

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: UNDERSTANDING STICKY NEWS:  
ANALYZING THE EFFECT OF CONTENT  
APPEAL AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT  
FOR SHARING POLITICAL NEWS ONLINE

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This dissertation investigates the concept of news stickiness and why certain news stories are shared more than others in an online environment. Building on theories of framing, uses and gratifications, and social psychology, the study is guided by the perspective that sharing behavior is considered a joint product of informational and personal factors. Previous research in the investigation of sharing motivations were usually one-sided, focusing on one particular attribute that contributes to the behavior; however, this dissertation argues the two key factors that drive news sharing each play a role in moving the audiences from content “internalizing” to content “externalizing.” Additionally, the dissertation also considers that the act of news sharing is carried out by humans and therefore, driven by the innate human needs that extend beyond content captivation. To bridge the gap in existing research, this dissertation adopts a mixed methods approach consisting of the following: 1)

Framing analysis of the “most shared articles of the day” on the *New York Times* website, examining shared content characteristics; and 2) online experiment testing whether the content features concluded from the framing analysis would make news stories more likely to be shared, with a post-experiment questionnaire evaluating the audience’s psychological motivations for sharing. Findings revealed that news personalization, particularly the use of emotional testimony, localized identification, and partisan provocation, constitutes the key content appeal shared by all articles sampled. Moreover, social engagement appeal is made up of five elements that help explain sharing behavior: reciprocal value, individual interest, information utility, persuasion potential, and the bandwagon effect. This dissertation is a step forward toward better understanding of how to make news sticky, in a sense that the news will not only be read but will also be shared extensively. It provided recommendations for news organizations seeking to analyze web traffic data and produce content that deeply resonates with their audiences. This study further contributed to the theoretical frameworks in audience engagement by associating human psychology with news sharing and ultimately confronted concerns such as an attraction to ‘fake news’ or a lack of interest in critical news on key issues.

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CONTENT APPEAL AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT FOR SHARING  
POLITICAL NEWS ONLINE

by

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## *1.1. The Research Problem*

The goal of this dissertation is to contribute to the understanding of how traditional news outlets can better understand audience engagement with news stories in the new media landscape. Specifically, the dissertation will investigate the concept of news stickiness, analyzing why certain breaking news coverage in politics attracts a larger number of more engaged readers than other news. In this study, news stickiness is a concept that attempts to unpack the specific elements of content that makes a story shareworthy. The shareworthiness of a story has been previously studied in the context of content virality, which means that there is an enhanced likelihood that the news story will be shared by multiple users in the digital space (Heimbach et al., 2015). In other words, virality simply measures how far a story travels in the online sphere but shifts the focus away from content attributes. This dissertation proposes that by examining the types of content elements and individual social needs that motivate users to share a story, news stickiness is key to our understanding of why certain stories are shared more than others and ultimately contributes to news virality.

Previous research often argues that news stories are more likely to attract repeated visits from audience members whose information and community-seeking needs are sustained through the ability to interact with news content and users simultaneously. With a large amount of news traffic linked to email and social networking sites, there is the assumption of passivity, that internet users are more

likely to stumble across news stories than actively seeking information. However, this dissertation argues that there are factors that drive people to engage more actively in seeking information and that people do exert increased selectivity and power of control with their news consumption behavior.

While there is considerable amount of research on the subject of why audiences read and share news in general, hardly any work has addressed this research topic by taking both the content value as well as framing of news and individual social engagement needs into consideration. Previous research has explored the role of specific message features and public opinion leadership that drive sharing, posting, and commenting behaviors online (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015; Bobkowski, 2015; Yaros, 2009). The present research is interested in exploring more comprehensive qualifiers of news stickiness by examining the specific motivations of audience news selection at the intersection of content appeal and social engagement needs. This dissertation will test whether a combination of content appeal with social engagement motivation can significantly help us to understand why certain news stories achieve sustained popularity (or stickiness) in the news cycle while other important breaking news is far less read or shared. The overall goal of the study is to contribute to our understanding of news content features and the communicative behavior of the audience. Taken together, they are significant drivers in shaping information distribution in breaking news. A more granular understanding of the intersection of story elements and the news consumer community should help media outlets better understand how to reach their audience most effectively. More broadly, this research will help us to understand how and why online news readers engage

with the news, helping to confront concerns such as an attraction to ‘fake news’ or a lack of interest in critical news on key issues.

