, produce content, signal quality, and sway commodification” (p. 99). Because of the profit-driven motives of social media platforms, many scholars view the algorithm-driven public pedagogy of social media as focused on reproducing hegemonic patterns of rampant consumerism of a commercial, rather than public sphere (Careless, 2015; Giroux, 2004; Freishtat & Sandlin, 2010; Fuchs, 2017; Reid, 2010; Sandvig, 2015; Wright, 2018; Wright & Sandlin, 2017). Instead of seeing content that is popular among social media users, algorithms determine what content will be presented or censored. Social media users believe what they post or share will be seen by their ‘friends,’ but Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, and other platforms leverage human censors to ban content, including artwork and political speech (Sandvig, 2015; Treem, Dailey, Pierce, & Biffl, 2016).

Along with the concerns that algorithms and human censors select which content is presented to users, Kimmons (2014) brought to light an interesting point that social networking sites, such as Facebook or LinkedIn, are not value- or judgment-free zones. Kimmons (2014) also notes that an individual’s actions online may not genuinely indicate their actual thoughts, feelings, or values. For example, liking or sharing a news article does not necessarily mean that the participant agreed with the points in the article nor understood the article or even read the article (Kimmons, 2014). One reason for this is the desire to be viewed by other social media users as someone who would read that type of article (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). The activities of liking and sharing do increase others’ trust in the news article, however, especially when the article was shared by those within one’s immediate group of contacts or friends (Masip, Suau-Martinez, & Ruiz-Caballero, 2018).

Most social networking sites have their own set of expected behaviors when it comes to likes and follows. In some cases, the sites’ algorithms reward participants that follow the

informal rules of the site, which are set by the corporation that owns or manages the site and is often hidden from users' view. For example, those who post, like, or comment more frequently than other users may garner more exposure to more users, thereby being viewed as an influencer or a micro-celebrity (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2016), which can lead to being seen as a trusted source.

In addition to the draw of becoming a micro-celebrity, social media platforms aim to keep their users engaged through the concept of what Papacharissi and Easton (2013) call a "state of permanent novelty" (p. 172). Because of the massive amount of news and other types of content that is readily available to social media users, content creators seek to draw attention by using what is referred to as clickbait, which describes the use of headlines that intrigue or mislead the reader so that they click on the content (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). Misleading or false information, what is often referred to as fake news today, can be very easily shared by users, which can allow false information to be viewed by thousands or even millions of users within minutes (Feldman, 2015). When news and misinformation like fake news circulates widely on social media, other types of media such as television or radio news will pick up and discuss this so-called viral social media content. This process of repetitive messaging can provide misleading views on the majority's sentiments and public opinion (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018)

All of these elements of social media, such as the for-profit motives of consumerism, use of algorithms and censors to determine what is accessible, ambiguity of the meaning of likes and sharing, trust as a function of popularity, focus on gaining attention and views, and the potentially unvetted repetition of false information, are all cause for concern about social media's fertile ground for mis-education. As Feldman (2015) states "the rising use of social media

platforms and the effect of these technologies on learners' knowledge construction and political action is perhaps the largest contemporary issue facing adult education today" (p. 59).

Moreover, reflection is, as Jarvis (1987) observes, "an essential phase in the learning process whereby people consciously explore their experiences in order to lead to a new understanding and, perhaps, a new behavior" (p. 168). All of these points together emphasize the importance of this study for those interested in understanding how social media, as a site of public pedagogy changes how adult learners reflect on political news.

In summary, social media is an increasingly pervasive site of public pedagogy that has the potential to mis-educate adults substantially. In his 1995 essay on the limitations of the Internet, Richard Hoggart posits that wisdom will not be found on the Internet; rather it will be found:

only where men and women sit and think and read, test their thoughts against what others from centuries back right through to the present have thought about the nature of their world and their relationships with others and with themselves (p. 23).

In other words, if social media users can reflect on their experience with political news on social media, they may be able to avoid the oppression of what Jenkins (1987) viewed as the taken-for-grantedness of experience within their socio-cultural milieu and to find Hoggart's view of wisdom.

### **Empirical Research on Social Media in Adult Education**

There is a wealth of literature that has been published, which examines various aspects of social media use as it relates to education and learning. In order to manage the number of empirical studies, this literature review focused on empirical studies that included adult participants who learned from social media within informal settings. Also included were studies

where learning with reflection was examined in a digital environment, which may not have been social media. The majority of the included literature centered around learning from general news content or political news content on social media. A total of 14 empirical studies were selected for inclusion. In this section, a detailed review of the empirical literature will be presented. The literature will be grouped thematically and discussed below.

### **Learning on Social Media**

The empirical studies that examined learning on social media varied on how they measured or determined that learning from political news took place. For example, Velasquez and Quenette (2018) evaluated how the political expression on social media correlated to offline political engagement. Diehl, Weeks and Gil de Zuniga (2016) evaluated how incidental exposure to political news on social media led study participants to reconsider or even change their political views. However, as previously mentioned, most studies only evaluated the participants' ability to recall information (Bode, 2016; Cacciatore et al. 2018; Dimitrova, Shehata, Stromback, & Nord, 2014; Edgerly, Thorson, & Wells, 2018; Lee & Xenos, 2018; Park, 2017; Park & Kaye, 2018; Shehata & Stromback, 2018). These quantitative studies used survey or panel data and required participants to respond to knowledge questions such as multiple-choice questions. Because these studies were survey oriented, the number of participants ranged from 650 adults (Park & Kaye, 2018) to 6,425 participating adults (Cacciatore et al., 2018).

An important attribute of these studies that needs to be considered is the time period when the survey data was collected, as well as the country where the participants resided. These attributes are important as there can be considerable differences in the availability of social media, the political climate of a particular country, and the socially acceptable views of social media as a site for learning from political news. For example, two studies (Park, 2017; Park &

Kaye, 2018) published by the same primary author include participants who lived in South Korea and leveraged survey data collected in May 2014, immediately preceding a major national election. According to Park and Kaye (2018), South Korea's political history is one of "authoritarian regimes and dictators" (p. 8). It was not until the late 1980s that the "internet opened South Korean citizens to unprecedented opportunities for becoming involved in politics" (Park & Kaye, 2018, p. 8). In contrast, two of the studies (Dimitrova, Shehata, Stromback, & Nord, 2014; Shehata, & Stromback, 2018) included participants from Sweden, which has experienced greater political stability as a social democracy (Political Parties in Sweden, n.d.) compared to South Korea. Both studies used panel surveys collected in election years between 2010 and 2014. Shehata and Stromback (2018) also incorporated surveys from nonelection years, between 2014 and 2016. Unlike the media environment in South Korea, Sweden has a strong public broadcasting media environment in which "most of the news that is shared on social media emanates from traditional news media" (Shehata & Stromback, 2018, p. 7). Lastly, four of the studies (Bode, 2016; Cacciatore et al. 2018; Edgerly, Thorson, & Wells, 2018; Lee & Xenos, 2018) included data collected from participants in the U.S. Bode (2016) used data collected in 2011; Cacciatore et al. (2018) in late 2011 and early 2012; Edgerly, Thorson, and Wells (2018) in mid-March of 2016; and Lee and Xenos (2018) compared data collected in both 2012 and 2016.

These differences in the context of these studies may have influenced the findings. For example, according to the Pew Research Center (Anderson & Caumont, 2014; Lu, 2017), just 30% of the U.S. adult population used social media to access news in 2013. However, that number rose to 68% in 2018. Therefore, studies that evaluated data from older surveys or that attempted to compare survey responses from different time periods face some potential

challenges. First, given the low percentage of adults who used social media for news in 2013 and previously, it follows that there was less demand for news on social media and, therefore, less news available on social media allowing more focused attention on the few available political news stories. Conversely, as more users began to access political news on social media, more and more media outlets began to provide more content on these platforms. In addition, the social and political contexts in which the data was gathered could have impacted the number of respondents, who were motivated to pay attention to political news on social media as opposed to focusing on non-political content.

Five of the studies were similarly structured and found the digital or social media being studied either had no impact on the participants' political knowledge or, where comparisons were employed, had reduced the participants' political knowledge compared to users who did not use digital or social media as their source of political news (Cacciatore et al. 2018; Dimitrova, Shehata, Stromback, & Nord, 2014; Edgerly, Thorson & Wells, 2018; Lee & Xenos, 2018; Shehata & Stromback, 2018).

Park (2017) compared four different social media platforms: blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, to determine which platform was associated with changes in participants' political knowledge. This author found that participants who use blogs or Twitter answered more of the multiple-choice knowledge questions correctly compared to other participants.

Bode (2016) asked her participants to review simulated Facebook Newsfeed posts which were all the same except one post. One group of participants received a news story with a video of a recent natural disaster while the other group received a political news story also accompanied by a video. This author found that more people were able to recall information about the political news story than about the natural disaster story.



Park and Kaye (2018) examined the influence that curating news on social media platforms had on the curator's political knowledge. These authors found that participants who curated political news posts were found to have more correct responses to the multiple choice questions used to assess knowledge than non-curators. As the authors observed, this result could potentially be due to the need to more closely examine the content in order to curate political news stories.

The studies discussed above all appear to adopt a cognitivist or information processing viewpoint of learning, which includes an emphasis on memory and recall (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). However, one's recall ability can be impacted by a number of factors including one's age and the level of interest and therefore, attention paid to the particular topic. Further, the studies that focused on Facebook as a specific social media site, all noted that the participants had lower correct response to the knowledge questions (Cacciatore, et al., 2018, Lee & Xenos, 2018; Park 2017). Cacciatore et al. (2018) speculated about the reasons for this difference in scores. First, most Facebook users in their study did not use traditional forms of news, such as television or newspapers in addition to Facebook. Second, because of the variety of content found on Facebook, the users may be distracted from political news content. And, third, the frequent incidental exposure to political news on Facebook can create within the participants the feeling that they are politically informed merely due to the level of exposure.

Each of these reasons further emphasizes the position that measuring recall alone does not accurately and entirely consider social media as a site of public pedagogy where adults may learn through reflection on political news access on social media. As the examination of social cognitive theory which was previously presented suggests, observational learning requires the learner to be motivated in some way such that they apply their attention to what they observe.

Learners autonomously select the object of their attention then use reflection to make meaning from what they observe. However, in each of the studies presented above, the elements of motivation, attention, and reflection were not deeply examined. Instead, the surveys sought to evaluate general social media use and correlate that to correct responses to knowledge questions to gauge the participants' ability to recall information which was broadly considered to equate to learning. This type of evaluation may have made overly optimistic assumptions about the respondent's motivation, attention, use of reflection and the subsequent learning which actually occurred.

### **Observational Learning on Social Media**

As noted previously, observational learning allows individuals to learn vicariously from observing the actions and the resulting consequences from others' experiences and behaviors. Several of the empirical research studies evaluated included an examination of observational learning within the context of social media (Diehl, Weeks, Gil de Zuniga, 2016; Masip, Suau-Martinez, & Ruiz-Caballero, 2018; Messing & Westwood, 2014; Velasquez & Quenette, 2018).

For example, in a study by Velasquez and Quenette (2018), which examined ways that observational learning from social media may change political participation behaviors, the authors found that the participants' behavior was influenced through their interactions with content and other users on social media. This quantitative study surveyed 227 participants who identified as Hispanic and who used either Facebook or Twitter. Included on the survey were questions related to "how many of their social media contacts were engaged in various political behaviors on social media" (Velasquez & Quenette, 2018, p. 9). These survey elements allowed the authors to correlate the participants' own political behaviors to those they observed on social media via their Facebook friends and those they followed on Twitter. Importantly, this study's

findings confirmed that the participants' social media contacts did directly influence their political expression on social media. This suggests that there may be a correlation between observational learning on social media and changes in individuals' behaviors. The behavioral outcome from observational learning aligns with the tenants of social cognitive theory presented earlier. Recognition of the power that social media, as a site of learning, has on human behavior further underscores the importance of additional research into how social media influences adults' learning processes.

One potentially significant flaw in the study by Velasquez and Quenette (2018) was heavily skewed political affiliation of the participants which the authors did note as a limitation. The majority of the participants identified as or leaned Democratic which may have affected the responses as the survey was conducted just before the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. Looking back on the issues that plagued social media during 2016, Bradshaw and Howard (2018) found evidence that junk news, or what is sometimes called fake news, spreads effectively on social media platforms. Further, one's social media contacts can influence the diversity of content to which users are exposed. Therefore, it would have been interesting if Velasquez and Quenette (2018) examined which of the participants' contacts were more influential in behavior change. This may have helped to separate the impact the politically-charged time period had from the impact of observational learning.

In another study, Messing and Westwood (2014) examined how social endorsements, such as likes, shares, or positive comments, influence which news content the study participants selected as compared to a selection of partisan-aligned news. This quantitative study of 739 participants found that "social endorsements fundamentally alter the way news is consumed and shared on the internet" (Messing & Westwood, 2014, p. 1056). Further, the authors found that

participants selected news content on the basis of social endorsements, such as the number of likes, shares, or comments, and not political partisanship.

Masip, Suau-Martinez, and Ruiz-Caballero (2018) conducted a study which evaluated the impact of social networks on the selection of political news. This mixed-methods study leveraged surveys of 6,679 participants in 2015, and focus groups with 106 participants in 2014, all of whom were citizens of Spain. Included in the findings is the influence that incidental exposure, finding news content by merely stumbling upon something that a friend posted or shared, has on the consumption of ideologically dissenting news content. Also, the authors examined the motivation to consume political news on social media, which was primarily due to an interest to better understand current events.

A study conducted by Diehl, Weeks, and Gil de Zuniga (2016) examined how social interactions and incidental exposure to political news on social media led to a reconsideration of one's political views through the use of persuasion. This quantitative study evaluated panel data from U.S. participants, which was gathered during 2014. These authors also found that incidental exposure to news content increased the diversity of partisan political news. Further, they found that "news consumption and [political] persuasion are related within the realm of social media" (p. 1889). In other words, those who used social media to access political news could be persuaded to reconsider their political views. This connection which the authors found reiterates the importance of further research in social media as a site of public pedagogy and learning.

Each of these studies points to the idea that the selection of which news content to consume on social media is mostly socially influenced. The ideas of motivation, attention, and

social persuasion, based on social endorsements or interactions, are also supported by Bandura's (2005) observational learning components of social cognitive theory.

The age of the studies should be considered, as much has changed in both political news media in general and in the way social media works since the data was collected. Further, today much of the content that is displayed for users on social media platforms is determined by technology, not other users. For example, Bradshaw and Howard (2018) notes that Facebook and Twitter leverage complex algorithms to sort, filter, and deliver content to increase the user's engagement on the platform. Other organizations can also launch algorithms that "learn from and mimic real people to manipulate public opinion" (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018, p. 8). In short, what the Messing and Westwood (2014) study did not consider was if the social endorsements were generated by other users or by algorithms. Again, because social media can be a site for observational learning, it is essential to understand how adults use reflection to consider all attributes of the content they are consuming, including who or what may be influencing where they focus their attention on social media platforms.

### **Use of Reflection on Social Media**

Investigating how individuals use reflection on social media or other digital platforms can be very challenging. As Freishtat and Sandlin (2010) state, "implicit aspects of learning [such as reflection] often go unnoticed as they lay beneath the surface of view" (p. 505). The paucity of empirical studies examined here emphasizes how challenging it is to study the process of reflection, an implicit aspect of learning, to confirm that reflection has indeed occurred without influencing it.

A study conducted by Park (2014) and reviewed above, included two survey questions for participants aimed at measuring what the author terms "news reflection" (p. 208). Park

(2014) contends that news reflection is the process of using news to make connections to both past experiences and prior knowledge to develop new assumptions. Based on this quantitative study of 1,157 South Korean adults, Park (2014) concluded that while news reflection can result in increased political learning, discussion of news topics, both online and offline, led to greater gains in political learning. Further, Park (2014) found that “engaging in actual conversation [either online or offline] provides an opportunity for discussants to organize what they have in mind in a coherent manner” (p. 230). However, Park presented additional clarification when he found that “online political talk is more beneficial to the increase of political knowledge than offline political talk” (Park, 2014, p. 230). In this study, the author viewed interpersonal discussion and intrapersonal news reflection as two separate and distinct activities. This view may fail to recognize the social constructivist and social cognitive theories of learning which support the idea that interpersonal or social discussion can actually facilitate the ability for one to reflect. Therefore, Park’s (2014) finding may reinforce the concept that individuals can and do use reflection to learn political news from social media.

While many of the empirical studies discussed previously focused on the context of social media, two studies examined the use of reflection within other types of digital environments (Kiili, 2007; Mason, Ariasi, & Boldrin, 2011). For example, one study focused on the learning that occurs through the use of digital, problem-based games (Kiili, 2007). In this qualitative study of 12 men between the ages of 20 and 30, who were students of the Finnish Turku School of Economics, the author sought to evaluate a model of problem-based gaming to better understand the learning processes leveraged when using this type of educational game. In this study, Kiili (2007) found that “from the learning point of view, the reflection phase seems to be vital” (p. 401). When the teams of game players reflected on the success or failures from each

game session to better understand the strategy used in the game, they were able to reflect on past performances to determine and implement new strategies for future sessions. Even though this study evaluated collaboration within a team of players, Kiili (2007) observed that reflection and the construction of knowledge truly happen within the private world of the individual. Another interesting finding from this study is that the ability to reflect can be impeded when the tempo of the game moves too quickly or when the game is too complex (Kiili, 2007). In other words, one's ability to reflect can be hampered when one is experiencing cognitive overload as a result of being presented with vast amounts of complex information, such as what might be experienced when consuming political news on social media.

This study, while dated and not directly related to social media, was included here as it explored how reflection is used in a digital environment. Kiili (2007), found that reflection is not always something that happens on the conscious level. This finding raises questions about how the author determined that the study participants engaged in reflection if it is not always a conscious process. Unlike other qualitative studies, this author did not include direct quotes gathered from participants' interviews, so it is difficult to discern what elements of the interviews were interpreted as evidence of reflection. Another aspect to consider is that the participant interviews took place a few days after the game playing sessions. Although the time delay may not have been a concern for this particular study, it is possible that the participants' perception about their reflection process may have changed over time. What would have been interesting is if the author conducted interviews both immediately after the gaming session and several days later to determine if or how the participants' description of reflection may have changed over time.

The other empirical study not directly related to social media sought to examine students' reflection processes as they engaged in online information searching related to two controversial topics in order to examine their beliefs about knowledge and knowing (Mason, Ariasi, & Boldrin, 2011). This mixed-methods study examined responses from 64 high school seniors in Italy. The qualitative component was gathered from students who were asked to think aloud while conducting their search. As a result of this research, the authors found that the students most frequently reflected on the credibility of the web sites they viewed, which indicated they focused on their beliefs about knowledge. However, as the authors noted, the students could only express the reflective process they were aware of, not the reflective thoughts that may have been happening subconsciously (Mason, Ariasi, & Boldrin, 2011).

This particular study was of interest as it aimed to examine the reflective process at the moment when the participants were searching and reviewing web pages. Using the thinking-aloud methodology can come with its own issues, however, as what the participants verbalize may not replicate the internal thoughts that might have occurred in a less formal setting. Further, the participants were provided with topics about which they needed to find information. Again, this may have altered their internal reflection process as the topics were not familiar to the participants.

Hocevar, Flanagin, and Metzger (2014) conducted a quantitative study of 3,568 U.S. adults to investigate how participants evaluated the trustworthiness of social media content given the vast amount of information accessible. Seeking to examine the relationship between the participant's beliefs about their ability to perform functions on social media and how the participants evaluated information on social media, the authors leveraged concepts from Bandura's (1986) self-efficacy theory, which is part of the broader social cognitive theory.



These authors found that individuals with higher levels of self-efficacy relating to social media do not take the time to critically evaluate what they find; but rather, use heuristic cues such as endorsement and reputation to minimize the cognitive effort required (Hocevar, Flanagin, & Metzger, 2014). In other words, social media users will “perceive sources to be credible if others do as well and tend to trust sources that are recommended by others” (p. 256), if they feel they are competent on the social media platform.

This study could have been improved in several ways. First, as a quantitative study, all of the participants’ responses to gauge self-efficacy and use of information verification strategies were all self-assessed, which reflected on the participants’ perception of their social media activities and capabilities. Secondly, the study did not seek to understand if there were different levels of trust applied to different types of sources. In other words, did the participants have higher trust in content that was posted by a friend or someone with their direct social network or in content that was highly recommended by others regardless of who posted it? Lastly, this study did not seek to research the process of reflection specifically, but instead examined whether the users evaluated or verified content posted on social media.

In a qualitative study of 112 individuals in the U.S., Pentina and Tarafdar (2014) examined “how social media affects online news consumption” (p. 214). The authors found that participants needed to implement strategies for managing information overload in order to make sense of the news in a way that resulted in knowledge formation. As in the previously discussed study by Hocevar, Flanagin, and Metzger (2014), the present authors also found that their participants leverage heuristic cues to evaluate the trustworthiness and reliability of the news sources when selecting what news content to consume. Further, a similar finding included an information overload management process, whereby the participants focused on content that

provided some sort of social legitimacy based on recommendations, likes, or shares from others on the social media platform.

While these authors recognized the importance of understanding how social media users create knowledge from news consumed on these platforms, they primarily focused on the different techniques participants used to manage the overload of information. However, this stops short of a full examination of how social media serves as a site of learning from political news, as it did not include an evaluation of the process of reflection, which is integral to knowledge creation.

In the final empirical study selected for inclusion, Fletcher and Nielson (2018) conducted a “mixed-method comparative analysis of how people navigate news on social media” (p. 2). Specifically, the authors examined social media users’ attitudes towards the ways that news content is presented to them through either editorial or algorithmic selection. Qualitative data was gathered via focus groups from 56 adults ranging in age from 20 to 54, conducted in Germany, Spain, the U.K., and the U.S. Additional quantitative data was gathered from an online questionnaire from over 50,000 participants in 26 different countries. As a result of the study, the authors concluded that most social media users do not have a clear understanding of how the content on social media platforms is filtered. However, they also found that most people “do not uncritically accept it either, because they are skeptical of all forms” of content filtering processes (p. 2).

While these authors did not examine what is learned or how reflection may or may not be used when consuming news on social media, they brought up an interesting question, or as they describe it, a paradox. They wonder why individuals use social media platforms as a source for accessing news, if they are skeptical about how the platforms work. However, they continue to

suggest that “in complex societies we all rely on many systems and technologies that we use without necessarily understanding or trusting them because they enable and help us in ways we find compelling” (Fletcher & Nielson, 2018, p. 17). This statement leads back to the purpose of this study and the gap that remains in the current literature which is to understand how social media as a site of public pedagogy changes how adult learners reflect on political news. In other words, the literature seems to support the idea that adults do learn and make-meaning from content consumed on social media platforms, in particular from political news content. However, what is not clear is if adults utilize the process of reflection when making-meaning and creating new knowledge from political news on social media, or if it is even possible to reflect when adults need to overcome the information overload of social media.

### **Conclusion**

As social media replaces traditional sources of political news, there is an urgent need to understand how this site of public pedagogy changes how reflection is used as part of the learning process. Both conceptual analysis and empirical research literature confirm that learning from political news on social media platforms does occur. Yet there is a gap in the literature that explores a key component of learning and knowledge construction that occurs through social media – the use of reflection. Instead, the empirical literature focuses on measuring outcomes, such as recall, political activation, or management of cognitive overload as proxies for evaluating the use of reflection in the meaning-making and learning process.

Viewing reflection through the lens of social cognitive theory allows consideration of vicarious and observational learning processes, and how motivation and attention, along with techniques to manage cognitive overload, can support the social construction of knowledge within the social media context. In addition, like any informal setting, social media platforms are

sites of education and mis-education where the power of algorithms and the activities of others set the curricula. This research study, aimed at understanding how learners reflect on political news consumed on social media addressed the current gaps in the literature as well as added to the body of knowledge related to adult education and the learning process changes of political news on social media.

The next chapter, Chapter Three, will present a discussion of the qualitative research method selected for the study which will be followed by a discussion of the position of the researcher, a description of the study, how the participants were selected, along with how data was collected and analyzed. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the strategies that were used to enhance the dependability of the study findings.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how social media, as a site of public pedagogy, influences how adults use reflection to learn from political news. The following research questions were used to frame this study:

1. What are individuals' perceptions of social media as a site of public pedagogy and how might those perceptions affect how they learn about political news accessed via social media?
2. How does the social component of social media influence the reflection process and meaning they make from political news?
3. How does the cognitive overload inherent in social media influence individuals' process of reflection and meaning-making from political news?

I will begin this chapter with a brief description of qualitative research methods and then describe the basic interpretative approach to qualitative research design which I employed for this study. I will then position myself as the researcher in this paradigm and describe the relevance of my experience to my study. Finally, I will describe the study itself, the participants, data collection methods, analysis, and the strategies that were used to enhance the dependability of the findings.

#### **Qualitative Research**

Research is guided by the researcher's beliefs associated to three areas: ontology – the nature of reality, epistemology – the study of knowledge, and methodology – the procedure used to gain knowledge. Together these form a framework or paradigm, which the researcher uses to formulate their approach to the research study. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018), four

paradigms are used as the foundation for qualitative research: positivist/post-positivist, constructivist-interpretive, critical, and feminist/post-structural.

For this particular research study, I leveraged a constructivist-interpretive paradigm. This constructivist view stands in contrast to a positivistic view, which considers humans as passive objects into which knowledge can be placed. The critical paradigm is grounded in the view that there are multiple realities, but one reality is privileged based on power. Using the feminist/post-structural paradigm, researchers seek to deconstruct current understandings of reality, especially as it relates to gender, race, ethnicity, and other dichotomies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The underlying ontology of the constructivist qualitative research paradigm is that there is no single, measurable reality; instead, reality is thought to be constructed by the learner. This view provides weight to the concepts of human agency and the ability of each individual to interpret experiences differently than others (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Further, the epistemology of this paradigm views reality as constructed by individuals as they interpret and make meaning from their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These meanings are negotiated in light of the individuals' interactions with others, as well as with their social and cultural norms (Creswell, 2014). Researchers using qualitative methods seek to understand how individuals make meaning of certain phenomena within a particular context (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

In order to better understand how study participants perceive a specific phenomenon, qualitative researchers strive to gather data using a methodology that Creswell (2014) describes as a natural setting; the "site where participants experience the issue or problem under study" (p. 185). By evaluating participants' lived experiences, qualitative researchers "have tended to place

emphasis and value on the human, interpretative aspects of knowing about the social world and the significance of the investigator's own interpretations and understanding of the phenomenon being studied” (Snape & Spencer, 2003, p. 7). Qualitative research seeks to understand phenomena as is it experienced within a broader social context, which is in contrast to quantitative research methods in which the subject of study is typically evaluated in isolation (Rich & Ginsburg, 1999).

When using qualitative methods, researchers collect data through a variety of means, including, but not limited to, interviews that ask open-ended questions, interpretation of non-verbal communication, examination of documents and artifacts, and observation. Using these data collection methods, the researchers themselves serve as the primary instrument of both data collection and analysis. This allows the researcher to make adjustments during the data collection process to delve deeper into the human experience as needed. However, the researcher’s unique worldview can bias the processes used for both data collection as well as interpretation and analysis. Therefore, it is essential that the researcher reflect on and clarify how their biases might inform the collection and interpretation of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). An essential element of qualitative research requires the researcher to try to understand how the participants make meaning from their experience and how this contributes to the construction of their reality.

Because it is believed that each person constructs meaning through the lens of their own worldview, the findings from qualitative research are not thought of as being generalizable to a broader population. Instead, the qualitative researcher seeks to understand the participants’ particular experience of interest in depth. Using an inductive method to analyze data through the lens of one or more particular theoretical frameworks, the researcher gathers and analyzes data to

determine themes, concepts, or even theories that can be derived from the results. The output of qualitative research includes rich, thick descriptions of participants' experiences and the meaning they made from those experiences (Merriam, 2002).

When determining the most appropriate research methodology for any study, the researcher must select the specific methodology that best aligns to the study's purpose and research questions. I was most interested in understanding the participants' experiences from their individual perspectives as they engage in their daily lives, as opposed to within a controlled setting, as is used with positivist qualitative research. While the emphasis of this study was how participants use social media to reflect on and learn political news, the underlying focus is not to empower or emancipate the participants, which would align with critical qualitative research. Nor was the purpose to deconstruct or understand dichotomies that may exist. Therefore, I have ruled out using a poststructural or feminist approach. Because the interpretive qualitative research methodology aligns well with my purpose, as I was interested in understanding the subjective experience of each study participant to better understand how they meaning-making of and interpret their experiences with political news on social media, I have selected this particular methodology.

### **Background of the Researcher**

As noted previously, the researcher is the primary instrument used in qualitative research to collect, analyze, and interpret the data. Researchers themselves are subject to influences from their own values, beliefs, and worldviews created by their socially-constructed reality, which may then influence the results. Therefore, it is relevant to discuss how my background, biases, and social positionality as the researcher may have shaped this study.



This process of researcher reflexivity is typically defined as “the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-examination...as well as active acknowledgment and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome” (Berger, 2015, p. 220). According to Berger (2015), researchers need to consider their positions relative to their age, gender, race, sexual orientation, personal experiences, values and beliefs, political and ideological stance, and their emotional responses to the study participants. I will also add that, because this study aimed to understand how social media, as a site of public pedagogy, changes how adult learners reflect on political news, I needed to consider my biases related to technological proficiency as social media platforms are accessed using some form of technology such as a computer, tablet, or smartphone.

I have worked in the information technology field since the late 1980s and am often viewed as a technology ‘expert’ by others who are both older and younger than me. However, because I am an “older” student, I am not what is considered a ‘digital native’ or a member of the ‘Google Generation’ – two terms which refer to individuals who were exposed to digital technology for their entire lives such as those born in the mid- to late-1980s (Rowlands et al., 2008). According to Bowne and Wohn (2015) in their published study examining generational differences in social media use, “examining characteristics of people’s networks and the content that they share may be a more useful approach at understanding differences [in social media use] rather than age” (p. 5). These points caused me to wonder if generational differences or differences in proficiency with an understanding of technology impacted my interpretation of the data gathered during the study. Likewise, I can identify with those who use social media as I have been active on several social media platforms for at least ten years and have been using social media as a source of political news for about four years. Therefore, I needed to be aware

that people use social media differently and the way they use it is not necessarily dependent on their age or technological proficiency.

Since I am an educator who primarily teaches adult learners in online environments, I hold particular biases about the teaching and learning processes that are enabled through the use of online platforms. I believe that many online platforms, especially social media, allow little room for the learner to reflect before they are bombarded with yet more information to consume and process. However, going into this study, I wanted to challenge my assumptions about the process of reflection when adults learn from social media. I hoped to learn if the reflection process was happening at some point during or after exposure to social media content, if at all.

Another factor to consider was my own political and ideological stance. I am a self-identified, liberal-leaning Democrat who seeks to be informed about the political news of the day. Throughout the past few years, I have been very interested in how political news is presented on social media, and how the use of language, algorithms, and images are applied in ways that may limit reflection and drive many social media users to adopt increasingly polarized political views. Focusing this study on how adult learners reflect on political news found on social media was an extension of my political interest. My interest and passion following political news could very well have affected both the data gathering and data analysis phases of this study.

To balance my own biases and positionality with that of the study participants, I applied three practical measures. First, I used NVivo12, a qualitative analysis software, to review and code the participants' interviews and to record my feelings about what was said and communicated. By recording my own feelings, I was able to continually and critically reflect on how my feelings affect how I interpreted the data. Next, I used a cyclical process of repeated

review of both the transcriptions and my notes, pushing myself to critically examine my interpretations of the data. Lastly, where appropriate, I sought out peers to review my interpretations to validate that I did not ignore specific themes nor did I project my own biases onto the interpretations (Berger, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Participant Selection**

In order to locate participants who get the majority of their political news from social media, purposeful sampling, which is “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96), was used to select participants. This sampling strategy is frequently used in qualitative research, as the goal is less about finding a sample that represents an entire population, and more about finding a sample of participants that have experience with the specific phenomena being studied. The size of the sample in qualitative research can vary widely as the size is “informed by fitness for purpose” (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2011, p. 161). In general, the size of the participant sample in qualitative research should be large enough to generate rich data, but small enough to prevent data overload for the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007).

Participants for this study of social media must have met the following criteria: (1) be an English-speaking adult between the ages of 25 and 29 who lives in the U.S., (2) currently uses one or more social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Reddit) to read political news; (3) have at least six months of experience using social media; and (4) have shared/re-posted at least one political news item on a social media platform within the previous three months; and (5) not be currently affiliated with a political campaign or activist group or be an employee of a social media company or news organization.

Individuals between the ages of 25 and 29 were selected for two reasons. First, adults aged 25 to 29 are most likely to use social media. According to Perrin and Anderson (2019) at Pew Research, 84% of adults aged 25 to 29 use Facebook, 93% use YouTube, and 57% use Instagram. Second, according to Cilluffo and Fry (2019), millennials between the ages of 24 to 39 will be the second largest group of voters in the 2020 election, representing approximately 27% of the eligible voters. Therefore, they are more likely to read political news and be targeted by political news outlets and campaigns on social media. Thus, individuals between the ages of 25 and 29 represent a population group that was well-aligned to answer this study's research questions.

While it was not critical that the participants have had at least six months' experience with social media, it was important that they be familiar with their social media platform of choice so that the technology itself was not foregrounded in the participant's experience. This criterion draws on Heidegger's "ready-to-hand" concept, where the individual is focusing on the activity of reading political news from a particular medium rather than on the medium itself as objects that enable access to the political news, which, in this case, would be a smartphone device or social media platform (Heidegger, 1927/1973).

Regarding the requirement to have shared or re-posted a political news item, I made the assumption that the user needed to pay some amount of attention to the item prior to sharing/re-posting. The act of paying attention is, according to social cognitive theory, the pre-cursor to reflection (Bandura, 1986). When the act of paying attention is followed by an action, this can indicate that reflection took place (attention—reflection – action). Therefore, making this one of the criteria not only narrowed the potential participants, but it served as a potential marker that attention was followed by action which is an indicator of reflection. There is, however, a risk

that the action of sharing or re-posting is not indicative of reflection. Social media users can post or share content as a way to construct and present a certain type of identity that others can see on social media (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). To assess if the act of sharing was related to reflection, I also focused on key terms used by the participants that may indicate that reflection took place.

Further, participants who had loyalties to political or activist campaigns, social media companies, or news organizations based on their current or past employment status with any of these entities may have brought undue bias to their interviews and were, therefore, excluded from the sample.

There are many different techniques used to purposefully select participants for qualitative research studies. For this study, I sought to obtain participants from my network of contacts by posting a call for participants using all of the social media platforms on which I have an account. These platforms included Facebook, and LinkedIn.

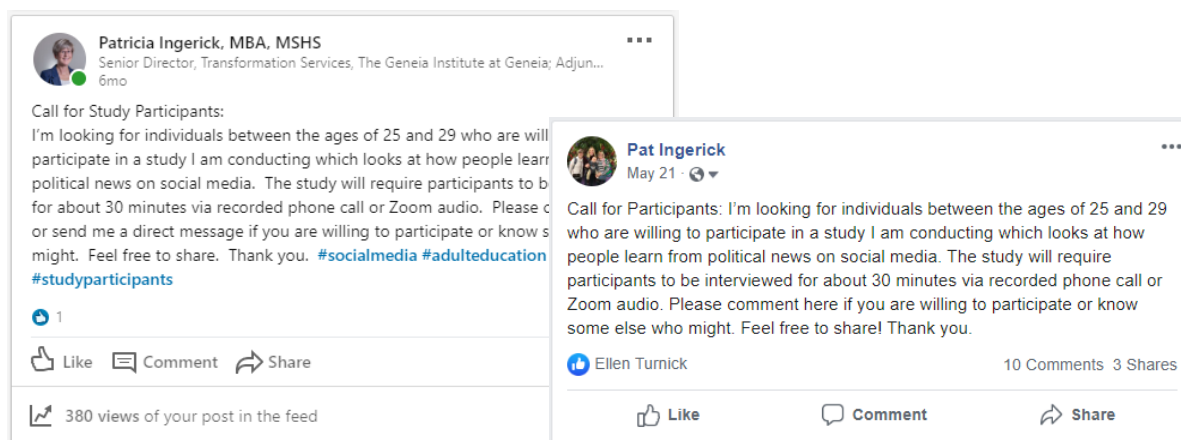


Figure 2. Call for Participants on LinkedIn and Facebook

In addition to these online call for participants, I emailed several colleagues asking them to share my call for participants. From these initial contacts, I received four participants. Then, using snowball sampling, I asked each of the four participants to help to identify additional

potential participants. This method, also known as a chain-referral method, is used when access to potential study participants is a challenge, when potential participants might be suspicious of the goal of the study or of the researcher themselves, or where it is difficult to contact potential participants (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Snowball sampling was well suited for this study as it applied the same process used on social media platforms to build online social networks. Through this process, twenty-two individuals indicated they would be willing to be potential participants for the study.

In order to determine if respondents from the snowball sampling met the study criteria, each respondent completed a short pre-screen survey using Survey Monkey. After evaluating all of the responses from the pre-screening survey, I determined that ten out of the twenty-two respondents met the study criteria. The below table provides a summary of the participants.

Participant	Age	Sex	Level of Education	Political Persuasion
<b>Able</b>	29	Male	JD	Left-Leaning
<b>Brad</b>	27	Male	Masters	Right-Leaning
<b>Ellen</b>	26	Female	Masters	Left-Leaning
<b>Kathy</b>	29	Female	Masters	Left-Leaning
<b>Kara</b>	27	Female	Associates	Unknown
<b>Krystal</b>	25	Female	Bachelors	Left-Leaning
<b>Kenneth</b>	27	Male	Masters	Left-Leaning
<b>Mary</b>	29	Female	PhD	Left-Leaning
<b>Rebecca</b>	25	Female	Masters	Left-Leaning
<b>Valerie</b>	25	Female	Masters	Left-Leaning

*Table 1: Participants*

### **Data Collection Methods**

Creswell (2014) suggests that there are four basic approaches used to collect data for qualitative research: observations, interviews, review of documents, and a review of audio or video materials. Researchers must choose the approach that best aligns with the purpose of their study. In order to gather information that supports understanding of how social media as a site of

public pedagogy changes how adult learners reflect on political news, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were employed.

When used in qualitative research, interviews have a specific purpose and allow the participants to “discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their point of view” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 409). Interviews can also be used when the researcher is interested in an individual’s experience of past events, especially those that cannot be replicated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Depending on the goal of the interview, the interview itself can range from highly-structured to semi-structured to unstructured. A semi-structured interview style allows for the use of open-ended questions and encourages the researcher to adjust and respond to the unique worldview of each respondent and to the direction of a natural conversation. The data collection and analysis process can be more nuanced and complicated when the researcher uses semi-structured or unstructured interview questions, as the actual questions presented in the interview can vary from participant to participant. However, this flexibility can be helpful as the researcher can adapt, expand on, and/or delete interview questions based on participant responses.

Questions were developed based on the analysis of the current literature and the theoretical frameworks upon which the study is based. Below is a sample of the questions that were used for each study participant during the interview:

1. Describe which social media platforms you use, and the reasons you typically use social media.
2. What is your primary purpose for using each of these platforms?
3. What kind of political news comes into your social media feeds?

4. How does the number of likes, shares, or comments affect what political news you view?
5. You indicated that you shared or re-posted a political news story. Please tell me about that story and how you shared it. How did you come across that political story? What were you thinking about in relationship to the story that may have led to your decision to share it?
6. How much time did you spend thinking about the political news story before you shared it?
7. How does that compare to the time you spend thinking about other stories that you did not share?
8. How do you think the political news you see affects what you know about political topics? Why?

Each interview was scheduled based on participant availability. All of the interviews were conducted via Zoom calls which used audio only. All calls were recorded and later transcribed. In addition to the data collected from the participant responses, immediately after each interview, I wrote a short summary of my own thoughts and feelings about each interview. Included in my notes was the date and time of the interview, and suggested revisions to the questions to the questions that I used for the next participant interview. These researcher notes allowed me to reflect back on each interview and to put it into the context of the day. I also leveraged these notes to evaluate the coding process, making sure I was not being overly influenced by any biases I may have about the participants or their experiences. Both the transcribed interview and my researcher notes are part of the data collection which was put into and coded using NVivo 12 Plus for analysis.



## Data Analysis

Data analyzed in qualitative research is not limited to the transcriptions of the interviews conducted with participants. Instead, the researcher's notes, thoughts, and reflections generated both during and after the interview process also become part of the data analyzed as part of the study. Qualitative researchers begin this iterative, interpretative process with the first participant interview. However, due to the amount of rich information gathered from the interview process, researchers need a method to aggregate and focus the data. To accomplish this, I used the constant comparative analysis method, which uses an iterative and inductive process to code and re-code data into categories and themes (Onweugbuzie & Leech, 2007). As the name implies, the purpose of the constant comparative analysis is to constantly compare the categories or themes found during the interpretation and analysis of the data to how the researcher categorized other data. When conflicts occur in how data is categorized, the researcher needs to stop and reflect on both the data and the categorization process to determine how to resolve the conflict. It is possible that a new category or theme may emerge which may require previously categorized data to be analyzed again (Glaser, 2008).