According to a report by the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School, stickiness concerns a Google experiment that measures how likely users are to visit a site and how often they go beyond a first click to the second or third (Hindman, 2014). The term expresses the concept of an interest rate for the internet traffic. Keeping audience interest and attention has been long reflected upon by media scholars, yet limited research has found examining factors that contribute to news content’s stickiness and why certain stories aggregate a large amount of audience interaction in the form of commenting and sharing, thus creating the potential for the formation of a virtual community around this news. Some scholarship (Leskovec et al., 2009) in computer science has also found that different sources of news imitate each other, so that once a thread experiences significant volume, it is likely to persist and grow through adoption by others. Others argue that news resources are governed by the “recency” effect and that new threads are favored over older ones. For the purpose of this study, as previously mentioned, sticky news is defined as news content and topics with high personal relevance that prompts individual desire to return for *continued* engagement and discussion. Building on previous research that indicates various news sharing motives, the present research suggests that the stickiness of certain news stories largely depends on the degree to which news is personalized and one’s motivation to engage in community activities. What people pay attention to determines which products and news stories are the most sticky, i.e. those that receive the most shares.



Deeper and stronger engagement with the news content and other users also may trigger the formation of relationships and sense of virtual community. The conceptualization of stickiness in this dissertation sets the context of interest apart from the main focus in previous research regarding basic sharing and commenting motivations, as the ultimate feature and goal for sticky news would be to engage new and returned users continuously for an extended period of time, as opposed to one-time or brief visits. In all, it is important to emphasize that news reading and sharing are two different processes and that only the former has been paid much attention in scholarly research. What is missing in the current academic understanding of stickiness that will be supplied by this project is the focus on a story's information appeal as well as audience's community resonance.

Scholars have tried to study news stickiness through the lens of audience attention. Previous studies (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Swanson, 1987; Williams, 2012) have considered various ways to conceptualize and operationalize the term "attention" in media studies and identified news content elements with which the audience's attention patterns are potentially associated. Traditionally, "attention" is more often discussed in the field of marketing and advertising. Davenport and Beck (2000) regarded it as a cognitive process leading to actions. Others have related it to the aspects of frequency and time calculation, such as repeated visits as well as the visit duration. However, with regard to the internet and news content, these traditional measurements of "attention" are reported as inadequate to capture the multi-level concept in its new role. As Williams (2012) pointed out, the attention given to news stories by audiences is often influenced by the perceived credibility of a news source.

Audiences are aware of the various channels to fulfill their information-seeking needs; therefore, they actively choose the information sources that best serve their needs over other competing channels. Audiences are not able to pay continuous attention to all news stories at all times, which means selective exposure to the sources that provide the greatest benefits become inevitable in their news selection process. This conclusion is supported by research that has addressed the connection between the credibility of media sources and the attention that the source receives (Knobloch et al., 2003; Swanson, 1987; Chaffee & McLeod, 1973). These scholars argued that when audiences find information with less credibility and utility value, they will seek information elsewhere. In other words, the more skeptical the audiences are about a news source, the less likely it is that they are going to direct attention toward such sources.

Attention as a powerful tool to measure audience activities online has also been conceptualized in ways that analyze how we *use* it as a form of cognitive processing. According to Linda Stone (2017), who introduced the concept of “continuous partial attention,” audiences want to connect and be connected and are motivated by a desire to be a live node on the network. Stone noted that audience wants to “effectively scan for opportunity and optimize for the best opportunities, activities, and contacts, in any given moment. To be busy, to be connected, is to be alive, to be recognized, and to matter” (pp. 2). The understanding of this type of audience behavior is particularly valuable to news organizations as it offers insights into what drives and motivates news consumers. Such explanation is relevant to the current research because it highlights the importance of information appeal of news

stories as well as the potential of allowing us to stay connected and pay partial attention continuously when we consume these stories. In other words, we are selective in terms of the things that to which we assign our attention. We tend to prioritize useful and informative stories that do not necessarily require our complete full attention, yet we may still consider them share-worthy as a way to build a sense of community resonance through remaining in contact with our connections.