The detailed data gathered in a qualitative research study can often be overwhelming to researchers in the data analysis phase of the study. For that reason, I began my data analysis process immediately after collecting data from the first study participant. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011) suggest the use of progressive focusing, whereby the researcher sifts, sorts, reviews, and reflects upon each set of participant data as it is obtained. After inputting both the participant data as well as my researcher's notes into NVivo, I reviewed the data using progressive focusing to begin to uncover key features and ideas for future consideration. Through this process, I began to add my own notes, summaries, and insights which began to

accumulate into the thick descriptions for which qualitative research is known. Then, using the constant comparative analysis process, I sorted, re-sorted, classified, re-classified, and categorized the data by assigning codes.

As each participant's data and the corresponding researcher notes were analyzed, I took a wide view of the all of the data analyzed to date. This view allowed me to determine if there were inconsistencies in how I had classified the data between participants and identified themes as they emerge. I also decided, based on my analysis to date, how I should adjust the questions I asked subsequent participants.

The overarching process in data analysis in qualitative studies is one of interpretation of the descriptions participants use to communicate their lived experience using the lens of the theoretical framework upon which the study is based. The goal was to find answers to the research questions that supported the purpose of this study. As a result of the interpretative data analysis process described above, themes will emerge from the data. Throughout the data analysis process, discovered themes must be confirmed with the data. Here, instead of looking at the data to find categories or themes, I used the themes I found and tested them against the data, continually confirming that the categories or themes could be substantiated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Once all data that I deemed relevant was placed in a category, and I confirmed the category or theme as noted above, the themes were be presented as the findings of this study.

### **Verification Strategies**

Producing study results that are valid, reliable, and that were obtained ethically is of primary importance to researchers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To confirm results are trustworthy, researchers must employ a variety of strategies to ensure the study has been performed with a high level of rigor. Qualitative researchers, seek to confirm the credibility,

reliability, and transferability to verify the trustworthiness of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). How each of these criteria will be addressed is outlined in the following subsections.

### **Credibility**

Credibility in qualitative research aims to confirm that the research findings intimately portray the participants' perception of the phenomenon. However, each will construct their understanding of reality, so researchers need to apply different techniques to confirm the credibility of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). One of the most frequently used strategies is member checks, in which the researcher shares preliminary findings with key participants in order to confirm that the researcher's interpretation of their experiences is accurate (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Another technique is triangulation, which effectively cross-checks data from two or more sources. Triangulation is frequently used in mixed methods research as data is gathered from both quantitative and qualitative methods. Other techniques include peer-reviews of the findings and confirming data saturation.

The credibility of the study was supported through the use of member checks which also support the reliability of the study. Triangulation using various sources of data was also used. Here, I used interview data collected from study participants with different points of view. Lastly, I determined when I had reached data saturation which occurred when I began to hear subsequent participants repeat the same information.

### **Reliability**

The concept of reliability in qualitative research aims to confirm the extent to which the findings of the study could be replicated in other studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, given the speed with which social media platforms change, and the constructionist view that each person creates their reality, it can be challenging to confirm reliability for qualitative studies and

this study in particular. In qualitative research, reliability is often viewed as consistency where the researcher seeks to have readers agree that, based on the collected data, the results of the study makes sense (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

To enhance the reliability and consistency of a study researchers can use triangulation, the use of multiple data sources, multiple researchers, multiple theoretical perspectives, and multiple methods, to enhance the reliability of the study (Hussein, 2009). Another recommended technique is to use an audit trail to allow others to understand better how the researcher arrived at their findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

One strategy I used to address reliability was to include an audit trail which entailed keeping detailed researcher's notes in NVivo which allowed conclusions and interpretations to be traced back to their source. In addition, I leveraged member checks to confirm my initial findings with some of those who I had interviewed for this study.

### **Transferability**

Transferability focuses on how the research findings can be transferred or applied to other situations. To improve transferability, researchers can employ purposeful sampling that considers maximum variation among participants. This type of sampling "is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many" (Merriam, 2009, p. 224). Therefore, in order to enable others to apply findings from qualitative studies elsewhere, researchers can include "highly descriptive, detailed presentation of the setting and in particular, the findings of the study" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 257). This technique can provide readers of the research study with the clarity needed to determine if and how the findings can be transferred to other settings and situations.

To address transferability, I included detailed descriptions of the context of the study and the study participants as well as the findings of the study using direct quotes from the interviews and comments from field notes. I provided this detailed information in Chapter Four. It is important to note, however, that the participants in this study many have been pre-disposed to the use of reflection largely due to their high levels of education. As a result, the findings of this study may be less transferable to other populations.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

In summary, this chapter provided an overview of the basic interpretative approach to qualitative research design which was used for this study. The constructivist-interpretive paradigm which provides the framework for this study was presented and discussed. I presented how I view myself being positioned as the researcher and described the relevance of my experience to this study. Finally, I described the study itself, the participants, data collection methods, analysis, and the strategies that will be used to enhance the dependability of the findings.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **FINDINGS**

This chapter will provide a brief overview how the most reference social media platforms work, which will be followed by an overview of the research process, an introduction to the participants of the study, and a discussion of the findings of the study.

To better understand the participants comments and findings, this section will summarize the functions of most commonly referenced social media platforms. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram all have similarities in the way they present content to their users. Typically, the user has a feed which is constantly updated with new content. The user can then scroll through their feed to quickly view posted content and, when there is something of interest, the user can stop scrolling to view the content. Sometimes the content is accompanied by a link that provides access to additional content. Social media users on these platforms can then use buttons to quickly show their reaction to the content. On Facebook these reactions include Like, Love, Funny, Sad, Wow, or Angry; on Twitter and Instagram there are only heart or Love indicators, and LinkedIn has a Like indicator. Users also have the option to share or re-tweet the posted content, or they can reply or make comments about the posted content. Generally, the reactions and comments are visible to others who can see the original posted content.

The posted content that is presented in the social media feeds are based on what media outlets, organizations, or individuals the social media user follows. The feeds also include posts shared by followed sources. Entities can also pay to have content show up in targeted social media users' feeds and is usually identified as sponsored content. Lastly, social media platforms use various algorithmic processes to determine what content may be of interest to a particular social media platform which will then be included in their feed.

Reddit is a social media platform that operates a bit differently than was described above. On Reddit, a user follows topic-oriented discussion threads called subreddits. Within these subreddits all of the Reddit users can upvote or downvote other's content and comments. Reddit users have a landing page, called the frontpage where they see all of the most upvoted posts within the subreddits they follow. A unique aspect of Reddit is that it is meant to be a social sharing site and it typically seen as more of a grassroots platform because the users are often anonymous. Further, some aspects of it are explicitly focused on learning as the posts can use indicators including AMA, or ask me anything; TIL, or today I learned; and ELI5, or explain it like I'm five.

Using this overview of the most referenced social media platforms as the context, the purpose of this study, as described previously, was to understand how social media, as a site of public pedagogy, influences how adults use reflection to learn from political news. The data from all of the participants were used in the analysis and identification of the themes to inform the guiding research questions of this study. These questions included:

1. What are individuals' perceptions of social media as a site of public pedagogy, and how might those perceptions affect how they learned about political news accessed via social media?
2. How does the social component of social media influence the reflection process and meaning they make from political news?
3. How does the cognitive overload inherent in social media influence individuals' process of reflection and meaning-making from political news?

To address these research questions, this study employed a basic interpretative qualitative research design, explained in detail in Chapter Three but a brief summary is also provided here.

Ten volunteer participants who met the study criteria participated in this study. Each participant was required to be between the ages of 25 and 29, live in the U.S., use one or more social media platforms to read political news for at least six months, and have shared or re-posted at least one political news items on a social media platform within the previous three months. The participants were interviewed separately via recorded Zoom audio meeting using semi-structured interview questions. The interview questions can be found in the Appendix for reference. The transcribed interviews were then analyzed as described in Chapter Three. The data from the interview transcripts were coded into categories and themes in order to organize the main findings.

The analysis of the data uncovered five major findings related to the research questions. Two main findings were discovered related to the first research question regarding the perception of social media as a site of public pedagogy and how those perceptions may have affected how the participants learned about political news accessed on social media. The first main finding is that social media was perceived to be a site of learning that provides broad access to content that may be unique as well as access to differing viewpoints. The second main finding is that the participants used an abundance of caution when using social media as a site of learning.

The second research question, regarding how the social component of social media influences the participants' reflection process and meaning they made from political news, revealed two main findings. The first main finding is that conflicts on social media can shut down discussions which can limit the reflection process. The second main finding is that when friends or trusted sources post content or comments the participants experience moments of inquiry and reflection.



The third research question, regarding how the cognitive overload inherent in social media influenced the participants' process of reflection and meaning-making from political news also revealed one main finding. This main finding is that cognitive overload on social media can influence reflection.

### **The Participants**

The participants were required to meet the following criteria: between the ages of 25 and 29; use social media to consume political news; and have shared or re-posted a political news items on social media within the previous three months. The selected participants included three men and seven women and ranged in age from 25 to 29. Nine of them had graduate degrees and were employed while the other one was a full-time student. One participant self-identified as a Republican while the others indicated they held more left-leaning political positions. Participants were not requested to disclose their race. Listed below is a brief description of each participant using a pseudonym.

#### **Able**

Able is a 29-year-old, male who works as an attorney in western Pennsylvania. He's an avid social media user who uses Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram. Able had previously used Facebook to connect socially, but since the 2016 election, he has begun to engage more politically on Facebook. He also has recently started to self-monitor his social media use, both as it relates to political news, and for general social use as he recognizes he can become too distracted.

#### **Brad**

Brad is a 27-year-old, male who lives in the central Pennsylvania area. He recently graduated with his Master's degree in Public Administration and works for state government.

Brad uses Facebook and LinkedIn and also uses social media for work-related investigative activities. He indicated that he consumes a great deal of news and information from Facebook.

Brad is very interested in foreign affairs.

### **Ellen**

Ellen is a 26-year-old, female who lives in the New York City area. She is a research assistant for a non-profit organization. While Ellen uses Instagram on a daily basis, she noted that she uses Facebook to read and post about political topics. Ellen also uses Twitter and considers it more of a news platform than a social media platform.

### **Kathy**

Kathy is a 29-year-old, female who works for a maternal health non-profit organization. She graduated from Westminster College in Pennsylvania and recently moved to the western U.S.. Kathy manages the organization's Facebook and Twitter accounts as part of her job, but also uses Twitter, Facebook, and especially Instagram for personal use. While she uses Twitter to stay current on political news, she also finds that she uses Instagram and podcasts to keep up with the news.

### **Kara**

Kara is a 27-year-old, female who lives in the central Pennsylvania area. She currently attends Harrisburg Area Community College for an Associate degree in cardiovascular technology. Kara uses Facebook as her primary social media platform of choice but also uses Snapchat and Instagram. She follows a local NBC affiliate station on Facebook for her primary source of news.

**Krystal**

Krystal is a 25-year-old, female who graduated from Penn State University and now lives in southeastern Pennsylvania. She is a nurse and works at Penn Medicine. Krystal uses Facebook and Instagram and does not have Twitter nor Snapchat accounts. She likes to use news apps from the BBC and *The New York Times* and is a big fan of John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight* program, which she often watches on YouTube. Krystal identifies as politically liberal.

**Kenneth**

Kenneth is a 27-year-old, male who lives in central Pennsylvania area and works in the corrections field. He graduated from Westminster College and Boston University, where he earned a masters in criminal justice. Kenneth, a self-described liberal, uses Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter and is highly active on Reddit. He primarily uses Facebook to consume political news, but also follows a lot of political information on Reddit.

**Mary**

Mary is a 29-year-old, female who is from upstate New York but now lives in western Pennsylvania and is currently a PhD student. As a very heavy social media user, Mary uses Twitter and Facebook primarily. She has two separate Twitter accounts for different purposes: one for following reporters and news, and one she uses as a professional account for following health policy topics.

**Rebecca**

Rebecca is a 25-year-old, female who lives in western Pennsylvania and works for a digital marketing and advertising firm. She graduated with a degree in public relations in journalism with a minor in sociology. While Rebecca uses numerous social media platforms for

her work, she personally uses Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Because she is also a freelance photographer, Rebecca posts a lot of content on Instagram.

### **Valerie**

Valerie is a 25-year-old, female who lives in the central Pennsylvania area. She graduated from Penn State University and now works at the Penn State College of Medicine as a biochemical research assistant. Valerie uses Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit as her primary social media platforms. While she follows political news on social media, she also belongs to Facebook groups that spot wildlife, which is one of her hobbies.

## **Data Display**

### Social Media as a Site of Learning

#### Accessibility to Content and Opinions

Aggregated source for political news

Access to unique content

Access to different opinions

#### Facilitates Discussion

#### Recognition of the Learning

### Using Caution with Social Media

#### Misinformation Impacts

#### Using Trusted Sources

#### Echo Chambers

### Social Interactions and Reflection

#### Friends and Reflection

#### Others and Reflection

### Constraints to Reflection

#### Conflicts on Social Media

#### Shutting Down Discussion

### Impacts of Cognitive Overload

#### Scrolling Through the Feed

#### Grabbing Attention

#### Feeling Overwhelmed

### **Social Media as a Site of Learning**

During the participant interviews and while discussing the participants' use of social media as a site of learning, a topic that came up frequently was the idea that social media provided access to content and opinions which were presented in a way that allowed the participants to see aggregated content from a wide variety of sources. Oftentimes the access to the input and opinion from individuals who would otherwise not be accessible was noted by participants as a beneficial aspect of social media. Those who mentioned this aspect found that these diverse viewpoints often pushed them to think about topics in new and different ways. In addition, some participants noted that social media allowed for content to be accessible to others who would not otherwise have access to that important information. Several participants who were very politically active found the ability to share content with others who would not normally see that particular news story an important value that social media offers.

The concept of accessibility seemed to also describe how social media presents an aggregated view or a starting point to begin to consume political news. Having political news stories from many sources presented in one or two social media platforms was cited as a reason why participants leveraged social media as a source for news. Further, specific aspects of different social media platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, allowed access to features such as focused group discussions, political fund raising capabilities, and the ability to share news privately via text, Facebook Messenger, or email.

Several participants shared their experiences in having online discussions within their social media platforms of choice. For many, the discussions were a way to both engage with friends and to have interactions with those who would not be otherwise accessible to them in their daily lives. These discussions, however, were not always viewed positively as some

participants found that others on social media were less interested in a discussion aimed at an improved understanding of a topic, and more about proving their viewpoint correct.

The ability to privately share news found on social media was mentioned by several participants as a mechanism used to bring the discussion and conversation outside the social media platform. For those participants who preferred to have face to face discussions or online discussions with a limited number of close associates, this affordance was one reason why they were able to engage in discussions on a topic in a perceived safe space. All of these topics are discussed in greater detail below.

### **Accessibility to Content and Opinions**

When participants described their perception of social media as a site of learning, they noted that the way social media platforms function make them a valuable tool to use as a starting point to consume political news. Participants also described how access to unique content and varying opinions on social media increased their perception about social media as a site of learning.

**Aggregated source of political news.** When participants described how they saw social media as a site for learning, one of the first points that was mentioned was that social media served as an aggregation tool. Participants noted that it was much easier to use one or two social media platforms to view political news from many sources, including major media outlets, as well as from individual reporters or people who were in a location or geography where political news was unfolding. Brad stated, “I’m a massive consumer of news and information, and Facebook, I use because it aggregates in one place instead of searching all around different websites. I like different news sources and I see them displayed in front of me.” Mary also commented that “I think I do get most of my news from social media.” Kara, who likes to focus

on local news and weather, follows a local television station on Facebook as her starting point to consume political news. Likewise, this idea that social media offers an aggregated source and starting point for political news and information was echoed by Valerie, who said,

I think it is a good starting point for topics that you like to look --bring them to your attention 'cause I don't really watch the news or read the newspaper or very, very, seldomly I'll actually go to major news sources like home web pages.

Ellen, who uses Twitter more than Facebook, actually views Twitter to be less social media and more of her source for political news. When Kenneth was asked what source he uses the most for political news, he replied that Facebook was his primary source, with Reddit being a close second. Mary, Kathy, Rebecca, and Kenneth also found political news on social media when they received alerts or notifications of breaking news from these platforms.

The participants who used Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram used these platforms to follow a variety of media outlets. When a social media user follows a media outlet, any content that the media outlet publishes will be presented in that user's social media feed. The participants can then also see what other social media users commented about the content when it was posted by the media outlets they followed. Several participants shared the specific media outlets they follow on either Facebook or Instagram. For instance, Kathy follows *The New York Times* and *USA Today*; Brad follows the *BBC*; Kara follows a local NBC-affiliated television station; Valerie follows the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *Buzzfeed*; and Able follows *Politico*. As an example of how participants found political news stories on social media, Rebecca referred to, "an article that I'm pretty sure I saw on Facebook, but it was a New York Times article." Valerie also indicated that she follows media outlets on



Facebook, saying that she would “be more likely to click on something from, like, the *Wall Street Journal* or *The New York Times*, or *The Washington Post* or something like that.”

Following media outlets and seeing the political news content they post is just one source from which the participants can aggregate news on social media. A few of the participants mentioned that they follow individual reporters on social media as a source for political news. Kathy noted she follows reporters from the New York Times as well as individual politicians in her Twitter feed. Mary revealed that she follows “a million reporters” on her Twitter feed.

In a similar fashion, participants who used Twitter also followed certain hashtags, which are words or phrases preceded by a # symbol, so they can receive relevant tweets from other Twitter users who tag their tweets with that hashtag. Ellen followed the #metoo hashtag on Twitter, which is used to post content related to the Me Too movement against sexual harassment and assault. She said, “the women on Twitter and almost every woman that was in my network or that I followed was sending things about #metoo.” By following a certain hashtag, Ellen was able to see an aggregated view of all posted content related to that topic.

While some participants saw value in using social media as an aggregation tool for themselves, the participants also perceived that others also used social media in a similar way and found similar value. Ellen said,

I think there is a lot of value in social media and that lies in the accessibility, and just the fact that, you know, everyone -- it is very rare to find someone who doesn't have any access to or any participation in social media of any kind. Whereas if you thought about it, you know, even 10 years ago people would get their news from the nightly news or a newspaper or something that's not 24/7. So in a way I think it's beneficial because it does allow stories to have a broader reach. Because you know, you could be on Facebook

doing shopping or Facebook connecting with friends, and then I'm sure you'd see something in your feed that is politically motivated and so it's beneficial in that way.

Ellen also saw value as a producer of content to use social media as a mechanism to reach a broad audience when she stated, “the entire reasoning for posting something on Facebook or any social media is the immediate reach it has.” Rebecca, who is focused on refugee activism, uses the opportunity to share news on social media as a means to amplify her message since social media has a wide reach.

Interestingly, there were several participants who did not view social media platforms as a primary source for political news but did say that they had read news they found incidentally when scrolling through their social media feeds. When asked what source Ellen uses to find political news, she said,

I have other sources that I would go to first. But sometimes I'll be scrolling through Twitter and then -- I follow all of those outlets there as well, and then in between something totally frivolous or silly there will be a big political story. And so in that way I would say that I'd be seeking it out but I don't ever consider myself to be going to a social media site for news.

Ellen continued by to emphasize this point when she said, “For myself I would never consider Facebook somewhere that is a news source.” Able shared the same sentiment when he said, “I don't get most of my news from Facebook.” However, Able uses Facebook groups as a closed discussion group where he and his friends can exchange views on political news topics. Along with Ellen and Able, Krystal stated that she does not follow any political news sources or media outlets on social media; however, she noted that she does see political news that her friends share on social media.

In general, the participants viewed social media platforms as a tool where political news from diverse sources can be aggregated for easy consolidated viewing. The participants that did not view social media in this way, still consumed political news via social media even if that news was incidentally found. Next, a review of how participants perceived social media platforms as sites where they could access unique content will be presented.

**Access to unique content.** Social media allowed the participants to access content that some perceived as unique or outside of what is available in from the mainstream media. This perception may also be a result of the participant being able to self-select what sources to follow within their social medial platform. For example, Kathy shared that she can generally find and learn about topics not presented in what she considers typical news sources on the Instagram page that she created for herself. Kathy said,

Instagram seems to be at least, kind of, the page that I've created for myself with people that I follow, is becoming, I would say, is becoming a little bit more newsy. I guess I feel like that's kind of the place where I learn about things that are going on that typically might not be covered by the news.