Building on the premise that audience attention is influenced by many different factors, this dissertation posits that the audience's sharing and interactive behaviors online are largely determined by the twin factors of news' information value and individuals' community resonance needs, which are two largely misunderstood or overlooked elements in audience engagement studies. These behaviors are unique to the digital media era and go beyond the traditional concept of "attention" in which users only gravitate toward certain topics and consume content without further a course of actions. Audience interaction online is a vivid example of the sticky effect of certain news topics and content that triggers steady sharing flow.

## ***1.2. Web Analytics***

For a long time, journalists did not know what the audience really wanted and could only determine its needs based on audience feedback or market evaluation to a certain extent. As the significance of providing what the public wants has been established in the news industry, the guessing game came to an end because audience preferences are now easily recorded by a variety of web analytics tools that are widely used in many newsrooms. Audience attention is the currency of the modern digital world: it is tracked, measured, and analyzed so that advertisers and news

producers can design materials to retain this attention as much as possible. Various website technical workers are put to the task of manipulating multiple functions online to present a more user-friendly environment, hoping for an increase in web traffic and user ‘lurking’ time. With news flowing at an unprecedented speed, though, updates occur by the minute and sometimes by the second, making it challenging for users to stop for long at one particular story. Some computer algorithms are used specifically to customize audience feeds and monitor web traffic. While carefully designed computer algorithms can usefully manage online participation (given that they usually control news suggestions for online users), they are only a tool that cannot account for other critical factors in the relationship between news and the reader. Not all news is created equal – some is much more compelling either to particular individuals (such as news about a local event) or in general (such as news about a critical national election). Thus, it is important to consider information management from more than the point of view of algorithms of pushing particular stories to users based on user history. One also needs a consideration of the more profound drivers of audience engagement as suggested in this dissertation.

Keeping the audience’s interest and attention has been long contemplated by media scholars, yet we have rarely seen studies examining factors that contribute to news content’s “stickiness” and why certain stories aggregate a large amount of audience interaction in the form of sharing. Undeniably, in seeking greater measurement of audience attention, web analytics tools provide news outlets with a wealth of information about audience behavior. According to the Web Analytics Association (2008, p. 3), web analytics refers to “the measurement, collection,

analysis and reporting of internet data for the purposes of understanding and optimizing web usage.” News organizations monitor how users of their respective websites behave online through metrics – a quantitative measure of passive viewing or consumption of content by internet users (Krall, 2009) – provided by the analytics programs. We know that they are powerful tools for evaluating reader attention; what we do not know is enough about how traditional communication concepts and methods can be deployed to help us understand digital audience attention in a deeper way.

There has been a growing number of scholarly studies that have examined newsroom practices with routine audience tracking measures (Boczkowski, 2010; Tandoc, 2014). A study by Vu (2013) employed a survey of newspaper editors in the United States to show that 84 percent of them monitored web traffic regularly, with 52 percent of the editors reporting that they did so every day. However, although web analytics provide largely reliable data with regard to audience footprints online, they may not be completely accurate. For example, a growing number of media outlets are heavily investing in analytics tools such as Chartbeat. It helps to inform them of not only the general demographics of their readers, but also how readers reach each story, the amount of time they spend on the story, whether there are any sharing activities further, and the number of active browser visits on a site at a given time (referred as “concurrents” on Chartbeat). However, it does not fill the knowledge gap between the selection of metrics provided and actual key performance data that news organizations should be aware of. Analyzing web statistics can be time consuming for someone new to analytics. Journalists often do not have the time and resources to

fully investigate the data provided by these tools when they are more focused on building content. Some scholars also noted that “carrying out a census-like measurement of users’ online activities is clearly limited by the lack of a link between activity and user” (Bermejo, 2005). In other words, the metrics that emerge from the analytics tools that news organizations have invested much money on can only help explain *what* the audience are reading and not *why* they are doing so, which is arguably the more important question.

Web analytics do engage with the idea of evaluating news stickiness on the surface level but they do not offer enough conceptual depth. In particular, we have little knowledge about whether the type of news that audiences frequently visit or spend much time on differs from news emphasized by the traditional editorial judgment. It is also nearly impossible to gauge and understand the metrics received from analytics deeply without consulting with audience members directly, which is what is neglected in the academic literature and something that journalists have not been able to explore fully. Previous studies found that most newsrooms still use web analytics primarily for monitoring traffic only, which also leads them to use audience information in their news making decisions (Tandoc, 2015). There are also different factors that contribute to how news organizations use web analytics, causing inconsistent perception of the importance and necessity of these tools. Many organizations may choose to track audience traffic more so than others due to funding availability and the leadership’s willingness to make editorial decisions based on news performance. For example, a study found that Al Jazeera journalists felt content to ignore audience metrics in what was perceived as “the safe space of the Al Jazeera

newsroom” (Usher, 2013). Such tension between the knowledge of what audience wants and journalists’ own news agenda may be eased by an examination of more comprehensive qualifiers that determine news “stickiness.”

### ***1.3. What Do We Know Now?***

Mediated mass communication has always been an effective and preferred means for politicians to get their messages across to the public. Both political actors and journalists alike continuously perfect their communication strategies, yet only a limited amount of information eventually makes it into the news (Berkowitz & Adams, 1990). Among those messages that become published news stories, some garner more attention while others are neglected. This dissertation topic stems from the growing phenomenon of political information sharing as a means of political expression, yet the factors that motivate individuals to share such information online with their social networks have not been comprehensively identified. Several researchers at the Pew Research Center concluded in 2011, “if searching for news was the most important development of the last decade, sharing news may be among the most important of the next” (Olmstead et al., 2011). According to another report by the Pew Research Center, two-thirds (68%) of the adults in the United States get news from social media in 2018, and about three quarters of these users visit Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram daily (Pew, 2018). This problem is of interest because, in the modern media environment, online platforms such as social media and email have increasingly become a space for people to express political opinions, seek information, connect with others through a topic, as well as share news and updates (Weeks & Holbert, 2013).

Under the current political climate in the United States, socially shared political information is crucial as a means for modern-day news dissemination and discussion. This dissertation seeks to take a closer look at how some political news become viral stories online while others do not. Building on existing studies that highlight connections between one's communicative behavior and political news use, this dissertation explores thematic qualifiers in a sticky story's content and contributes to the field of research by focusing on the social engagement factors as an additional layer of influence that also motivate citizens to share political information online.

The current research concerns a timely issue in journalism and media coverage of political events following the 2016 presidential election of the United States. President Trump has dubbed some news media and journalists as “sick people” (Victor, 2017) and “crooked” (Finnegan, 2017) who are “the enemy of the American people” (Cillizza, 2017) on multiple occasions, making the tension between the current U.S. president and the American press “the most sustained attack any president has ever made on the news media,” pointed out by The Washington Post columnist Margaret Sullivan (Garber, 2017). As President Trump engages and escalates his widespread “war” against the news media, journalists have been progressively criticized or applauded for confronting the government on Trump's attacks on the “fake news media.” There has been an increasing appetite among the public for the protection of the First Amendment and political news coverage to “shine a light in dark corners and hold the government accountable,” says Washington Post editor Marty Baron.