She also described unique content that she found posted on social media related to the history of mistreatment of indigenous peoples. She said,

A woman on Instagram wrote an article about John Muir who's an outdoorsman who like everyone just thinks is a kind of... they look to as a real end-all be-all. His quotes are on everything. Anyway, it was a piece about John Muir and saying you know he was a really amazing outdoorsman and opened up so many spaces for folks. But also, like, he has a pretty sticky history when it comes to indigenous folks and pushing them off of their land.

In another example, Rebecca recalled a specific news story that she accessed on Facebook which helped her to understand how refugees experience Thanksgiving with their host families. She explained,

This one is less news, but it educated me more than a lot of articles have. It was from a while ago it was from around Thanksgiving. It was a New York Times article . They were -- so I'm in the same realm of politics --I'm really invested in what's happening with refugees and immigrants at the moment . And so an article that I'm pretty sure I saw it on Facebook, but it was New York Times article that was about refugees and how they, um, it was their first Thanksgiving in the United States and how their host families, so to speak. And so this article was about these refugees coming to their host families at Thanksgiving and bringing their food from their home country and just that whole narrative. It was just written so well and it taught me so much because, I mean, obviously coming to a new country is going to be incredibly different.

Along with the examples presented above, the idea of unique content also includes the participants' ability to view political news stories that were presented in near real-time. Again, it was Kathy that observed that reporters are posting streaming video on Instagram in order to present political news as it happens in near real-time. She said,

I think that's also the really interesting thing about Twitter right now and like Instagram right now with stories is like, Caitlyn Dickerson is literally broadcasting what is going on at the border through an Instagram story platform which is so interesting and kind of completely changes the conversation because now you're seeing things happen in real time.

Unlike traditional live news on television, social media users can access the posted video whenever they desire. There is no requirement to record the live feeds. Instead, they are preserved on the social media platform.

Other illustrations of unique content that can be found on social media are news content posted directly from companies or content about specific companies that would not typically appear in traditional news. Kathy noted that “the other day I saw REI was posting about their new pride line, like gay pride, and I was like, wow that's interesting.” She continued and added that she also sees political protests against corporations that have poor workplace practices in her social media feeds.

Political news on social media is further presented in a unique way because social media users can not only read the posted content, but they can also see, in near real-time, how others who viewed that content are reacting to or commenting on it. As a result, the participants’ perception of the political news stories consumed on social media can also be influenced by immediate social commentary, which is generally not available from other forms of news media such as newspaper, television, or radio. For instance, Kara stated,

When I read articles specifically like something that might come from WGAL, I like to read through the comments. And I think a lot of people do this. And I read through the comments to see other peoples’ reaction before I make my own judgment. Because I'm the type of person that sees both sides of the story and when it comes to that type of stuff I like to see everybody else’s reaction or everybody else’s, um, faults or comments on the subject before I work to make my own judgment of the situation, like the situation of the post.

Likewise, Able noted that he would “be more likely to read an article if there was an argument, if my friends were having an argument in the comments section of that article.”

Kenneth also indicated that the social commentary unique to social media platforms is intertwined with what political news content is presented in his social media feeds on Facebook and Reddit. He said,

I know that Facebook influences me in a way because you can see other people’s.... if you click on the main article you can see anybody's comments. Reddit has, you know, up or down. If you downvote a comment, it moves down to the bottom of the page. If you upvote it, it goes to the top. So I do see that's probably a lot more... I don't know, I guess I get a lot more information that way too, because I see what other people's opinions or what they're sharing.

Mary is also someone who appreciates the social commentary found on social media. She shared that she likes “reading through what people have to say about various articles they've posted, things like that.” Like Mary, Kathy noted that she often reads other users’ comments, which help her to reflect. She noted,

I think I will see someone maybe post the clip of say, the debate last night, making comment about that person's response and then there's kind of a conversation below that. I'm not always engaging in that conversation but I'm often reading them and it's kind of stimulating something else.

Kathy’s idea of stimulation describes her perception of social media as a site of learning. She stated that she felt stimulated on social media as a result of others posing different ways to look at a the topic of the post. Kathy stated,

I would say I feel like I'm most stimulated on twitter and Facebook because of the comments -- not the comments but like on twitter for example you know someone might share something and there's always kind of some feedback like, have you ever thought about it this way?

Krystal shared a unique observation about how the online comments seem to, in her view, provide a more accurate assessment of people's true thoughts and opinions, which are in contrast to their thoughts and reactions when they are not on social media. She described it this way,

I'm definitely one of those people, like, oh you should never read the comments, but I'm doing myself. I think it's really telling, you know, there's things that keep happening like in our world that people keep being surprised by. And then sometimes I'll, like, head to the comments on the article and be, like, it's really not that surprising that that's happening because these are the reactions that people have online, and I think that the way they react online is the way that they also react in real life. They might not say those things out loud but they're clearly thinking them, and so I think it's pretty telling.

Together, these participant comments lend insights as to how participants perceive the value of access to unique political news-oriented content presented on social media as it relates to learning. In addition to unique content, the participants described how access to different opinions formed their perception of social media as a site of learning. This aspect will be described next.

**Access to different opinions.** Participants described how access to those with different opinions of various situations contributed to what they now know about those situations. These descriptions supported the participants' perception of social media as a site of learning. For some participants, access to different opinions is gained through Facebook groups. These groups

can allow for open membership or more restricted membership. In general, the purpose of groups is to allow social media users that have something in common to discuss topics of interest. Mary, for example, said, “I’m in several Facebook groups that I really like and I sort of like reading through what people have to say about various articles they’ve posted.” She continued to share how she uses groups when she mentioned that,

There's also places – pages or groups that I'm just, I'm just going to read the stuff that's on there or at least sort of skim through it to see if it is an interesting me. So there's, like, some groups where, like, I will immediately stop to think about what's on the page if it pops up in my feed.

Able also indicated that he uses Facebook groups to gather the opinions of others, when he said, “I have 2 or 3 social media – they’re Facebook Messenger groups with friends that, where we have created to talk about politics.”

In addition to leveraging Facebook Groups to access opinions that might not otherwise be accessible via traditional political news media, Krystal appreciates the ability for her to hear the opinions of those who might be directly impacted by a political topic. She relayed this story.

There was a comment that someone made [on Twitter] -- one of the candidates made last night I think it was about like police brutality. And you know kind of just sharing like, oh they thought that Mayor Pete’s response was spot on but then maybe you get, like, someone might chime in that’s from that community or is from a minority population and can provide a different response or something kind of really nuanced.

Krystal also observed that, in addition to hearing opinions from others on Twitter, she likes “watching other people’s Instagram stories and kind of just connecting with people that I typically wouldn’t be able to connect with.”



Valerie also noted that it seems as if her social media feeds are “trying to connect to people that you wouldn’t necessarily run into in real life”. She continued to explain that she appreciated learning from other’s opinions. She said,

I’m not interested in getting into a political discussion where it would be like, a I’m right and you’re wrong sort of thing. Where it’s more like, what do you think about this? Oh, I don’t necessarily agree with parts of it or something like that. Or if I see something that I don’t really know anything about, but I know someone might have more of an opinion about, I like to hear their thoughts about it.

Valerie then presented a story she found on Facebook about the LGBTQ community, which she subsequently discussed with a friend who is a member of that community. She explained that she wanted to understand the impact of the information presented in the story from someone who had a unique perspective and opinion about the topic, when she stated,

And I was like, what do you think of this, is this something that I might want to consider adopting? And she gave me a big rundown about how it caused a lot of drama with people within the LGBTQ, and so it was nice to have an explanation about that.

The above noted participant comments illustrate the perception of social media as a site of learning that offers access to opinions about a variety of political topics. Some participants leveraged these opinions to gain a more in-depth understanding of the topic. A usual progression to viewing different opinions about political news topics on social media is to engage in discussions, both online and offline. The next section discusses how participants perceived how their use of social media enabled discussions about political news topics.

### **Facilitates Discussion**

During the interviews, the participants described how they use social media to engage in discussions with others. Sometimes these discussions were with smaller groups of online users with either Facebook Groups or Facebook Messenger, which is a Facebook form of direct text message. In an example shared earlier, Able noted that he uses Facebook groups as a forum to discuss politics with friends. On the other hand, Valerie appreciates how social media has become, in her eyes, more of a public forum that enables discussion with a broader audience of social media users. She said,

Or like being able to have, you know, wide discussions about a lot of various things rather than like, you know, texting your friend and being like, Hey here's something for us to talk about. It's [social media] become much more of a public forum I think then like a close social group like it was back when I joined it however many years ago.

Like Valerie, Kathy uses Twitter to engage with political topics like health policy. She shared that she uses “my personal Twitter [account] for similar reasons, honestly, as well as just to take part in the conversation typically around kind of current events and policy as well”. However, Kathy also explained the challenges she perceives when it comes to having an online discussion about political news topics. She found that the ability to have detailed online discussion that may allow room to better understand the nuance of the meaning was difficult. She said,

I think it's harder and harder to carry on those conversations especially on line because of the same thing like you know there's no nuance. It's really hard to find, you know, see people's reactions or dig deeper and the way that we engage in conversation in person often times.... people find themselves thinking, while one person is talking, you're

thinking about what your next answer is. And online that happens even quicker because literally someone can be typing a response and you're typing in your response to it at the same time. There isn't time for that kind of give and take I guess.

Kathy's insights to the challenges of having online discussions may be a reason that other participants preferred using social media as a starting point to facilitate discussions outside of the broader view of a large audience of social media users. Several participants described their preference for sharing political news content that they found on social media via text or direct message to specific friends or family members. For some, this private sharing was a way to have a discussion in what they perceived to be a safer, less public manner and to avoid what Valerie termed "nasty" people. She shared,

People just kind of can be really nasty out of nowhere. So I prefer to have like a more private conversation so I can have kind of a more controlled discussion if that makes sense. Sometimes I share it privately rather than posting it on my page. Like, I would share it, text the link to a friend, or if it's on Facebook I can send the link directly to somebody in messenger and then we can have a discussion about that.

Kara was another participant who also noted her preference for sharing political news stories in a more private way when she stated,

I don't typically like to share publicly any type of news stories. But I do, like, if I see something on Facebook or that someone else had shared and I want to share it. I will usually do it in a private message or I'll copy it and put it in a text message.

When explaining the reasons behind the use of private sharing, some participants noted that they prefer to engage more directly in a face-to-face manner. Participants who preferred this sharing method often pointed out the benefit of having a human connection, which can feel less

obvious when discussions occur online. For example, Ellen said, “when you're face to face you have the opportunity to look someone in the eyes and be emotional or like have human connection where you're not typing over a screen.” Mary found that engaging in online discussions can be exhausting and frustrating, because she feels she is often unable to end the conversation on a positive note which she describes here.

I just find it really exhausting, um, and I also think in person, like, it's easier to walk away if someone is, like, not engaging in good faith whereas, like, if you're online, like, you never want to walk away. Even if someone's engaging in bad faith because, like, you don't want someone who's reading it to come away with a perspective that, you know, doesn't match yours if the other person isn't sort of being totally honest or open.

And I think that can be really frustrating when I have this impulse to, like, at least end on a positive note and, like, that just can't happen sometimes.

As Mary continued her thought, she made an interesting observation about why it can be challenging to have productive discussions about political news topics within social media platforms. She noted that, when online in social media, “you might meet people who have a totally different value system and when you don't have that like-value, it's hard to sort of trust the other person.” The perceptions Mary shared about differences in values and being challenged to trust those engaged in an online discussion seem to influence how she sees social media as a site of learning.

Potentially, in an effort to be engaged with those who share the same values and who are trusted partners in discussions, Kara and Kathy shared experiences where they engaged with family and co-workers to have productive discussions about political news they found on social

media. Kara said that she enjoys having discussions with her coworkers about content she found on Facebook when she stated,

I read something and like I'll ask my coworker did you see this on Facebook because me and my coworker seem to follow the same things and you know then we'll have a conversation about it. And so, like, I can put the social media down and then bring it into my day and actually have a conversation with somebody in the room about it.

Kara also spoke about a situation where she and her father engaged in a face-to-face conversation about a political news story they both read on Facebook. She observed that, while her father has different viewpoints, the discussion lead her to make her “own judgment on the subject that we're talking about.”

Like Kara, Kathy shared an experience she had when she shared a news story with her parents, which resulted in what she called “a pretty good conversation”. Here is how she described that experience:

And so I had shared it on line on my Facebook page and had some kind of commentary. But then sent it to my parents who are both nurses and my mom had like a particular response to them and [we] actually engaged in a pretty good conversation. It was like, oh, I hadn't really thought of that as it pertains to a particular issue with hospitals. So that was an instance where it was, actually, it sparked a pretty good conversation I would say. Definitely, I thought that I needed to kind of step back and thought I hadn't taken in consideration any of those things. So that was an instance where I wouldn't have had the conversation with her had I not shared that article.

The previous sections explored the participants' thoughts and observations about how social media could be perceived as a site of learning, as it offers what the participants viewed as

a starting point for viewing an aggregation of sources of political news and access to both unique content and differing opinions. Further, the participants shared their perceptions about how consuming political news on social media can facilitate both online and offline discussions about those news stories. The following section will further explore what participants said that may indicate they recognized that they were able to learn about political news from social media.

### **Recognition of the Learning**

To confirm that social media is perceived as a site of public pedagogy, it is important that the participants recognized that learning took place. In other words, did their viewpoint change, even slightly, due to their exposure to political news content on social media. Many of the participants shared their perception that social media is a site of learning for themselves and for others. Rebecca confirms that her viewpoint has been shaped by content she consumed on social media when she stated, “I will say that that article taught me a lot and it's really shaped my perception of things a lot when it comes to refugees”.

Krystal was able to contrast her viewpoint about a political candidate with her father’s viewpoint. While she noted that they both accessed the same media outlets for political news, Krystal primarily accesses those media outlets on social media. She observed,

I'm probably doing the same exact thing, repeating whoever else I'm listening to or reading on my Twitter account. My dad doesn't use social media at all and I think that that is really interesting the way that it can completely shape your viewpoint.

Kenneth also seemed to recognize how social media has influenced both what he understands about politics, but has also driven him to take action and become more politically involved. He noted,

I think the past couple years [social media] have definitely influenced my understanding and political participation. Definitely. Because you see not only just understanding and research and reading about it, but also, like, the urge to volunteer and, like, do things out in your community and call, you know, your representatives and donate, you know, attend minor rallies or campaigns. Like, those are stuff that I never was, like, I would do. I might be interested but not to this level and I think that's definitely influenced it.

Further, Kenneth acknowledged that, as a result of reading about political topics on social media, he has questions about his previously-held beliefs, especially in the area of criminal justice reforms. Kenneth said, "I think a lot of that has changed and there's a lot of things I read in criminal justice reforms, I can't really think of anything specific, but it's definitely made me question what I've believed before."

In a previously-described example, Rebecca related that, based on reading a political news article she found on Facebook about how refugees experience their first Thanksgiving in the U.S., the article "taught me a lot and it's really shaped my perception of things a lot when it comes to refugees". Brad, too, acknowledged that he recognized learning that occurred on social media. However, he seemed to suggest that social media was a supplemental site of learning for him, when he stated that social media may "fill in some gaps where I either don't know or don't have a big understanding of something." Additionally, Kathy indicated that she uses Instagram to learn, which she described as the "kind of the place where I learn about things that are going on that typically might not be covered by the news." An example includes what Kathy learned about John Muir's interactions with indigenous peoples which was described earlier.

Based on the above, several participants recognized how social media served as a site of learning that influenced their viewpoints about certain issues. While they appeared to recognize

their own learning, additional comments from these and other participants also indicated that they viewed social media as a source of learning for others. Ellen, for example, stated that “I don't feel comfortable enough sharing things or trying to influence people any type of way if I don't feel confident about something myself.” However, she went on to share an example where she attempted to share information in order to influence another person's view point. She said, “But my process in engaging was to be like, oh maybe if I provide this person with facts and data and evidence, then I will be able to change that person's mind.”

For Ellen, sharing and commenting on social media is also a way to draw others' attention to what she considers important information so that others can potentially learn as well. Ellen said,

Things that I would post about would be like, oh I like this candidate. I want everyone to see that or I think this is an urgent thing that we all should be paying attention to and have a post for that.

Both Kenneth and Krystal shared political content on social media in an effort to potentially clear up or add context to others' perceptions of certain topics. Kenneth said, “The far right, they preach all of the things that Trump really isn't. So that's, I think, that's what was highlighted the most and that's why I want to share it.” Krystal wanted to help others to view the historical figure, John Muir, in a broader context when she shared,

There was one [article] that I think was like particularly controversial that I had shared. It was saying that we could recognize his accomplishments or benefits to the outdoor industry but also recognize that, you know, he [John Muir] also had some black spots on his past that I think it's helpful to recognize.



Like the other participants, Rebecca, seemed to recognize social media as a platform for learning. However, she added a cautious note when she stated that when using social media, “it’s too easy, way, way, way, too easy to just share information that’s going to ultimately harm other people.” The participants’ perceptions that one should use caution when consuming and learning from political news on social media will be explored in the next section.

### **Using Caution with Social Media**

The content on social media can be contributed by any individual or entity that creates a user account on that platform. On these platforms, one can easily find a multitude of accounts owned by corporations, media outlets, associations, and individuals. However, it can be a challenge for those looking to learn from content consumed on social media to validate that these user accounts legitimately represent the assumed entity. Further, even if one is assured that the social media user accounts are legitimate, it can be difficult to evaluate if the content of the post is accurate, true, or correct.

Because it is so easy for just about any entity to post content on social media, posted content could be intentionally misleading, taken out of context, altered, or simply incorrect. Most of the participants perceived these and other similar challenges they considered when consuming political news from social media.

During the interviews with participants, while discussing how their perceptions of social media as a site of learning affected how they learned, a topic that was mentioned frequently was the idea that social media contained a great deal of what they considered to be misinformation. As a result of this perception, participants were, at times, very cautious when considering content from sources that appeared suspect, or where the content itself appeared to be false. The

perception that there is a potential for misinformation to be present in their social media feeds was described by several participants.

Another topic that arose from the participant interviews was the importance of confirming or evaluating both the source and the content of the political news posts found on social media. For most participants, if they perceived that they were not able to trust the source of the information found in their social media feed, they would avoid accessing the content further. For others, the content that was posted by friends or sources they have intentionally followed on the social media platform was perceived as trusted.

The third general topic that was described by participants was the recognition that some of the content in their social media feeds was influenced by the echo chamber effect. This effect essentially means that individuals self-select friends and media outlets that only post content that confirms their already-held viewpoints. Each of these topics, which will be examined below, seemed to indicate that the participants perceived that they needed to be cautious when using social media as a site of learning about political news.

### **Misinformation on Social Media.**

Even though many of the participants described learning or influence on their viewpoints due to the political news they consumed on social media, many participants offered words of caution about the risk of misinformation and, fake or altered content, which can be widely circulated on social media.

Out of all of the participants, Able was the most concerned about the influence that misinformation may have on what individuals may learn from social media. In response to a question about social media algorithms, Able noted that, “the more you understand how social media works, the easier it is for you to avoid getting misinformation from social media.” From

this comment, Able seems to be confirming that misinformation does exist on social media, and it is important that individuals who use social media as a site of learning have some level of understanding about how and why the content is presented to them.

As someone who is very interested in political news found on social media, Able continued to reveal his concern about how content on social media can be presented in ways that support opposing viewpoints. When describing his difficulty in trying to discern what he considers fact, Able said,

I can't tell when there are 50 percent of stories saying one thing and 50 percent of the stories say another thing and, the fact of the matter is, there is a fact here. Something happened. Like, facts still exist.

Sharing another note of caution about how social media stories can be used to propagate misinformation, Able notes, "And I think that people will often times share them without paying any attention at all to what was actually in the article." He continued to describe his assessment that social media "started out harmless, and now it is a clear and present danger that if you aren't careful you will become just misdirected."

Ellen also indicated that misinformation or fake information is a concern as it is possible that others will believe it. She said, "I've seen things that people have shared in my feed that are like entirely fake and not true and made me be like, what? Like, how could anyone believe that?" Like Ellen, Valerie stated her concern about misinformation on social media. She noted, "I think with social media there is so much like, misinformation that can easily get spread around. Because it's so easy to just post anything with little to no moderation or fact checking." Mary's comment presents her straightforward opinion about misinformation that may be found on social media. She said, "I see a lot of headlines on my Facebook groups that are like, we solved cancer

and it's from, like, I love scienceandhealth.com. Like, OK, that's not real." When asked how she deals with the risk of misinformation, Mary stated that she would evaluate the source of the content. She noted she would "check the source -- I will before I click on something. I will be like, this website is trash and I just won't click on it."

Rebecca took a longer view when she discussed how information, specifically altered images, can remain accessible on social media via the Internet for an extremely long time. She explains her concerns when she stated,

I don't think anyone's fully above manipulating information that way. It's been done in some shape or form for as long as people could share information. Truly and there's no good way to stop it 'cause once it's [altered images] on there, like, even if you deleted off the initial platform that it was on, it will have been shared and screen shotted and disseminated in so many different ways. But it's still going to be out there, right? And as long as I could foreseeably see human existence being, I mean, I don't know, so for the unforeseen future it will exist on the Internet. And it's dangerous because it will cyclically continue to pop up. So not good for anybody in the long run.

Like Mary, Rebecca performs some validation of the content prior to forming an opinion about the political news content she sees posted on social media. However, she recognizes that many other social media users do not seek to validate the credibility of the source or content on social media.

These comments from the interviews underscore how the participants' perception of misinformation on social media affects how they interact with the political news content posted on social media. One way participants sought to avoid consuming misinformation on social

media was to use caution when selecting the sources that posted content. In the next section, a review of the participants' remarks about the use of trusted sources will be presented.

### **Using Trusted Sources**

Trusted sources appeared to have a great deal of influence over what sources and content were selected by the participants to view or consider when they were reviewing political news posts in their social media feeds. For example, Brad trusts the content that the BBC posts on social media so he will be more likely to review their content instead of content from other similar news sources. Brad said, "I'll take a look at who the source is. Say the BBC published something, I'm probably more likely to look at that than say one of the big 3 [American news] outlets". Like Brad, both Krystal and Able commented that they would be more likely to view content that was posted by a friend.

Another tactic used by some participants to evaluate political news stories on social media is to triangulate, or confirm the content with another, trusted source. Able explains how he used this process when he said,

Sometimes I'll see the reference to a story on social media and then look it up somewhere that I trust. If I'm going to read things -- if there's something in there that kind of catches my eye and I'm like, I don't know, I'll go to the other platform and other organizations to see what other research I can do to, really for my opinion, before I jump to any conclusions.

Like Able, Ellen also described her process of evaluating the source of content she consumes on social media. She noted that this is the first step she takes to determine if she considers the content credible enough to consider. Ellen said,

I would vet it. Like, that would be my first stand. Like my first gatekeeping action would be the person and be, like, based off their post, before it's just something that I would generally considered to be true or generally considered to be false or something of that nature.

Continuing in that same vein, Kenneth also conducts a process to evaluate the content presented in social media so that his emotional response does not cloud his ability to come to a fact-based conclusion. He states,

I see links and I, like, I read what other people have shared but I try to, you know, check the link and read the actual link rather than people's opinion. I try to fact check and not just immediately run with my emotions on a situation because I don't want that to happen. I try to keep that from happening.

As it relates to taking the time to reflect on the content and to perform some validation or fact checking, Valerie notes that one reason she performs this process is because the nature of social media allows anyone to post content even if they are not a credible source or if the content itself is validated. Valerie said,

I'll click on BuzzFeed things sometimes but I if it's something that I actually care enough to click on I'll probably, you know, search Google as well to see more 'cause pretty much anybody can write and post on BuzzFeed, so it's almost like Wikipedia. It's a good starting place but you still should probably go out and do your own – do more research to learn about something 'cause it's so easy to just post anything with little to no moderation or fact checking.

Valerie tends to validate content from other sources outside of social media especially when she has been thinking about political news content for a time. Valerie said,

If there is something that does stick out [to me] and I find myself coming back to it, I will seek out more information probably outside of social media if I am compelled to seek it out myself.

Rebecca and Valerie both said that when they read or see political news content on social media and before they finalize their thoughts about the piece, they will conduct reviews using different social media platforms and websites. Rebecca explains it this way,

I do a lot of fact checking before I post. And even if I'm not going to post, if I'm going to read things -- if there's something in there that kind of catches my eye and I'm like, I don't know. I'll go to the other platform and other organizations to see what other research I can do to, really for my opinion, before I jump to any conclusions.

As Rebecca explained, and as was previously discussed, she read an article she found on social media about how refugees celebrate Thanksgiving with their host family. From the article, she learned the details behind this event and how it did not live up to her previous understanding.

Based on the new information she learned, she began to review more information. Rebecca said,

I worked with refugees before but I didn't know about the host family part or about the fact that even though it's mandated it often doesn't follow through the way that maybe was initially intended. And so that threw me into a whole other round of research.

When asking Rebecca about her thoughts on altered images that could find her way into her social media feed, she indicated that the risk of seeing these images drives her to closely review content on social media prior to forming an opinion or sharing other information on social media. Rebecca stated, "I tend to do research before I share anything to make sure that I'm not disseminating information that's inaccurate or doesn't truly echo what I believe per se."

Many participants relied on content posted from known sources, like trusted media outlets or from friends. However, some participants tended to increase their trusted sources for content by including new source that were recommended by a source that was already trusted. For example, Kathy shared an instance where she followed a trusted source of content and when that source suggested other sources, she followed those as well. This snowball effect can allow the participants to expand the content they see to avoid creating an echo chamber, which will be described in the next section. Kathy stated,

A little while ago I can't remember, someone like what I think was reporter, Nick Kristof, from *The New York Times* -- he posted here is the top 10 conservatives that I love to follow on Twitter. Like, these are people that I trust. They're providing unopinionated news sources and really great takes on whatever issues. I've noticed that, like, something like, why am I following this person? And then I'll remember, oh I follow all those accounts that Nick Kristof told me to.

In another example, Kathy noted that she began to follow a particular reporter after hearing about her reporting on a podcast. This is an example where trusted sources from one medium, in this case a podcast called *The Daily*, can be followed in another medium, such as the social media platform, Instagram. Kathy explains,

I heard her voice on the podcast and now I follow her on social media and now she's the person I look to when I am-- like there's so much going on right now at the border, and what is fact and what is not and what is hyperbole. And she is a person that I will go to because she's there and I value her opinion, or you know I value her reporting.

By evaluating the source of political new content and using a process of triangulation to validate their credibility, participants confirmed that they exhibited a cautious attitude when



learning on social media. Another topic revealed through the participants' interviews that indicated a level of caution is applied to learning on social media is the recognition that echo chambers can occur within one's social media feed. This is explored in greater detail below.

### **Echo Chambers**

An echo chamber is the term for the effect that can be created when one participates in a social media environment, wherein the only content presented is that which confirms or amplifies the participant's current beliefs and viewpoints. These echo chambers can limit the social media user's ability to consider other's opinions. While this effect does not necessarily limit one's ability to learn, it can restrict one's ability to expand one's world view beyond that which one already holds. For this reason, the participants perceived that recognition of the echo chamber effect can influence how they learned on social media.

Some participants feel that they have inadvertently created or contributed to their own social media echo chamber. Others indicated that they suspected that the algorithms used in social media to determine what content to present in one's social media feed is to blame for the creation of an echo chamber. Able noted that the echo chamber can also be reinforced because social media users "tend to share articles that are worded in a way that supports their view structure."

While Kenneth believes he has experienced the echo chamber effect in his social media feeds, largely due to those who he has friended or followed, he is also aware that this effect may be influencing the political news content he sees on social media. He said, "as for friends, you know, I definitely will interact with friends but I'm also aware of my own little political bubble because of my friends."

Ellen seemed to emphatically state that she preferred to have her social media feeds only echo her own viewpoints. She explained that she will purposefully cull those she has friended or followed in an effort to create a social media feed that supports her personal viewpoint. She said,

Why would I want to see things that I don't like in my Facebook feed, you know? So, like, when people are posting things that I don't agree with, like, alright well I don't need that, I don't need that, I don't need that, to the point where I am definitely in the echo chamber of my own beliefs. Because all of the people that I surround myself with, or I've chosen to surround myself with, in these arenas. So I only want to see things that make me happy. Yeah, I'm definitely in the echo chamber. Like, I identify as very left leaning politically and, you know, so if I see people who I haven't spoken to in 10 years posting shit I don't agree with, I'm just like yeah, I don't care about this. Goodbye!

Kathy, on the other hand, appears to have taken conscious steps to avoid the creation of a social media echo chamber. She purposefully included sources in her feeds that hold views from another side of the political spectrum. As a result, she acknowledged the benefits of hearing a diversity of opinions. Kathy said,

Like, here's ten conservatives that if you want to not have an echo chamber on your account here's who you should follow. And I think a few other people did that I think it was like after 2016 election where we all kind of realized that we had these really curious social media accounts that clearly were not reflecting what was going on in the real world. And so a few other people have done that and I think that that's pretty beneficial because it allows me to at least hear from folks that I typically wouldn't hear from.

Rebecca warns of the dangers of social media algorithms that only present content in one's social media feed that supports the existing viewpoint. She is concerned that other social media users will not see content that challenges some information as a result of the algorithmic echo chamber. Rebecca states,

As much as my voice might be heard if I say that's not real, due to the algorithm, people that really need to see that someone is saying 'this isn't real' aren't going to see that because that's not what they're interacting with, that's not what they want to see, and that's not what their feed is going to give them.

While many participants voiced a need for caution when consuming political news from social media, they also shared their perceptions that social media, because of the accessibility to content and opinions of others, and how the functions of social media can facilitate discussion, can be a site of learning. The constructivist process of learning infers that one can reflect and make meaning from one's experiences, whether they experience them directly or vicariously. Therefore, in the next section, the participants' perceptions about how the social elements of social media can influence their reflection will be explored.

### **Social Interactions and Reflection**

As discussed earlier, one of the advantages of using social media as a site for learning is that these platforms can facilitate discussion or simply provide access to opinions and ideas that can stimulate thinking and reflection. Using reflection, the participants can make meaning from the consumed information. The process of reflection can be difficult to identify. However, when the participants used terms such as ponder, stimulate, or thinking during the interviews, these may indicate a reflective process. Further, several participants shared reflective questions they asked of themselves as they were consuming political news on social media. Another way to

attempt to identify the reflective process is to consider what action the participants may have taken as a result of reflection. These indicators or markers of reflection were used to analyze the participants' responses during the interview process.

Focusing on these markers during the participant interviews, there were two topics that were revealed that seemed to describe how the social component of social media influenced the participants' process of reflection and meaning-making. The first topic was the influence of friends, including what they posted, questions they posed, and likes or upvotes their content received. As discussed in the previous section, many participants used caution when consuming political news content on social media, but were more likely to consume content from trusted sources including friends. Based on the participants' responses this trust seemed to give the participants the confidence to engage with and reflect upon their friends' activity on social media. For some participants, they posed self-reflective questions to themselves about why certain friends' posts received a great deal of attention from others on social media. For others, comments their friends posted stimulated the participants to reflect and to consider new viewpoints.

The second topic which was identified during the participant interviews was the influence that the general social media audience had on the participants' process of reflection. Unlike the influence that friends had on this process, much of the reflection seemed to be triggered by the comments, likes, and shares from users that were not necessarily friends with the participant. This reflection process appeared to be largely focused on seeking to understand the meaning of posts receiving a great deal of interactions, or in an effort to make meaning from content. In the case of the latter, participants often took action to obtain additional information about the topic at hand. For some participants this action preceded a subsequent action including posting content

or making comments on an existing post . The two topics on the participants' perception of the social influence on reflection will be presented in greater detail below.

### **Friends and Reflection**

Unlike the influence that general social interactions may have on some participants, when content is shared by someone the participant considers a friend or someone they know and trust, many participants are more likely to engage with that content. As an example, Able noted that he considers the source of the post along with the number of comments that post has received when determining if the post is something he wants to view and reflect upon. He observed that a large media outlet like Politico would typically have a large number of comments, so that would not necessarily draw his attention. However, if a friend's post has a large number that seems unusual, he would think about that and decide to read the post. Able said, "If I see Politico posting something I don't pay any attention to how many likes or comments that it has because I know that it's nationally circulated" He continued to note that, "If I see like a friend's post, I pay more attention in general to the things that friends posts and when I, if I would see a friend's post that had 150 likes or something on it, then I might think, oh well what's this attention coming from?"

Continuing on with Able's experience, he noted that his friends on social media will also help to guide him towards answers to his reflection questions. He also noted that his friends on social media also will help to guide him to other resources when he said, "I just ask them questions like, oh who said what, why, what's going on there, and they just fill in the blanks there or at least lead me towards something else that I need to be reading."

Kathy was another participant whose use of social media to consume political news appeared to result in an opportunity for reflection. As previously described, she found a news

article about the healthcare industry which she shared on her Facebook page. Separately, Kathy sent it to her parents who are both nurses. As a result of finding the news article on Facebook and then sharing it with her family, she was able to engage in a conversation which lead her to comment that, “I hadn’t really thought of that as it pertains to a particular issue with hospitals. So that was an instance where it was, actually, it sparked a pretty good conversation I would say.”

Valerie conveyed an experience similar to Kathy’s when she described her interaction with a friend on social media. During this interaction, which was included previously, Valerie viewed a political news story about the LGBTQ community. In seeking to better understand the topic, she reached out to a friend on social media who was a member of that community. She asked her friend “What do you think of this? Is this something I might want to consider adopting?”

Both Kathy and Valerie sought out a friend or family member to engage in a discussion about a political news story. As a result of these discussions, it seems as if both of these participants engaged in reflective thinking that led them to a greater understanding of the topics.

Another participant, Mary, shared a detailed example of how she engaged in reflection that was influenced by a friend. It started when Mary shared a political news story about the healthcare industry on her Facebook page. Even before she shared the article, she noted that she thought a lot about the article before posting it when she said, “I read it in the morning, I don’t know how early in the morning, and I didn’t post it until about 11:30 at night.” When asked why she waited to share the article, she described how she has been embarrassed about some of the things she has posted to Facebook in the past so she wanted to take some time to carefully consider what she was going to post. Mary said that she was also “thinking about how the

people in the story were making really difficult decisions.” Eventually Mary shared the article along with her own commentary. She received a few comments on her post from her friends, but one friend in particular who was currently traveling abroad, made a comment that Mary said “made me think more clearly about how we compare our healthcare system to healthcare systems in other countries”.

Based on the Mary’s story and the examples shared by the other participants, the indicators of reflection described earlier appear to be present when interacting with friends on social media. The next section will examine the participants’ perception of the influence the general population of users on social media has on their reflection.

### **Others and Reflection**

As the term social media implies, the participants engaged with platforms that enabled various forms of social interactions. Most of these interactions come in the form of viewing what others post, the comments on those posts, what they indicate they like, and what existing content they shared. In contrast to the interactions from friends, as explained above, many of the participants focused their reflection processes on evaluating the credibility of the content shared by the broad user base on social media who are not friends. Another way participants may indicate that they may have engaged in reflection is when they describe their efforts to find out more about a topic prior to posting or commenting about it. Rebecca explains it this way,

I do a lot of fact checking before I post. And even if I'm not going to post, if I'm going to read things -- if there's something in there that kind of catches my eye and I'm like, I don't know. I'll go to the other platform and other organizations to see what other research I can do to, really for my opinion, before I jump to any conclusions.

She continued on to explain that she wants to make sure that the content that she posts is as accurate as possible so that she is “not disseminating information that's inaccurate or doesn't truly echo what I believe per se.” Rebecca offered a specific example where she wanted to better understand what she learned from a specific article when she said,

I worked with refugees before but I didn't know about the host family part or about the fact that even though it's mandated it often doesn't follow through the way that maybe was initially intended. And so that threw me into a whole other round of research.

Likewise, Able, provided an example where, even though he was familiar with the topic, he spent “an above average amount of time considering it before sharing because I was familiar with the subject matter and I was really digging in, and checking out.” Valerie also observed that she will seek out additional information if there are posts that she continues to think about. She said, “If there is something that does stick out [to me] and I find myself coming back to it, I will seek out more information.”

In addition to the participants who sought to gather additional information to have a greater understanding about the topic of a political news story, Kathy noted that even though she may not be directly participating in the online discussion by making comments or liking a post, she often reads these comments which help her to reflect. She noted, “I'm not always engaging in that conversation but I'm often reading them and it's kind of stimulating something else.” As noted earlier, this idea of stimulation could mean thinking and reflecting.

To confirm what Kathy meant when she used the word stimulated, she explained that when social media users share content on Twitter, others may respond with a probing question such as, have you ever thought about this topic is this other way. Ellen found that she, too, spent time thinking about how the engagement of celebrities in the #metoo movement created what she



termed a tone shift around sexual harassment. Other participants, including Kenneth and Mary expressed that they also found themselves pondering or stopping to think when seeing or reading political news content on social media.

Several of the participants shared what might be considered a process of reflection that they employed when viewing the number of likes, comments, or views when consuming content on social media. For example, Kara enjoys reading the comments from others on posts that she reads. She noted that she prefers to view others' reaction to a political news story before she makes her own judgement. Kara stated,

When I read articles specifically like something that might come from WGAL, I like to read through the comments. And I think a lot of people do this. And I read through the comments to see other peoples' reaction before I make my own judgment. Because I'm the type of person that sees both sides of the story and when it comes to that type of stuff I like to see everybody else's reaction or everybody else's, um, faults or comment on the subject before I work to make my own judgment of the situation, like the situation of the post.

Kathy also shared a particular experience where she viewed a post that she found interesting then viewed the comments to evaluate how others were reacting to that post. Kathy said,

The other day I saw REI was posting about their new pride line, like gay pride and I was like, wow that's interesting. I wonder how outdoorsy folks feel about that? And so I kind of like, head to the comments to see what the reaction is.

Based on the observations made by Kara and Kathy, it is possible to consider that reading others' comments may lead to reflection in order to create their own judgement and viewpoint about the topic.

For some participants, the number of likes or views rather than the comments are more likely to trigger the reflective process. Like many social media users who use YouTube to consume political news, Krystal monitors what is trending – what content has the most views or interactions on social media. This social measure of interaction draws Krystal's attention to certain videos on YouTube so that she can stay abreast of what others are watching. Krystal noted,

I tend to watch things on YouTube that are trending which are like more than a million views or something. So I definitely think that plays a role in what I do watch or like --I don't know if I want to watch that otherwise, but because it was like so virally viewed on YouTube, you're like, oh I have to watch it because everyone else is watching.

Other participants tended to recognize that if a post is receiving a lot of interactions, that means that people are having an emotional reaction to the content of the story. This expression of emotion, at least in Mary's view, is what will influence her to view the post so she can begin to reflect on the cause of the emotional reaction. Mary stated,

I also think that if I see something that is getting a lot of interaction obviously people are feeling -- have feelings about it. And I like to know what's going on. I like to know what people are, you know, getting excited or angry or upset or happy about so I'm sure that in some way I'm being impacted by it.

The current section examined how friends and general users on social media may influence the participants to reflect and make meaning from the content they consume on these

platforms. However, there are also interactions on social media that may constrain or reduce one's process of reflection. The following section will explore participants' perceptions on these influences.

### **Constraints to Reflection**

As presented earlier, social media can be a site of learning where productive discussions on a variety of political news topics can take place. However, it can also be difficult to participate in these type of discussions as others' motives for engaging may not be clear or aligned with everyone who participates in the discussion. The result can be frustrating to those who are interested in using social media as a site of learning. Throughout the participant interviews, two topics were uncovered that seemed to constrain the participant's reflection process. The first topic was the recognition of what the participants perceived to be conflicts, or fights between social media users. Most participants viewed these exchanges as negative, frustrating, exhausting, or nasty. While many participants described situations where other social media users were perceived to be disingenuous or unwilling to learn, very few participants described their role in creating or engaging in these conflicts. Those that did recognize the futile nature of these exchanges and have taken steps to avoid them when possible.

The second topic that was uncovered relating to how reflection can be constrained on social media is how conflicts can serve to shut down discussions that, in other circumstances, participants perceived as a starting point for their reflection process. Participants acknowledged that when engaged in what some termed as arguments on social media, they will be unable to enjoy the same human connection they experience when engaging face to face. The participants' common perception is that most online discussions are actually forums where social media users

attempt to prove their point, not where users are interested in learning. Both of these topics that may serve to constrain reflection will be presented in greater detail below.

### **Conflicts on Social Media**

When asked about their perception of engaging in discussions on social media, many participants noted that it can be very challenging to engage in online conversations with those who are not friends or trusted sources. These social media fights can influence how the participants perceived their ability to engage in discussions that can lead to reflection. Kenneth observed that because people are engaging in an online format instead of face to face, they tend to take on a bullying persona. He observed,

People cross lines because they're behind the keyboard, you know, like, they don't know this person personally, it's just words so they don't feel like they have to hold back because they don't personally know them or they're never going to see that person. So I don't know. I guess it just kind of ties in with... it's not bullying, but the cyber bullying kind of thing.