The pressure for the media to uncover the truth surrounded by unprecedented political hostility bears some unexpected benefit for the news industry. Media outlets across the country have been able to reap the rewards in the form of a growing size of engaged audiences (Hatcher, 2016). However, what the audiences are engaged with and why they are doing so remain to be researched much more fully. According to The Hill, MSNBC and some late-night talk shows are enjoying their best ratings during the Trump presidency, and the New York Times, often at the forefront of Trump's disapproval, has seen a significant surge in subscriptions (Stanage, 2017). The controversial flavors of political news are in abundance as the administration tries to implement policy change for a variety of issues. Facing no shortage of political news feed, what makes certain stories stand out remains an especially intriguing point of research for social scientists. While it is easy to conclude that some news stories are widely read and consumed on a variety of platforms, the task remaining is to identify user characteristics and content features that propel news diffusion. Moreover, as scholars have confirmed that certain news content and topics are more successfully shared, this dissertation is interested in which specific stories are more likely to be shared if all concern the same topic.

This dissertation argues, however, that content is only one part of the equation in understanding what creates sticky news only. This dissertation also aims to examine how audience engagement online creates sticky news content, how the various sharing behaviors are triggering conversations and community building through common interests and shared platforms. Research on audience's online news reading behaviors has been growing rapidly. In the cases of breaking news, recent

studies have examined cases such as the BP oil spill (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012), Hurricane Sandy (Lachlan et al., 2014), and Domino's product tampering YouTube crisis (Veil et al., 2012), to name a few. Numerous studies have examined the use and impact of the internet, yet most still focus on communication within the news websites in the form of commenting as opposed to sharing beyond the news sites (Sommerfeldt, 2011; Du et al., 2010), and have rarely taken the step further to examine community relationships as a motivator for audience participation online.

Here the research will examine how each dimension of a story's information appeal and community resonance will affect the likelihood of individuals to share a story. For a convenience sample, the researcher will monitor the lists of "most emailed articles today" and "Most shared articles on Facebook today" on *The New York Times*' website and examine various content qualities that make the stories engage stronger readership. This content analysis will be followed by a survey gauging the likelihood for people to share news. This multi-method does not discriminate against story topics and will provide better generalization support for the intended purpose of the study. The study was built on the premise that many impactful topics circulate on the internet and receive an extensive amount of coverage in the breaking news environment, yet not every published story is widely read and shared by the audience. The information appeal and community resonance of news stories are the key stimuli of this study. They will be defined and operationalized in subsequent sections.

#### ***1.4. News Content Appeal***

The first layer of news stickiness that this dissertation focuses on is a story's content appeal, which includes the following four dimensions:

First, plain-text news stories follow the traditional standards of newsworthiness and good journalism writing and they are both informative and useful. Scholars have developed several criteria for basic news writing. News should be, first of all, either context oriented or event oriented. This means that more news stories not only appear more often in the media but also receive greater coverage and are given more importance (Feeley et al., 2016). To unpack the quality of prominence, how a topic is considered newsworthy can be evaluated in 12 newsworthiness factors: frequency, threshold, unambiguity, meaningfulness, consonance, unexpectedness, continuity, composition, reference to elite persons, reference to elite people, personalization, and negativity (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). Adding on to these, news is also influenced by a journalistic process including ease of information access; information availability and readiness; journalists' news values; work routines; organizational pressure; and financial constraints (Tukachinsky, 2013). These standards serve as the basic components that identify and influence a good news story.

Second, human interest framing in news coverage has shown a widespread effect on political attitudes. Though all framing in news stories emphasize "a particular aspect of a topic that makes this element more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable and therefore more accessible and applicable in audience interpretations of the topic" (Entman, 1993), human interest frame is one of the most commonly used news frames (de Vreese, 2005). By applying and highlighting specific human

interests and personalizing news stories, journalists aim to bring a personal angle to the story, fostering the belief that certain problems depicted in the news are happening more frequently than in reality (Zillmann et al., 2004). Research shows that interviews and messages from ordinary citizens are usually more vivid and concrete than plain numbers or interviews with politicians and officials (Brosius & Bathelt, 1997). This is sometimes examined interchangeably with episodic framing, a news strategy that depicts issues by focusing on certain individuals and events (Iyengar, 1994). Some studies have investigated whether exposure to human interest-framed news will affect the attribution of responsibility of an issue, but what type of audience behavior such exposure may trigger is unclear.