While Kenneth did not state that he engaged online in a way that he described as crossing lines, he did confirm that he was involved in an online conflict when he said, "I found myself getting into political arguments in the beginning of this-- the beginning of Trump being elected." However, he continued to note that he recognized that, "at some point this just isn't worth it anymore and I have since stopped doing that." Because of the conflict that Kenneth sees online, he suggested that, "I should stop even really sharing any political stuff on my Facebook."

Valerie also reported that she has concerns about others' reactions to what she shares on social media. She said, "You never know which Joe Schmo is going to comment on a post I shared and tell me that I'm stupid for thinking that, or, like, if I'm trying to brainwash someone

by sharing this or something.” In addition to being concerned about what other social media users might comment on one of her posts, Valerie also acknowledged that, even when the other social media users are friends or family, they can be engaged in what she calls a “fight” online.

She stated,

On Reddit when it's, like, anonymous, people can be nasty but people can be nasty when they know the person on the other line too. And I've got family all over the political spectrum. I've got friends from college, friends from high school, friends from work, all over the political spectrum. I just don't have any interest in starting a fight or posting something and then other people get in to a fight and then I get flooded with notifications about it.

Both Kenneth and Valerie confirmed that they have little desire to engage in what they view as online fights or conflict. Based on her statements, Mary agrees, but also noted that she has had some success at having productive online discussions as well. Mary observed,

I think it's rare if you're getting into a comment discussion on Facebook that people are being, uh, genuine about their conversation. I think there are spaces where I have had good discussions with people who disagree with me but it's fairly limited online I think.

Taking the opposite view, Kara confirmed that she is unwilling to engage in online discussions, especially about politics as she stated that this is a topic on which others may not agree with her positions. She noted that she does not like to upset people or create what she views as negativity and she suggested she would be successful at avoiding these actions if she keeps her opinions to herself.

Unlike Kara who prefers to not engage with others on political topics when online, Ellen shared a specific experience when she engaged in an online conflict on Facebook. Her reasons

for doing so were, in her view, positive, as she was seeking to share what she saw as factual information with the goal of changing someone's mind. Here is her story,

Something that I saw recently, my friend's mom posted something about ..it was an opinion piece about how the term pro-life is basically overshadowed in the anti-abortion movement but a lot of the same people are like -- this is like the border thing, where they're critical of the way that the conservative people who consider themselves to be pro-life are reacting to people at the border. And I got into a small Facebook thing with that. But it was like, in my mind, I was trying to come from a point of education and not just being like 'Oh my God this woman's an idiot'. But could be like, no that's actually not true. Like this is empirically not true. To make that... to decide to delve in there was sort of, perhaps, the lapse in judgement of my part. But my process in engaging was to be like, oh maybe if I provide this person with facts and data and evidence then I will be able to change that person's mind.

Whether engaging in online conflicts or fights was regarded as a lapse in judgement as Ellen mentioned, or something to be avoided as Kara, Valerie, and Kenneth noted, the result appears to be the same. These conflicts and fights seemed to affect the participants' reflection process. To explore this further, the next section will examine the participants' impressions on how online conflicts can shut down discussions which are often the starting point for reflection.

### **Shutting Down Discussion**

In addition to the points the participants made regarding online conflict and fights, another related topic was the participants' perceptions about difficulties faced when attempting to engage in online discussions. Many participants perceived that other social media users engaged with one another in a ways that prohibited or shut down the possibility of having a

productive discussion. As an example, Mary observed that it can be challenging to have productive discussions about political news topics within social media platforms when the contributors' values are not aligned. She noted, that when online in social media, "you might meet people who have a totally different value system and when you don't have that like-value it's hard to sort of trust the other person." She returned to this point later in the interview, when she stated that the different contributors, "have a perspective and they're going to prove their point and that's it and they don't -- they don't want be open and that makes me not want be open and then it just devolves."

When comparing her views of online discussions with those that happen face to face, Mary noted that she becomes easily frustrated when she is consuming other peoples' online posts, but will be less frustrated when discussing topics with people in person. She continued to explain why she feels frustrated in online discussions:

I also think in person, like, it's easier to walk away if someone is not engaging in good faith whereas, if you're online, you never want to walk away. Even if someone's engaging in bad faith because, you don't want someone who's reading it to come away with a perspective that doesn't match yours if the other person isn't sort of being totally honest or open. And I think that can be really frustrating when I have this impulse to at least end on a positive note and that just can't happen sometimes.

Like Mary, Kenneth expressed his perceptions about online discussions and how the conflict can shut down the exchange of ideas and opinions when he said, "we fight about it even though we know that .... me arguing with them is probably not going to change their opinion."

Kathy also feels it can be difficult to have engaging online discussions. Kathy noted that she sees the difficulty partly because of the speed at which the responses can be generated and partly because of the lack of nuances in the responses. Kathy explained when she said,

I think it's harder and harder to carry on those conversations especially on line because of the same thing -- there's no nuance. It's really hard to find, you know, see people's reactions or dig deeper and the way that we engage in conversation in person often times.... people find themselves thinking, while one person is talking, you're thinking about what your next answer is. And online that happens even quicker because literally someone can be typing a response and you're typing in your response to it at the same time. There isn't time for that kind of give and take I guess.

Interestingly, Kathy reported that she would avoid engaging in online discussions on Twitter with individuals who are on the opposite side of the political spectrum from her. She was the only participant who explicitly shared her unwillingness to engage with people who belong to a different political party when she stated,

Like the conversation on Twitter this morning when everyone was, you know, in my feed it was typically people that are probably going to vote for a Democrat in 2020, but they have a difference of opinion on which Democrat that is, and we'll engage in those types of conversations. Not with someone who's on the complete other side.

Able seemed to hold the strongest views about how conflicts on social media can shut down discussion and constrain reflection when he states,

I don't think that anybody actually learns anything in an argument on any social media comment section. They're not there to learn so that's not what that's for. It's for people



making their points and making a counterargument to what the other person just said, but they're not really learning more about the topic.

Able's thoughts seem to summarize how most of the participants perceive the influence that online conflict and shutting down discussions has on one's ability to reflect and learn on social media. The next section will examine the participants' perceptions about how, because of the vast amount of information on social media, they experience cognitive overload and the influence that has on their reflection process.

### **Impacts of Cognitive Overload**

Cognitive overload is experienced by individuals when their brain's working memory is overloaded with information, as discussed fully in Chapter Two. As a result, the individual's ability to process the information is hampered. Cognitive overload is associated with social media because the vast amount of information that is constantly being updated and presented in one's page or feed can impede the social media user's ability to process all of the content.

For many of the participants political news was just one category of content that is presented in their social media feeds. Several of the participants noted that they follow sources related to their hobbies, social groups, or work-related topics, and they used two or three social media platforms on a regular basis. As a result, the participants can experience cognitive overload when attempting to learn about political news found on social media.

During the participant interviews, three topics were discovered that appeared to describe the participants' perception of how experiencing cognitive overload influenced their process of reflection and meaning-making. The first topic was how participants described the ways they found political news in their social media feeds. Most of the participants indicated that they scrolled through their social media feeds to find political news. Even those participants whose

social media feed was primarily focused on political news content scrolled through their feed until finding something that grabbed their attention. In the process of scrolling, participants noted that they would oftentimes unintentionally come across political news content in their feeds. Further, because of the vast amount of content being presented in the social media feeds, participants explained that they often do not read the entire content, some only reading the headlines before continuing to scroll. This distracted consumption of the news appeared to influence how the participants selected political news content upon which they may then reflection.

The participants' descriptions of what grabbed their attention and why is the focus of the second topic that was discovered during the participant interviews. Some participants would stop scrolling if they saw an image or an interesting headline. Some focused on the number of upvotes or likes a political news story garnered from the other social media users. However, these attention grabbing elements of the social media post are not often associated with the import, validity, credibility, nor completeness of a political news story. Participants also noted that their attention was fleeting, such that they would stop only momentarily on a political news story before moving on.

The third topic related to cognitive overload described by the participants was their feeling of being overwhelmed by the vast amount of content available on social media. Participants shared feelings of drowning in information, feeling frustrated that they are not able to fully understand or reflect on a topic, and even feeling concerned about how the cognitive overload of social media is impacting the society as a whole. Each of these topics will be examined in greater detail below.

### **Scrolling Through the Feed**

Most participants, potentially due to the vast amount of information on social media, found political news by scrolling through the content of their social media feeds. It appeared that, based on the participant interviews, the participants scrolled in a way that allowed them to be easily distracted which influenced the depth of the political news content they would choose to read. In this way, many participants simply stumbled upon political news content including Brad who noted that, “I tend to just scroll to see what’s going on.” Kenneth echoed Brad’s comment when he said, “[On]Facebook I would say, I usually just scroll and that's how I usually stumble upon certain news articles.”

Other participants, including Rebecca, repeated that, particularly on Facebook, they often are, as Rebecca pointed out, “mindlessly scrolling” because she is “Not looking for anything in particular just seeing what's happening.” Ellen is another participant who simply scrolls through her social media feed, however, Ellen uses Twitter more than Facebook. When she is scrolling on Twitter she noted that she will often find what she described as “a big political story” between posts that are frivolous or silly. Ellen confirmed that, when using Facebook, she has “never searched for news”, rather, when she consumes political news from that social media platform, she noted that, “it's always been just by happenstance, scrolling or seeing something and then posting.”

Focusing on what Rebecca conveyed during the interviews, she observed that what she sees in her Facebook feed is highly influenced by her social media friends. She described what she sees when she said, “So when I'm scrolling through Facebook often when I'm seeing is -- because of my age -- a lot of people getting engaged or having babies.” Interestingly, Rebecca

also felt that the ability to stumble upon political news while scrolling on her Facebook feed was beneficial.

Other participants appeared to be less positive about the political news they find while scrolling on social media. For example, Kara noted that when she sees certain political news posts on social media, she uses this process,

I just kind of scroll. Whatever comes up first is what I look at, and I just follow from there. If it wasn't that interesting or I don't want to, like, I read it, and I didn't really want to pursue other people's opinions then I just kind of scroll by.

Based on her comments, Kara seems to indicate that she may apply some sort of filtering mechanism to determine what she prefers to focus upon. However, at least in the process she described above, there were no indicators of reflection as presented in a previous section.

Likewise, Mary stated she skims the content on certain social media pages or content posted by certain groups. She appears to confirm that she uses skimming as a filtering process when she says that she will, "at least sort of skim through it to see if it is an interesting me." Valerie also uses a skimming or filtering technique, as opposed to reflection, when selecting political news content on social media. She noted that when she see content from certain Facebook groups, she does not participate by commenting or liking the posts. Instead she stated, "I get a lot of those groups but I don't ever, like, participate really. I'll just kinda be like, oh that's nice and keep scrolling." Her comments appear to confirm that she also tends to filter what content she chooses to consume.

Valerie also expressed that she rarely seeks out political news on social media. She commented that the political news content on social media comes to her, instead of her finding it. Her comment seems to summarize how most of the participants found political news content on

social media. This idea that news finds her in her social media feed can influence the first step in one's reflection process, which is to gain one's attention. This topic will be described in the following section.

### **Grabbing Attention**

Because gaining one's attention to content is the first step towards reflection, it was important to understand the participants' perception of cognitive overload and how that phenomena may have influenced the participants' attention. There were several elements of political news found on social media that drew the attention of the participants. For several participants, certain words used in the post or in the headline of a story were what drew in the participant and encouraged them to read the post. Rebecca was one such participant who stated, "if I see words that are catching my eye I'll likely stop and click on it to get more information.

For Rebecca, beautiful or jarring images will also make her pause to look at a post. Because of her interest in the Sudanese conflict and refugees, images on Instagram on those topics will cause her to pause. She also stated that an interesting headline will cause her to stop scrolling and look at a post as well. Rebecca said,

So those things if I see an image that really -- if it's a beautiful one like someone had a really cute baby, then I'll stop but also if it's really jarring. So, for example, the images from Sudan at the moment that are rising up -- that will stop me. And so that kind of thing and also, from my journalism background, a good headline will get me.

Valerie is another participant for whom a catchy headline or certain words will draw her attention to a particular post. Valerie said,

If there's a headline that for some reason catches my attention more than another headline maybe I'll stop and click on that. I don't know, maybe a word will catch my eye and I'll go back to read the post.

Because Kathy is interested in political news generally, posts that are politically oriented will attract her attention on social media. Kathy stated,

I would say like if people kind of if it's more like a newsy thing like if I see someone is at a maybe a protest and they have like a very catchy sign I'll typically stop and kind of to read more about that.

All of the participants mentioned above, described some element of the social media post that seemed to draw their attention in a way that led them to stop scrolling and to potentially focus and reflect on the content. What was not described by the participants, however, was if they used any sort of reflection process to assess why the elements of certain posts grabbed their attention. However, both Rebecca and Kathy described how they applied the lens of their past experience or current interest as a filter to select political news content on social media.

In addition to the text and image elements of the social media content, participants described how the social interactions or the overall tone of the content was what gained their attention. For example, Krystal said that she would view certain content on YouTube based on the total number of views. She noted, "because it was like so virally viewed on YouTube, you're like, oh I have to watch it because everyone else is watching."

Kenneth's attention to political news content on social media is usually focused on content that is prevalent on the front page of his Reddit feed. As described earlier, content will be moved to the top of one's Reddit front page based on the number of upvotes it receives from other Reddit users.

For Mary, it is the tone, or urgency of the topic presented in the political news content on social media that she notes “breaks through” the cognitive overload to draw her attention. She noted that “the urgency of some of the things we’re doing or talking about” in some of the political news content presented in some Facebook groups will gain her attention.

The participants’ description of their process to find political news on social media included scrolling and incidental exposure to political news content. The consumption of political news content was also predicated on elements of social media that could break through the cognitive overload and grab the attention of the participant. In the next section, the participants’ description of their cognitive overload experience will be explored in greater detail.

### **Feeling Overwhelmed**

As described earlier, social media feeds are constantly being updated with new content. The result can be that social media users experience cognitive overload as they attempt to sort through and process all of the content presented to them. This phenomena can impact what the participants choose to consume and pay attention to and it can also influence the social interactions with content they have posted. For example, Rebecca expressed the frustration that stems from cognitive overload when she said, “Especially on twitter, there's so much going on and I will often retweet things and no one responds or there isn't really anything that comes from it and you're kind of like retweeting into the void.”

With this statement, Rebecca appears to recognize that it can be difficult to elicit responses from other social media users. What is not clear is if she recognized that the lack of response may well be due to the cognitive overload that most social media users experience. However, she later confirmed that she experiences an inability to process all of the notifications

of new content she receives from her social media platforms. She noted that, as a result of the notifications, she “felt like -- I think inundated sometimes”

Able described a similar feeling when he relayed his feelings about the amount of content on social media. He said, “it's mostly just kind of trying to keep my head above water with the flow of information coming at me.” Able also observed that, in order to try to keep up with the content on Facebook, other areas of his life, like preparing for the bar exam, have suffered.

Ellen also observed an effect she believes is a result of social media users being inundated with content when she noted that, “you became so inundated with this information that is sort of encouraged posting I would say.” Her comment seems to indicate that social media users feel compelled to respond based on the extensive amount of content focused on a particular topic.

In addition to the feeling of being overwhelmed with information, both Able and Ellen voiced their frustration with the effect cognitive overload had on being able to deeply understand a particular political news story. Even though Able recognized that he can be distracted with Facebook, he finds it important to read some portion of the political news content he finds on social media. He said, “I would say, typically, I spend some time reading through everything. I would probably say I read the first half of most articles that I read on social media.” However, Able continued to state that even though he was frustrated that he does not have the time to read all of the political news content on social media as he would like, he is still interested in learning more. He said that even though he struggles with cognitive overload, “it doesn't make me less interested in knowing the answer. ”

Ellen also recognized that her experience with cognitive overload on social media can impede her learning. She noted,



I do sort of feel inundated with information and so there are so many things that I feel like I wouldn't have even been aware of, that I don't read up on. So I would say that that sort of prohibits me from getting to the bottom of something if I don't feel particularly compelled to get to the bottom of it.

In addition to how experiencing cognitive overload can influence the process of reflection and learning, Able voiced his concern about the broader societal impacts social media has overall. He stated that he views social media platforms as being “tossed down your throat.” He appears to reflect on the impacts of cognitive overload when he said, “I think that’s what we're experiencing now as a society is this information overload, and how on earth to address that?” More specifically, Able described his view that “the constant flow of information is purposeful” and is used as a way to manipulate social media users. He believes that “when you have an indefensible position the only... sometimes the only action is to just overflow people” because key information will get lost in the vast sea of information.”

While Able recognized that his viewpoint may seem like a conspiracy theory, the general concept that the cognitive overload experienced by social media users can influence their ability to reflect and learn appears to be confirmed by the other participants’ comments.

### **Conclusion**

Data for this study were collected from participant interviews. The analysis of the data suggest that there are five major findings: (a) social media was perceived to be a site of learning that provides broad access to content that may be unique as well as access to differing viewpoints; (b) participants used an abundance of caution when using social media as a site of learning; (c) conflicts on social media can shut down discussions which can limit the reflection process; (d) when friends or trusted sources post content or comments the participants experience

moments of inquiry and reflection; and (e) participants' reflection was influenced when they experienced cognitive overload due to the wealth of information available on social media platforms. The significance of the findings and the suggested implications for learning about political news on social media is discussed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to understand how social media, as a site of public pedagogy, influences how adults use reflection to learn from political news. From the purpose, the following research questions guided the study:

1. What are individuals' perceptions of social media as a site of public pedagogy, and how might those perceptions affect how they learned about political news accessed via social media?
2. How does the social component of social media influence the reflection process and meaning they make from political news?
3. How does the cognitive overload inherent in social media influence individuals' process of reflection and meaning-making from political news?

To explore these questions, I employed a qualitative methodology and interviewed 10 participants using semi-structured questions. Participants were selected using the criteria described in Chapter Three. The data from all of the participants were used in the analysis and identification of the themes which helped to answer the research questions. These findings will be summarized in the first section of this chapter. In sections two and three, I examine how the research questions are answered in light of the theoretical frameworks of Public Pedagogy and Social Cognitive Theory. In section two, I focus on understanding the first research question, exploring the perceptions individuals can have about social media as a site of public pedagogy, and how those perceptions might affect how they learned about political news accessed via social media. In the next section, I explore the answers to the second and third research questions, related to how the social component of social media might influence the reflection process and

meaning-making from political news, and how the cognitive overload inherent in social media may influence the individuals' process of reflection and meaning-making from political news. In the fourth section, I discuss the implications for theory and practice in adult education and social media use in adult education. In the fifth section, I examine the study limitations and provide suggestions for further research. Lastly, I provide concluding reflections about the meaning of the study.

### **Summary of Findings**

As presented in Chapter Four, the qualitative data analysis revealed several themes from the participant interviews. First, participants perceived that social media was a context for learning that provided broad access to unique content offering differing viewpoints. Second, while the participants perceived that social media was a site for learning, they recognized that, when learning from social media, they needed to apply an abundance of caution when selecting content to consider. Third, the participants perceived that social media provided moments of inquiry and reflection especially when friends or trusted sources post content or comments. Fourth, the participants perceived that the unmoderated nature of social media platforms shut down discussions about political news topics due to conflict, which appeared to limit their reflection process. Fifth, the participants perceived that they experienced cognitive overload which influenced their reflection process when learning about political news topics on social media. In the following section each of these findings will be explored in light of the theoretical frameworks utilized in this study.

### **Findings in Light of the Theoretical Framework**

In order to understand how adults use reflection to learn from political news consumed on social media, two theoretical frameworks informed this study: public pedagogy and Social

Cognitive Theory. Public pedagogy views many concepts of the term *public* as sites of pedagogy, where informal teaching and learning, and education and mis-education can take place (Biesta, 2012; Reid, 2010; Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011). This theory was used since the study was looking to explore both the perceptions about social media as a site of learning and how those perceptions affected the ability to learn from this site. Social Cognitive Theory suggests that individuals determine, via their human agency, not only what events and social models to observe and pay attention to in their social environment; but, also, what meaning they will make from those, and how this meaning will be applied to future decision-making and actions (Bandura, 2001). This theory was helpful to understand the findings as they related to the reflection and learning process that can happen within a social context and how that social context can influence what is selected for learning.

Before reviewing each of the frameworks, it is important to consider how ubiquitous social media has become in the lives of Americans. Approximately 68% of American adults use some form of social media, and almost half of all Americans get their news from Facebook, the most prevalently-used social media platform on the planet (Pew Research Center, 2018). Treem, Dailey, Pierce, and Biffel (2016) note that social media platforms are Internet accessible, provide the ability for users to consume and interact with content, as well as with other users, and act as the mechanism for users both to create and share content with others on that platform.