Third, identifiability and localization have been conceptualized as part of an integrative framework that suggests a story is personalized if the character's personal identity or group affiliation is revealed and that the character's experience is specifically attached to one person and shared by a group of people (Small & Loewenstein, 2003). Health communication scholars have explained that such personalized depictions are more likely than depersonalized depictions to achieve intended persuasive effects. They allow the audiences to "enter the character's inner world and personalize the story more so than in the absence of this information" (Zhou & Niederdeppe, 2017).

Lastly, some scholars have in recent years tackled the research problem of partisan news use and its role in shaping political information sharing. Previous studies found that individuals who experience strong emotional responses to political content may be more likely to share information in social media (Berger & Milkman,

2012). This finding prompted scholars to explore partisan news as one likely source for citizens' emotional responses to politics. In a study of the *New York Times* website, Berger and Milkman (2012) found that stories that generated negative emotions were more likely to be both read and shared. In another study using data from a survey collected during the 2012 U.S. presidential election, Hasell and Weeks (2016) found that partisan media may elicit anger toward a particular political party or a specific person, hence it stimulates an emotion that can lead people to take action and encourage political information sharing. Emotions may also mediate the influence of partisan media on intention to participate (Wojcieszak et al., 2015). These scholars successfully established the link between partisan news consumption and emotional arousal among audiences, which posited that partisan media use affects the extent to which people share information about political news online. Results like these set promising groundwork for this dissertation as they indicate an indirect effect that political news may have on the broader population, especially when the possibility of getting exposed to news and political information on social networking sites is higher (Kim et al., 2013). Adding on to the literature, the present research posits that political news is more likely to be shared when the content is more or less tailored for specific audience groups and that it caters to one's needs and desire to socially and psychologically engage with oneself and others.

As previously mentioned, the current political environment offers us an unparalleled opportunity for news media to engage the public via political reporting. Political news sharing also presents scholars a compelling opportunity to study online users' news sharing behavior in general because politics are inherently controversial

and emotional (Marcus, 2000). Even when provided with multiple stories of the same news topic, partisan media use is especially conducive to various content features and emotional arousal. For example, at around 11:00 p.m. on October 12, 2017, the *New York Times* shared a breaking news article on its Facebook page regarding Trump scraping critical health care subsidies and attacking the Affordable Care Act again. Within 24 hours, it had generated over 900 shares on Facebook. Roughly around the same time at 10:35 p.m. on October 12, the *Washington Post* posted a similar article titled “Trump to end key ACA subsidies, a move that could threaten the law’s marketplaces” on its Facebook page, and within 24 hours it had garnered 100 shares. What lies behind the difference in the share numbers? Granted, the *New York Times* has 14 million followers on Facebook, and the *Washington Post* is “liked” by barely 6 million. However, the general belief is that once an article is shared by someone on Facebook, it will pop up on all of his or her friends’ news feed, regardless of whether this friend is following the article’s source or not. Intuitively, one could easily attribute such difference in an article’s impact on factors involving a prominent story topic and the level of engagement by its readers. To take a step further, the reputation of a news outlet and the strength of its social media presence also arguably play a role. As news organizations have started to closely monitor their website traffic and audience activities in recent years, how news articles of the same topic that are published by similarly reputable sources may generate a vastly different amount of influence online remains an understudied question.

### ***1.5. Audience’s Social Engagement Needs***

This dissertation argues that we cannot understand the motivation to share news stories without considering the motivations linked to everyday social interactions. Scholars have previously focused on habit, companionship, passing time, and entertainment as main motivations for media content consumption among audience members (Van den Bulck & Claessens, 2014; Santana, 2013; Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2012; Domingo & Heinonen, 2008). The overarching concept is that the more strongly media users are motivated, the more actively they will engage in various audience activities (Lin, 1993). This dissertation, however, is interested in recognizing *why* users take actions to share stories in the post-consumption stage. It is important to further understand whether the appeal of user interaction and community engagement with news sharing would motivate the audience to distribute and revisit a story. In other words, to explore the qualities that make certain news topics stickier than others and the process of community formation, one needs to step back and evaluate these questions: After reading a story online, why do some of us feel the need or urge to share what we see with the rest of the world?

The uses and gratification model has been widely applied in scholarly work examining audiences' news consumption habit and the motivations behind the reading behavior. Frequently, it is the first paradigm in audience psychology studies that researchers need to thoroughly review before diving further into audience behavior analyses. As defined by Lee (2013), uses and gratifications is composed of several key ideas, namely: 1) audiences are active consumers of media; 2) media uses are purposive and goal-oriented (e.g. to satisfy certain needs); 3) media uses are driven by specific reasons, or motivations, within a wide range of gratifications that

vary across individuals and communication processes; and 4) social (e.g. social groups or relationships) and structural factors (e.g. channel or platform availability) also play a part in mediating communication behavior and effects. In his work examining the relationship between journalists and users, Heinonen (2011) discusses the basic premise of uses and gratification theory: audiences are not passive, but active users, and they have been this way even before the interactivity of the internet. Coleman (2012) also discusses uses and gratification theory when outlining what he calls “surveillant” users, those who hope to keep current with world news.

Sundar, however, pushes past those traditional uses and gratification categories to suggest digital gratifications for digital users. According to Sundar (2013), all of the uses for an online audience could fall under the category of information-seeking, as this is the nature of the online community, so it is necessary to go beyond this category and break it down into more specific gratifications and uses. Some of the overarching categories he suggests include modality (e.g. the method of presentation and agency), the ability to affect change, interactivity, the ability to modify content or navigability, and the ability to move through the medium.

As Lee (2013) points out, uses and gratifications studies are not entirely accurate or reliable. The largest problem is that these studies rely upon self-reporting descriptive information rather than quantitative unbiased fact (Lee, 2013). Therefore, results of many of these studies are likely to be flawed in some ways. However, these concepts are still important because all of these gratifications being met or not being met could affect audiences’ sharing behavior, especially online where there are many different moving parts such as one’s social media presence, the availability of various



sharing buttons on each news site, or accessibility of one's online network. The uses and gratifications model serves as a fundamental concept for understanding audiences' behavior online, especially news reading; however, it does not capture individual motivations for news sharing adequately. Whether the audience's social engagement gratifications gained from news reading would apply to news sharing remains somewhat lesser known.

The innate social engagement needs for audiences to spread information to their social connections are something that have been discussed previously but the literature on this is somewhat inconsistent. Many scholars focused on news commenting and analyzed the motivations behind it alongside news sharing. This dissertation, however, is particularly interested in news sharing behaviors as a key communal social experience that taps into one's innate needs for a sense of social connection. Several scholars have highlighted several main reasons for people to share news on social networking sites. LaRose and Eastin (2004) discussed the pleasure of forging and reinforcing social ties among users as a crucial gratification people obtain from using the internet. The essence of sharing news on social networking sites lies in "sharing" news experiences with others (Choi, 2016). News shared among internet users may create the information source that lays the foundation to foster social connections and relationships (Lee & Ma, 2015).

An overall more comprehensive examination of the effect of audiences' online news sharing behaviors on community engagement is called for in the present research, with this dissertation suggesting that such behaviors are largely motivated by qualities of sticky news. In the events of news sharing, it is believed that online

users are able to “transcend geographic boundaries and redefine their sense of community” (Moy and Hussain, 2012). A handful of studies have investigated the motivations for online sharing behaviors by examining motivational factors that influence news sharing among people in the social media environment. Some researcher identified news sharing as a form of news externalizing, which means a more strategic and active behavior of posting news links (Weeks & Holbert, 2013). Sharing knowledge on social media helps one to attain status among peers and obtain peer recognition (Hew & Hara, 2007). By sharing content and exchanging ideas with fellow users online, we may enhance our reputation and popularity (Rafaeli & Ariel, 2008). Furthermore, research has suggested that motivations such as reputation building (Park et al., 2009) and providing information and offering social support (Ridings et al., 2006) are connected with information sharing and posting. Collectively, past research suggests a combination of factors that contribute to audiences’ sharing behavior through a sense of community resonance: maintaining social ties and relationships, reinforcing identity and personal beliefs, exerting social influence, and establishing status.