While this study was framed around adults learning through public pedagogy and how social cognitive theory views the influences of social contexts on reflection, the particulars of learning political news from social media platforms was examined. Some of the previous research that examined the educative force of social media focused on political news as a topic for learning; however, this research did not adequately focus on the influence that social media

has when using reflection to learn about political news from social media. Therefore, the findings are significant to adults' use of reflection is influenced by social media. Further, this study provides a deeper understanding about how social media influences adults' process of reflection when learning about political news topics consumed on social media platforms. This study also provides insights into the existing and current research on these topics. These topics will all be discussed in more detail in the upcoming sections.

### **Public Pedagogy**

As discussed previously, public pedagogy is described by Kellner (2011) and Kelly (2015) as the educative influence of media and popular culture, where individuals learn how to think, what to believe, and how to act to fit into societal norms. Public pedagogy emphasizes the informal, incidental, and often unintentional learning that occurs from exposure to daily life. As Jarvis (2010) noted, "we learn whenever we are conscious, although we are not always aware we are doing so" (p. 63). In other words, it is the exposure to and interaction with public sites that influence learning and the creation of knowledge.

The idea of *public* as it relates to public pedagogy, generally aligns with Habermas's (1996) idea of the public sphere as opposed to being related to the concept of ownership, rather it is viewed as a specific form of interaction (Biesta, 2010). Public pedagogy also describes the analytic lens used to investigate the education, mis-education, and learning that occurs as individuals engage in all areas of a society's culture, which includes social media (Biesta, 2012; Wright, Sandlin, & Clark, 2011).

When individuals learn through public pedagogy, they are not guided by an instructor or pedagogue, specifically; instead, when viewed through a social constructivist lens, they undertake their own education by making meaning from their mediated or non-mediated

experiences and then reflecting on the alignment of new experiential meaning to their existing meaning schema (Sandlin, Burdick, & Rich, 2016; Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011; Wright, 2018). The literature that discusses educational theories and ways in which adults learn from different forms of mass media, including social media, often reference public pedagogy (Careless, 2015; Diehl, Weeks, & Gil de Zuniga, 2016; Frishtat & Sandlin, 2010).

This theory was particularly useful in understanding the findings of my study, because it allowed me to examine the educative force that social media has on individuals who use these platforms to consume political news. More specifically, because viewing social media through the lens of public pedagogy assumes that some learning is taking place when individuals are exposed to content on these platforms, I was able to study how certain aspects of social media may have influenced the participants' reflection process as they learned about political news topics.

**Perceptions of social media as a site of learning.** The first major finding of this study relates to the pedagogy of public sites such as social media. As previously noted, individuals learn through sites of public pedagogy including forms of mass media and social media. As the concepts of public pedagogy suggest, the primary attribute about sites of learning that fall under this theory are sites that are widely accessible or are considered to be part of the public sphere: what and where the masses are exposed to within the course of their everyday life which exists outside the traditional institutions of education (Biesta, 2012; Giroux, 2004; Kelly, 2015; Sandlin, Burdick, & Rich, 2016; Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011; Savage, 2010). This perspective suggests that learning occurs as a result of exposure to public sites, including social media, and provides the lens to evaluate learning and knowledge construction when engaging with public sites.

The participants recognized that social media helped to change what they understood about certain political news topics, confirming that their exposure to political news on social media served as a site of public pedagogy. Some participants noted that the change in what they now know about different political subjects was the result of interactions that happened directly on the social media platform.

**Applying an abundance of caution.** The second major finding relates to the ways that the perceptions about a specific site of public pedagogy, in this case social media, influenced the learning process. The participants' experience with the educative force of social media aligns with how sites of public pedagogy are described by Merriam and Bierema (2014) and Tisdell (2008). However, the educative force of public pedagogy can be considered to provide both education and mis-education. According to Tisdell (2008), when individuals passively accept the information they are receiving through public pedagogy, they can be mis-educated. Conversely, when individuals are able to reflect on these messages, the information is thought to be educative. Sandlin, O'Malley, and Burdick (2011) suggest that the educative forces of public pedagogy can both educate and mis-educate adults, in large part, due to the lowered focus on cognitive rigor compared to what is often evident in more formal sites of education.

Because public pedagogy, as a framework, recognizes the potential for mis-education, especially when there is limited application of reflection, I was able to use this lens as a way to interpret the data, which revealed the finding that the participants tended to apply caution when learning from social media. Participants recognized the potential for mis-education about political news topics on social media because there are few restrictions on who can post content or what content can be posted. As a result, the participants were often skeptical about the validity and credibility of the political news content they found on social media. Further,



participants confirmed that they perceived the political news content posted by unknown others required more validation than similar content posted by friends.

### **Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)**

As discussed in detail in Chapter Two, Bandura (1986) developed SCT as a framework to explain ways humans learn and develop their values and beliefs, and how that learning drives and controls their behaviors. SCT suggests that every display of one's behavior is an expression of their values and beliefs, and that the social reactions that are elicited by that behavior will subsequently influence one's values and beliefs. According to SCT, individuals learn by directly experiencing the results of their actions or by vicariously observing others' behavior and the resultant consequences. However, observational learning does not imply that one blindly copies the behaviors of others; rather, it involves reflecting on what drives others to behave in a specific way. Inherent in observational learning is the idea that learners are agents of their learning. Using their agency, each individual determines, not only what events or others to observe and pay attention to in their social environment, but, also, what meaning they will make from those and how this new meaning will be applied in the future.

SCT includes concepts of self-regulation and self-examination which include a process of reflection. When using reflection, adults can make meaning of their experiences, whether these experiences are experienced directly or vicariously through observation (Bandura, 2005). In this way, individuals can learn vicariously from observing and reflecting upon the actions and resulting consequences from others' modeled behavior which can be observed from sources of mass media. In short, SCT suggests that observational learning, which begins with the application of human agency, relates to how adults' reflection and mean-making process is

influenced by both the social aspects of social media and the cognitive overload experienced on social media.

This theory was particularly useful in understanding the findings of my study because it allowed me to explore the participants' observational learning process as they consumed political news on social media and how reflection was used as part of that process. As in other theories of adult education, the process of reflection is central to SCT as it provides the means through which adults can assess and either change or strengthen what they come to understand as meaningful, valuable, or socially acceptable forms of thought and behavior. Using SCT also provided the framework through which I could understand how the social components of social media, including consuming political news content from both trusted and untrusted sources, and the ways that online conflicts and cognitive overload may have played a role in the reflection used as part of observational learning.

**Moments of inquiry and reflection influenced by trust.** The third major finding was revealed when interpreting the participant interview data through the lens of SCT. This finding relates to the ways that, through the application of human agency to select observational models upon which to reflect, individuals are influenced by their social associations. As it relates to SCT, Bandura (1986) noted that one of the primary attentional determinants are associational networks; the networks made up of individuals with whom one has some type of connection. In other words, people with strong ties to each other are more likely to interact within a social context.

When using the observational learning aspect of SCT as a theoretical lens, I was able to understand how the participants' process of selecting which political news content to consume on social media was an expression of their human agency and was influenced by their social

associations. Because reflection is most often an internal process of thought, it can be difficult for researchers to identify. The selection process itself is often not a result of the reflective process, rather, the decision to read or not read a political news item is often based on social and heuristic cues (Winter, Metzger, & Flanagin, 2016). However, after selecting political news content to consume, which was posted by both those in their associational network and those outside their close network of friends, they used terms such as “ponder,” “stimulate thinking,” or “seeing more clearly,” that appeared to indicate they reflected on the content. This theoretical perspective was used to understand how the new meanings or new understandings of a particular political news topic were formed through the use of reflection.

**Shutting down discussions limited reflection.** The fourth major finding relates to the ways that observing negative social models influenced individuals’ willingness to pay attention to and use reflection to learn from those models. Without a willingness and motivation to pay attention to a specific social model, one cannot engage in observational learning. SCT suggests that individuals will disregard social models that do not provide rewarding outcomes to the observer (Bandura, 1986). Further, when seeing social models experience negative or punishing consequences, others will generally avoid participating in a similar fashion (Bandura, 1986).

Using this theoretical perspective I was able to make sense of how participant’s reflection and meaning-making process was restricted when they chose not to engage with others whose modeled behaviors on social media were viewed as disingenuous or unwilling to engage in discussions in good faith. Participants generally avoided online discussions about political news topics when the ways that others were engaging were viewed negatively. Through the use of self-reflection, as viewed through SCT, individuals are able to predict what is likely to happen in a particular circumstance. This perspective helps to understand why participants stopped

interacting with these online discussions, which effectively shut down and restricted their ability to reflect on that discussion.

**Cognitive overload influences on reflection.** The last major finding was also discovered by interpreting the participant interview data through the lens of SCT. This finding relates to the ways that observational learning can be impeded by attentional distractions. When explaining the details of observational learning which is part of SCT, Bandura (1986) stated that, “observational learning is often retarded by attentional deficits arising from.....distracting preoccupations” (p. 180). Put differently, if individuals are distracted it is difficult to learn through the observation of social models.

SCT and observational learning provided the theoretical perspective through which I was able to make sense of how participant’s reflection and meaning-making process was restricted when presented with the attentional distraction of the cognitive overload experienced when one seeks to learn about political news topics from social media. The participants expressed a desire to learn and reflect to gain a deeper understanding of political news topics they consumed on social media, but they confirmed that the cognitive overload they experienced on social media impeded them from doing so.

In summary, public pedagogy and social cognitive theory were used as lenses through which the participant interview data was interpreted. Public pedagogy was helpful to understand how the participants perceived social media as a site of learning and how those perceptions influenced the ways they learned from social media especially as they learned about political news topics. In order to understand how the social and attentional influences of social media influenced the participants’ reflection, SCT was used as the theoretical lens. The next section

will include a discussion of the findings as they relate to the empirical research around how learning from social media influences reflection.

### **Perceptions of Social Media as a Site for Learning Political News**

Before positioning the findings from this study into the research on social media and public pedagogy, a summary of the major assumptions and findings from that research is presented below:

- a) Facebook is viewed as a site of public pedagogy because it was viewed as a space where socially acceptable norms were policed by others and where users can communicate and share knowledge (Careless, 2015; Freishtat & Sandlin, 2010).
- b) mass media, including social media has the power to educate and miseducate (Tisdell, 2008).
- c) when adults experience a disjuncture in their lives they often turn to the Internet, or social media, among other resources to seek new understanding and meanings to resolve it (Wright & Sandlin, 2009).
- d) when teenagers and young adults participate in political discussions on social media, it generates an educational situation (Andersson & Olson, 2014).
- e) the process of repetitive sharing and re-sharing of content on social media can allow the circulation of misleading or fake information (Feldman, 2015; Bradshaw & Howard, 2018).
- f) those who used social media to access political news, even incidentally, could be persuaded to reconsider their political views (Diehl, Weeks, & Gil de Zuniga, 2016).
- g) when consuming content from Facebook, more people were able to recall details about a political news story than from stories about natural disasters (Bode, 2016).

- h) when close examination of a political news story consumed on social media is performed in the process of curation, more people were able to score higher on knowledge assessments than those who did not curate political news content (Park & Kaye, 2018).
- i) the frequent incidental exposure to political news on Facebook can lead people to feeling that they are politically informed (Cacciatore et al. 2018).
- j) those who interacted with political news content and with other users on social media were more likely to change their political behavior than others (Velasquez & Quenette, 2018).
- k) those who engaged in online political discussions were more likely to increase their political knowledge than those who engaged in offline discussions (Park, 2014).
- l) while most social media users do not have a clear understanding of how the content filtered they are skeptical of all types of filtering processes (Fletcher & Nielson, 2018).

While these studies that examined how individuals use social media, including whether or not individuals learn political information from social media (Bode, 2016), less is known about how individuals' understanding of social media as a site of learning influences their meaning-making process of political news, in particular. As Bode (2016) noted, "social media may be the new social and cultural force to complicate our understanding of the process of lifelong political learning" (p. 45). Previously, traditional sources of media offered exposure to limited sources of news which created a society that less polarized than today (Bennett, 2016; Peterson, Goel, & Iyengar, 2018). Now, some journalists actually report on what is happening on social media platforms like Twitter as political news (Bouvier, 2017). Further, because social

media offers a much wider array of political news sources than traditional forms of media (Winter, Metzger, & Flanagin, 2016), individuals can more easily be exposed to fringe content that has previously been outside of what was available on mainstream news (Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014; Piotrowski & Ruitenberg, 2015). With social media replacing traditional sources of political news, there is an urgent need to understand if adults perceive social media as a site for learning about political news topics and how these perceptions influence the reflection necessary to their learning process (Messing & Westwood, 2014).

Social media platforms are often presented as a means to stay connected with friends and family or to see what is happening in the world. However, social media users may not be consciously aware that these platforms serve as a site where they may be educated and mis-educated, as they observe others and consume information. Through the lens of public pedagogy, individuals learn what is viewed as important, valuable, and desirable within the society as well as what is not (Guy, 1999). Reid (2010) stated that through this often indirect learning, “we come to understand ourselves in relation to others and to our culture through social media interactions” (p. 194). The participants viewed social media as a site where they had access to the opinions and comments about political news topics from other people whose opinions may not normally have been readily accessible outside of social media platforms. In addition, participants used social media as a starting point for finding political news: either because it aggregated numerous sources of news in one place, or because they were incidentally exposed to political news on social media while pursuing other content.

The perception that the participants viewed social media as public, in the sense of the public sphere, was confirmed as they perceived social media as having a broad reach and as being a place for public discussions. However, when social media users privately select what

content to consume or interact with, they may make their preferences public. In this way, social media may not be fully public nor entirely private (Reid, 2010; Shao & Wang, 2017). Even though the participants may not have considered social media to be a site of education, they recognized that their exposure, either purposeful or incidental, to political news on social media and the ways they communicate about it led to new understandings and meanings (Careless, 2015; Papacharissi & Easton, 2013). As a model, public pedagogy can explain how even incidental exposure to political news on social media can lead individuals to reconsider or even change their political views (Diehl, Weeks, & Gil de Zuniga, 2016).

As Giroux (2004) observed, the Internet and, subsequently, social media has taken on new import as a site of public pedagogy. These pervasive sites of public pedagogy not only allow adults to be exposed to a broad spectrum of political news content, but they also provide them with the ability to self-select what content they consume. When social media users self-select content that confirms their already-held political viewpoints, they are at risk of creating a social media echo chamber. Participants understood that their social media feeds can create an echo chamber of political viewpoints based on content and comments posted by their friends and what media outlets they followed on these platforms. They also recognized that they could avoid the echo chamber effect if they opted to include friends or news outlets that hold differing political views. The recognition of the echo chamber effect further supported the idea that the participants' learning from social media as a site of public pedagogy was affected by their perceptions of social media overall (Garrett, 2009).

Generally, the participants applied a great deal of caution and skepticism when consuming political news content on social media potentially as they recognized the mis-education that can result from sites of public pedagogy. However, existing research suggests



that, even though social media users might be skeptical about how the platforms present content, individuals will continue to use the platforms without trusting them if those social media platforms help them in ways they find compelling (Fletcher & Nielson, 2018). In summary, the findings extend the existing research as they indicate that social media is perceived as a site of learning even by those who viewed the political news content there skeptically. In addition the need to better understand how social media influences, not just the ability to recall content, but to reflect as part of the learning process is supported through the findings.

### **Reflection is Possible, but Challenging**

To provide a short review, a summary of the major assumptions and findings from the research which examined the use of reflection when using observational learning as viewed through the theoretical framework of SCT to learn about political news topics on social media is presented below:

- a) reflecting on political news encompasses using news information to connect past experience and previous knowledge and to obtain new inferences from the political news content (Eveland, Shah, & Kwak, 2003).
- b) when social media content is posted by those within one's immediate group of contacts or friends, or it has a number of likes or shares, social media users have more trust in the news article (Masip, Suau-Martinez, & Ruiz-Caballero, 2018).
- c) when selecting political news on social media, the greatest influence was from social endorsements, such as the number of likes, shares, or comments, and not political partisanship (Masip, Suau-Martinez, & Ruiz-Caballero, 2018; Messing & Westwood, 2014).

- d) while news reflection can result in increased political learning, discussion of news topics, led to greater gains in political learning (Park, 2014).
- e) when assessing learning from social media, the emphasis has been on memorization and recall and not reflection (Bode, 2016; Park, 2017; Park & Kaye, 2018).
- f) one's ability to reflect can be hampered when one is experiencing cognitive overload as a result of being presented with vast amounts of complex information (Kiili, 2007)
- g) individuals with higher levels of self-efficacy relating to social media do not take the time to critically evaluate what they find; but rather, use heuristic cues such as endorsement and reputation to minimize the cognitive effort required (Hocevar, Flanagin, & Metzger, 2014).
- h) individuals need to implement strategies for managing information overload in order to make sense of political news on social media in a way that resulted in knowledge formation (Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014).

Eveland et al. (2003) describes the process of reflecting on political news as making “cognitive connections to past experience and prior knowledge, and to derive new implications from news content” (p. 363). Mezirow’s (1990) view of learning confirms that reflection can allow the creation of new meaning. Raelin (2001) found that, through reflection, individuals can become aware of their errors in judgement. In addition, Moon (2007) found that the outcome of reflection can lead to making a decision, experiencing an emotion, understanding a topic, or recognizing that further clarification or reflection is needed. Further, an internal questioning process can demonstrate that an individual is engaged in inquiry and interpretation of their current experience (Seibert & Daudelin, 1999). Freishtat and Sandlin (2010) state that, “implicit aspects of learning [such as reflection] often go unnoticed as they lay beneath the surface of

view” (p. 505). In other words, as Kiili (2007) concluded, reflection does not always happens on the conscious level which makes it difficult to assess. However, potentially because of this difficulty, many studies evaluated participants’ ability to recall information as a proxy for reflection (Bode, 2016; Cacciatore et al. 2018; Dimitrova, Shehata, Stromback, & Nord, 2014; Edgerly, Thorson, & Wells, 2018; Lee & Xenos, 2018; Park, 2017; Park & Kaye, 2018; Shehata & Stromback, 2018).

Therefore, as noted earlier, I looked for certain terms or phrases the participants used that appeared to describe their process of reflection, including thinking, pondering, stimulating thinking, or coming to a conclusion. Some participants also posed questions to themselves as they viewed political news content on social media, which, likewise, appeared to be a form of reflection. Using these potential outcomes as a reference along with the terms or phrases used by participants, there was evidence that the participants used reflection as they engaged with political news on social media.

**Reflecting on content in the feed.** However, as discussed previously, social media users do not make fully autonomous decisions about what political news to pay attention to or to consume. One way those who produce political news content on social media seek to draw user’s attention is to use headlines that intrigue or even mislead the reader (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). Additionally, algorithms, recommendations from friends, or other social media users’ activities that indicate a story is trending or the most widely read are more likely to determine where social media users focus their attention (Messing & Westwood, 2014), and, subsequently what content they reflect upon. However, because the political news content in their social media feed is driven by algorithms that consider the social media users’ preferences based on what content they like, share, or follow, it is probable that there is some existing bias to the

political news content (Ananny, 2016; Sandvig, 2015). As a result, even though the participants may have perceived that they were learning from a broad array of possible political news content on social media, they observed and potentially reflected upon only that content that was available for observation within their social media feed (Fletcher & Nielson, 2018; Sandvig, 2015; Treem, Dailey, Pierce, & Biffel, 2016). Further, participants confirmed that they often selected and paid attention to political news content that was related to their past experiences or their current political interests which they found on their social media feed.

**Trust influences reflection.** The target of the reflection appeared to be different when engaging with known associates than when engaging with unknown associates. The participants often selected to pay closest attention to content that their friends posted, commented on, or with which they interacted (Messing & Westwood, 2014; Velasquez & Quenette, 2018). As it relates to consuming political news from social media, the participants confirmed that they were likely to belong to Facebook groups with people they already knew where they discussed political topics. In addition, because the participants were able to self-select what news media outlets, reporters, hashtags, or friends to follow, content and comments from these sources were prevalent in the participants' social media feeds. In this way, the social aspect of social media influenced the participants' attention to certain political news content (Masip, Suau-Martinez, & Ruiz-Caballero, 2018).

It is possible that the reason content from close social associates drew more attention than content posted by unknown others was the level of trust the participants assigned to their content. No participants reported that they felt skeptical or sought to validate the credibility of the content or comments posted by friends. Instead, participants were apt to engage with content posted or commented upon by known friends or entities, both directly on the social media platform and

through private messages. However, when engaging with unknown others on social media, the participants described a sense of hesitation, a lack of confidence in their knowledge of the content, and a fear that their motivation for posting would be misconstrued (Barnidge, 2017).

When participants engaged with friends or family members about political news topics they consumed on social media, they were likely to pose questions in order to better understand the topic from another point of view. As Raelin (2001) suggested, individuals are more willing to question their beliefs when they are engaging with trusted others. In other words, individuals are more receptive to new information or contrary views, which begins the process of reflection when that comes from trusted sources. Participants noted that when reflecting on differing viewpoints from trusted sources about political news topics found on social media they used phrases like “I hadn’t really thought of that,” or “What do you think of this?” or that a comment “made me think more clearly.” One participant stated that when discussing political news in a Facebook group, he would ask questions like “what’s going on there?” These participants’ responses indicate that they were able to reflect on political news topics consumed on social media especially when engaging with trusted others, which is one example of how the social component of social media influenced the participants’ process of reflection.

**Reflection on content from unknown others.** Participants also used indicators of reflection when engaging with unknown others about political news on social media. Reflection was used as a way to confirm the accuracy of what the participants themselves understood about a topic particularly prior to posting a comment (Mason, Ariasi, & Boldrin, 2011). Reflection encourages people to challenge their previously-held interpretations which can require that they have the courage to put forward a position that may not be accepted by their social associates (Raelin, 2001). When participants were preparing to post content or comments about political

news topics on social media, they wanted to make sure that their posts were well-considered first which required them to reflect on their current judgments about a political news topic. The participants confirmed that they would conduct additional, and for some, extensive investigation about a topic before posting so that they could avoid being seen as jumping to a conclusion, or posting inaccurate information. This need to more deeply understand a political news topic before sharing their positions with a broad, social community is another example of how the social component of social media influenced reflection (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017; Kimmons, 2014).

Participants also reflected when observing, but not engaging with the comments others made about political news content. Participants confirmed they would read through the comments about political news topics to see other peoples' reaction before making their own judgment. Several participants noted that the process of reviewing others' comments on political new topics would stimulate thinking, which could be viewed as reflection. The ability for social media users to observe others' responses to political news topics allowed the participants to reflect upon others' underlying values and beliefs which is yet one more example of how the social component of social media influenced reflection (Velasquez & Quenette, 2018).

Because social media allows users to be exposed to a "large, diverse network of social connections" (Diehl, Weeks, & Gil de Zuniga, 2016, p. 1878), individuals can be exposed to opposing viewpoints on political news topics (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). As a result, social media users may engage in online discussions (Park, 2014), seek out more information on the topics, or reflect on their own thoughts about others' views and comments (Diehl, Weeks, & Gil de Zuniga, 2016). Engaging in discussions either directly on social media or as a result of sending political news content found on social media to others was viewed by the participants as

instrumental to their learning (Park, 2014). However, some participants confirmed they were less interested in participating in online discussions about political news topics and preferred to reflect privately about content and comments posted on social media.

**Restricting reflection.** There were also some social components of social media that may have restricted the participants' willingness to consider or reflect upon differing political viewpoints. When seeking to learn about political news topics on social media, participants noted that they would come across what they termed as "fights" on social media (Fox & Moreland, 2015; Yang, Barnidge, & Rojas, 2017). Typically social media engagements described this way were viewed by the participants as online exchanges where they perceived that other social media users were simply looking to prove their point, had no interest in learning, or were disingenuous in their exchanges (Barnidge, 2017; Ekstrom, 2016). The participants perceived these engagements as barriers to productive discussions that could lead to reflection about political news topics. However, some participants described their experience engaging in these so-called "fights" on social media. All of these participants found the experience futile, and described their experience as exhausting, frustrating, or negative.

In addition to the ways in which social media "fights" about political news topics restricted the participants reflection, some participants found that the ways in which social media functions were also barriers to reflection. The participants noted that the perceived lack of human connection, the speed at which comments and tweets can be generated, and the restriction on the length of tweets were all barriers to engagement in online discussions, which impeded their ability to reflect on others' interactions on political news topics.

The glut of information found on social media can also challenge adults to decide what political news topics deserve their attention (Cacciatore, et al., 2018). Determining how to deal

with the massive amount of information available on the Internet and social media requires the ability to manage information and cognitive overload. When too much information is received, individuals are unable to pay attention to and process the information (Pentia & Tarafdar, 2014). Therefore, unless individuals can manage the information overload by filtering out what they deem as unimportant, individuals may find it difficult not only to recall the information but to reflect cognitively on the content (Kiili, 2007). This finding confirms existing research that when too much political news information is received on social media, individuals are unable to pay attention to and process the information (Pentia & Tarafdar, 2014). When working memory is overloaded with information and the ability to process the information is impeded, cognitive overload is the result (Carr, 2010).

Because the participants confirmed they were overwhelmed by the amount of political news content on social media, they often found themselves mindlessly scrolling through their social media feeds. Participants noted that they often found political news articles by stumbling across them in their social media feeds and simply skimmed the headlines before continuing to scroll (Diehl, Weeks, & Gil de Zuniga, 2016). The process of scrolling, skimming, and scrolling can lead to non-reflective learning, where the content is passively accepted as true without further consideration (Mezirow, 1990). Activities like noticing or memorizing are often part of non-reflective learning, but can be pre-cursors to learning supported by reflection (Moon, 1999). When the participants scrolled through their social media feeds and skimmed the headlines of political news content, they likely were not reflecting on the political news content (Hoccevar, Flanagan, & Metzger, 2014). However, when some aspect of the political news content grabbed their attention, the participants stopped scrolling to review the content more closely. Because of the different influences cognitive overload had on the participants' while consuming political



news from social media, the participants lamented the fact that they felt unable to deeply understand important political news, as they were unable to keep up with the constant stream of new content (Park, 2019).

### **Implications for Theory and Practice**

The study of how adults use reflection to learn from political news consumed on social media offers implications for the theory and practice of adult education. Although the scope of this study was limited to learning from one specific topic of content with a group of learners that met specific criteria, the ways the study participants used reflection to learn about political news topics from social media can be useful to adult educators seeking to understand how social media, as a site of public pedagogy, influences how adults learn from political news. This understanding can be considered for the theory and practice of adult education and can provide suggestions for further research into how adults learn from social media.

The concept of using reflection to learn from one's experiences is not new. Dewey (1910) explained the importance of what he called reflective thought to its educative value. Piaget (1970), Kolb (1984), Bandura (1986), and Mezirow (1990) all advanced Dewey's conception of reflection to describe how individuals, through the use of reflection, can examine, validate, or change their previously-held beliefs in light of new experiences.

Exploring how reflection is used when learning about political news from the pervasive medium of social media is critical to understanding the process of lifelong adult education and learning. Adult educators must recognize how social media, like all other types of media, can be a force to both educate and miseducate. This is especially important because adults' process of reflection can be influenced by the way social media platforms function.

## **Implications for Theory**

The theoretical frameworks of public pedagogy and SCT are based on a paradigm of social constructivism. Constructivism centers around the idea that individuals seek to construct knowledge that will enable them to operate in their everyday lives and to participate in the cultural norms of their society (Bentley, 2003). This theory posits that all knowledge is constructed in light of one's existing perceptions, biases, and societal position (Kincheloe, 2005). Social constructivism expands on constructivism as this theory supposes that socially-mediated communication that is embedded in one's culture is the primary foundation for how and what is learned (Driscoll, 2005). However, it is important to note that the immediate access to vast amounts of information from a now globally-connected Internet is redefining culture as well as communication methods. The idea that learning results from one's exposure to their culture is a primary component of social constructivism.

During the qualitative data analysis, concepts of knowledge construction with the use of reflection in a social media context were uncovered. Many adult education scholars have examined the use of reflection as part of the learning process (Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1990) and how social communication within the context of one's culture plays an important role in the learning process (Bandura, 1986, 2001, 2005). Together these aspects of learning are also important to public pedagogy and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986; Giroux, 2004; Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011), and related to the findings of the study. These findings showed that social media was perceived as a site of learning which influenced the participants' reflection process due to the social component of social media, and to the experience of cognitive overload.

**Public pedagogy.** To date, public pedagogy has not been used as the basis to explore how reflection is used by adults when learning about political news from the pervasive medium

of social media. Further, while the influence of social media as a site of public pedagogy has been studied, few studies exist that seek to understand how reflection is used on these sites when learning about political news topics. Therefore, this study makes a unique contribution to the literature of adult education.

Reflection is a key component to the learning process from a social constructivist viewpoint. Using reflection, learners consider the validity of their current values and beliefs in light of new information in order to construct new knowledge. However, public pedagogy as a theory primarily emphasizes *what* individuals learn from popular culture and other public sites, rather than providing a theory about *how* individuals learn from these sites. This study confirms that the process of reflection is possible when consuming political news from social media, however, the social components of, and the cognitive overload experience on social media greatly influence this important part of the process of learning.

Using social media allows adults to not just consume political news content, but to produce this type of content as well. Social media users are encouraged to comment or interact with content others have posted, to share, in essence amplify, what others have posted, and to post their own original content. When interacting on social media including sharing what others have posted or commenting on others' posts, the study participants confirmed that they engaged in reflection as they considered what to post largely because they recognized that others would be exposed to their content. While public pedagogy focuses on analyzing what individuals learn from popular culture, including sites like social media, the theory does not examine the learning that takes place when individuals produce content that becomes part of a site of public pedagogy. In other words, the theory of public pedagogy could be applied to examining those who, unwittingly, begin to adopt the identity of a pedagogue with a site of public pedagogy.

Public pedagogy, like other theories of adult education, generally views education, learning and teaching from a perspective of “constructs that reify traditional forms of intellectual activity as the only possible mode of critical intervention” (Sandlin, O’Malley, Burdick, 2011, p. 364). However, it may be possible that social media is such a different form of mass media that the process of learning that takes place when engaging with these platforms does not align with the more traditional views of reflection.

The scale and speed at which political news is posted, shared, and interacted with on social media far exceeds what has previously been possible with more traditional forms of mass media such as newspapers, television and even websites. As a result more adults experience cognitive overload and have developed ways to filter or skim social media content, specifically political news content. This new way of consuming information can limit one’s ability for deep reading which, according to Carr (2009) equates to deep thinking which can also be considered reflection. Yet, the participants in the study confirmed that they were able to think about and reflect on political news content found on social media. Therefore, the theory of public pedagogy may need to consider what the learning process is and what education is in ways that are unique to social media.

**Social Cognitive Theory.** Learning through observation of social models found in mass media has been discussed at length (Bandura, 2001). However, as noted, social media is a very different type of mass media as it allows many-to-many interactions instead of the one-to-many delivery modes of traditional forms of mass media such as television and newspapers. An important difference is the role that social media users’ emotions can play out in their interactions. The study participants confirmed that conflicts that were visible on social media influenced their reflection process. These conflicts brought out responses that appeared to

indicate an emotional response by the participants. However, SCT does not deeply consider the role that emotions and emotional responses play in the learning process.

SCT focuses on the interplay between the individual, their environment, and their behavior. However, the theory does not suggest that one or the other of these factors is more influential than the other factors. Individuals each have different levels of maturity, have had different experiences, and experience different emotions that can be impacted by their physical state. All of these differences can affect the influence any one of the factors may have on their learning. While the study participants were close in age, it is possible that their maturity levels varied widely which may have influenced the interplay between themselves, the social media environment, and their behavior and ways of being. More specifically, their maturity levels may have influenced their reflection process.

In summary, both the theory of public pedagogy and SCT focus on understanding what and how adults can learn from forms of mass media and sites widely available to the public such as social media. However, while each theory has a different focus, together, they serve as a framework for understanding how reflection is used by adults when learning about political news on social media

### **Implications for Practice**

As Feldman (2015) states “the rising use of social media platforms and the effect of these technologies on learners’ knowledge construction and political action is perhaps the largest contemporary issue facing adult education today” (p. 59). Therefore, it is important to consider how the examination of the findings in light of the two theoretical frameworks can offer several implications for practice, both from the learner perspective and from the adult educator perspective. The following four implications will be discussed: (a) the importance of

incorporating social media use as part of adult education; (b) the importance for adult educators incorporate activities that require adults to select and reflect upon political news topics on social media as a way to practice engaging with this platform; (c) the importance for adult educators need to teach ways to engage in a civil political discussion on social media platforms; and (d) the importance for adult educators to teach in ways that both encourage and teach techniques to engage in deep thinking and reflection.

**Incorporating social media in adult education.** This study has revealed how important social media is as a site for learning about political news topics and how adults have been able to use reflection to learn from this site. Further, the study found that the cognitive overload often experienced when using social media as a site of learning about political news topics influenced the participants' process of reflection. With the exception of those who used social media extensively for their job, the study participants did not question the overall purpose or reason for the existence of the social media platform. Recognizing that social media platforms are owned by corporations that collect data to sell targeted advertisements to reap large profits is important as one considers why social media could or should be used as a site of learning. As Bennett (2016) noted, there has long been a tension when trying to reconcile how political news organizations could be unbiased and act in the public good when they effectively sell their audience's attention to advertisers to generate revenue.

Another challenge that participants had to their process of reflection was the experience of cognitive overload as a result of the vast amount of political news content that is constantly presented on social media platforms. As Merriam and Bierema (2014) noted, the "sheer volume [of content on the Internet] is not only overwhelming but incomprehensible" (p. 199). Therefore, unless individuals can manage their cognitive overload by filtering out what they deem as

unimportant or not credible, individuals may find it difficult to not only to recall the information but to reflect on the content.

Consequently, it is possible to envision classes that provide education around the social media platforms most widely used to consume political news content. Topics might include basic overviews of the corporations that own these platforms and how the platforms are used to generate revenue for those corporation as well as what influences algorithms have on the ways the platforms operate and present content. In addition, incorporating techniques that can be used to filter and parse content to reduce the cognitive overload experienced on social media would be important.

**Incorporate activities to practice selection and reflection with social media content.**

The study participants found that they often engaged in mindless scrolling on social media before finding something that drew their attention to political news content. They also noted that they spent a good deal of time seeking to validate the credibility of the political news content they found on social media. Largely due to the fact that anyone can post content that is meant to be viewed as political news, political news on social media is experiencing a credibility crisis (Shao et al., 2018). As stated previously, Diehl, Weeks, and Gil de Zuniga (2016), found that those who used social media to access political news, even incidentally, could be persuaded to reconsider their political views. The crisis of credibility and the importance of social media to inform political views emphasizes the need for adult educators to incorporate activities that allow adults to practice selecting and then reflecting upon political news content consumed on social media.

Because of the breadth of topics encompassed under the concept of political news adult educators could incorporate a practice activity that aligns with almost any course topic. Further,

using a guided practice with technology can make a significant impact on the use of reflection (Kori, Pedaste, Leijen, & Maeots, 2014). Such an activity could be used to help adults become more confident in how they assess political news content on social media to be credible and allow them to learn techniques to avoid distractions as they fully consume the content and engage in reflection.

**Teach ways to engage in political discussions on social media.** Conflicts and “fights” were revealed to be aspects of social media interactions about political news topics that influenced the study participants’ process of reflection. Some participants recognized their engagement in these conflicts as a lapse in judgement. Therefore, it would be beneficial for adult educators to teach ways for adults to engage in productive political discussions on social media.

Engaging in online discussions on social media can be very different from engaging in face-to-face conversations. The speed of the exchanges, the restriction on the length of the exchanges and the mistrust between the participants have all be cited by the study participants as reasons why they found it difficult to engage in productive discussions on social media about political news topics. Adult educators could facilitate a separate course on online political discussions or they could incorporate techniques for productive online discussions within any course topic.

**Teach to engage in deep thinking and reflection.** As Carr (2008) noted and as was discussed previously, the nature of how social media platforms function can impede one’s ability for deep thinking and reflection. Not only does one’s social media feed continually update with new content, but many social media platforms provide notifications when friends or followed accounts interact with or post new content. Further, the devices many adults use to access social media are connected to other applications that offer a myriad of distracting notifications such as



email and text messages. Further, because reflection is such a critical part of the learning process, as discussed earlier, it is important that adult educators teach ways to engage in deep thinking and reflection. Like several other suggestions for practice, teaching for deep thinking and reflection on social media is something that could be included with any course topic.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

While this study offers an improved understanding of the influences to reflection participants experienced while consuming political news on social media, there are some limitations to this research. The study provides a starting point to understand what is known about how adults learn from social media; however, social media platforms themselves not only function in different ways, they also encourage individuals to express their identity in very different ways. For example, Facebook and LinkedIn expect users to express their actual identity using their name and to share personal or professional details about themselves. On the other hand, Twitter and Reddit users are not generally expected to share any part of their actual identity and users of these platforms often post either anonymously or using a pseudonym. It is possible that these different factors related to each social media platform may have influenced not only how the study participants interacted on the platforms, but also how they reflected on the content found there. While most of the participants largely discussed their experiences using Facebook, other's experiences were related to Reddit or Twitter. As a result, the findings may not be transferable to one particular social media platform or to another group of individuals who use a different mix of social media platforms. This limitation suggests that there are numerous opportunities for further research.

As previously mentioned, there has been limited research in adult education into the ways that adults reflect when learning from social media content, no matter what that content may include. More information is needed about how the public pedagogy of social media teaches adults of any age about political news. Further, expanding the research to combine adult education and political news studies will benefit both subject areas.

While the experiences of the study participants cannot be generalized to the whole population, their experiences permitted a view into how the functions of social media platforms and the social influences found there allowed me to examine ways reflection can both be employed and restricted. The insights generated from this study suggest there could be other ways that the pedagogical use of reflection on social media could be assessed. Because the social influences of social media played a large role in the use of reflection, applying the findings from this study to those of varying ages, demographics, and political persuasion provides an opportunity to further explore different social contexts within social media. Of particular importance is to broaden this research to participants that are less likely to have deep experience in the use of reflection such as the highly educated participants used in the current study. It is possible that the education level of the participants pre-disposed them to being generally more reflexive when consuming any content from any source. Therefore, the findings of this study may have limited application to the general population; yet the findings do provide a basis for expanded research in this important area.

### **Final Reflections**

When I started this research process, I had one primary goal in mind. I wanted to understand the part that social media played in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. I felt that if I could contribute some level of understanding, I could contribute to society in a way that would

allow our democratic system to continue to exist. It took me a while to focus this research project down to a reasonable scope as it was such a bit topic to try to understand. While I was interested in research that could leverage my interest in critical public pedagogy, I chose to narrow the focus to evaluating the use of reflection on social media. From my perspective, it is through the use of reflection that individuals can begin to become more aware of the power structures and the use of hegemonic forces in popular culture. With this more narrow view, I felt that I could set the stage for me to expand my research with the solid foundation that this study would provide.

I was happily surprised that so many of the study participants were not only very interested in my study, but also strongly emphasized how important they viewed the research to be. They were all very willing to allow me to have a glimpse into their social media use and their thinking about political topics. In these days of political polarization, sharing those thoughts with a stranger required a great deal of trust in my view so I considered myself fortunate to speak with the participants as they revealed their thoughts about political topics.

As I began the process to analyze the data and write up the results, I found that I spent a good deal of time staring off into space as I was trying to reflect and think deeply about what the data meant to me. I often wondered if I got it right; if, when the participants read my findings, they would wonder how I had come to those conclusions. After all, who was I to assess whether or not they reflected or learned? It wasn't unusual for me to use others as a sounding board for my thoughts. As I explained to others what my study was about, I found that I was actually talking through how my findings could be viewed through the theoretical lenses I used. As time when on, I felt more confident and assured that my interpretations were right, or at least

reasonable. Yet, I still feel that unease about what the participants might think of my interpretations.

I am not sure that the feeling of unease will ever fully go away even as I am finishing the project. However, what I do know is that uneasiness drives my curiosity to know more and to research more. I hope that this research makes even a small contribution about how adults learn from political news from social media. Even as I write this, many social media companies are under siege as the public demands that they are held more accountable for the content on their sites and how that content is presented, largely driven by the recognition that this content is educative in some way. Recognizing that my research might contribute, even a tiny bit, to understanding this important global concern gives me the greatest satisfaction.

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## VITA

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### EDUCATION

Doctor of Education (May 2020) in Lifelong Learning and Adult Education, Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Dissertation title: “Adult Learning and Reflecting on Political News: An Examination of the Public Pedagogy of Social Media”.

Master of Science (May 2014) in Health Sciences, George Washington University, Washington, D.C.

Master of Business Administration (May 2003) Lebanon Valley College, Annville, Pennsylvania.

Bachelor of Arts (May 1991) in Business Administration and Management, Alvernia University, Reading, Pennsylvania.

### ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

Director of Academics, USciences Online, University of the Sciences, February 2020 – present. Responsibilities include: oversight of all online academic programs and adjunct faculty.

Part-time Faculty, Department of Public Health Sciences, Pennsylvania State University, March 2016 – present. Responsibilities include: developing, updating and teaching graduate course in Population Health.

Adjunct Faculty, School of Health Studies and Education, Saint Joseph’s University, January 2008 – May 2015.

### PUBLICATIONS

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