### ***1.6. Study Background***

This dissertation seeks to examine specific qualifiers of the content appeal of news, combined with an investigation of one’s social engagement needs, to explore what makes certain news “stickier” than others. Through a content analysis of the most shared stories on the *New York Times* in July and August of 2017, it was found that stories engaged with human interest personalization and episodic framing were more likely to be shared.

Taking the topic of immigration policy for example, several stories on President Trump's announcement of the possible removal of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program were published in the New York Times on September 6, 2017, along with video content and opinion pieces. Of all coverage on this announcement, four articles approached the news in different angles. They were titled:

“Trump Moves to End DACA and Calls on Congress to Act” (A)

“The Very Bad Economics of Killing DACA” (B)

“C.E.O.s See a ‘Sad Day’ After Trump’s DACA Decision” (C)

“Democrats Begin Legal Assault on Trump’s Move to End ‘Dreamer’ Program” (D)

As of February 10, 2018, each of the article had experienced different amount of attention on Facebook. Article A stood at 77 shares, and articles B, C, and D had 7,967, 1,957, and 138 shares respectively. Many factors could have contributed to this dramatic difference in the amount of sharing each article had received on Facebook alone. While all four articles were largely similar in story length, the use of multimedia elements such as photos and videos, and overall tone of reporting, this dissertation argues that human interest framing present in articles B and C, as well as strong partisan content in article D were the major reasons that played a role here. The present study is built on the premise that many impactful stories of the same topic circulate on the internet and receive an extensive amount of coverage in the political news environment, yet not every published story is widely read and shared

by the audience. This is just one example of what this dissertation seeks to uncover about why some stories on the same topic are shared more widely than others.

As previously discussed, to more effectively capture audience interest in an attempt to explain why story performance differs, news organizations are already engaging with web analytics tools to analyze audience traffic. These tools are no strangers to business owners as a means to track site visitors, and there has been a rise in the application of these tools among news media outlets in the last decade. Google Analytics, Chartbeat, Parse.ly, and CrowdTangle, are few of the many available tools out there that allow journalists to drive, understand, monitor, and react to audience behaviors on their sites. Facebook and Twitter installed their own built-in analytics function on their websites to allow users to further examine the data behind a page or tweets beyond just numbers of “likes” and followers. Today, these tools offer an easy and inexpensive (and often times, free) ways to track audience activities, making them one of the key ways to ensure marketing success. The benefits are obviously tangible and crucial. Analytics tools offer insights into the best performing articles or sections on a news site at any given time of the day, audience demographics, page visits and unique visitors, social mentions of the account, the amount of time readers spend on watching a live video or reading an article, and detailed reports on site performance and raw, real-time data collection. Some tools also allow the monitors to compare results with other competitors and suggest advertisement placement, creating media intelligence with visually friendly statistics. Although the lure of content performance analytics is critical and appealing, these tools do not provide measurements on specific content features besides videos and photos, and one will

not be too convinced as to why audience members choose to share and spread certain stories more than others. This is where this dissertation seeks to fill in the blanks, and dive deep into audience psychology to hopefully make sense of audience choice and selections to further understand the data presented.

Currently in the United States, a charged political climate seems to have made social media and news both more relevant and more contentious within society. At the same time, socially shared political news is a growing phenomenon in general. The widespread nature of news sharing shows that social media sites have become important sources of information for online news users (Napoli, 2015). Even for those who continue to find news through more traditional ways, social media sites have been developed into a significant secondary channel for news consumption (Bright, 2016). News sharing on social media also challenges the news media agenda because instead of undermining the traditional outlets, it only enhances their influence (Bright, 2016). Audiences are exerting both editorial control and social communal expressions when making the decisions on which news they would like to make more or less visible.

An increasing amount of people list social media as a major venue where they find and consume news (Mitchell & Guskin, 2013). Recent research by the Pew Research Center also shows that Americans are more likely than ever to seek news from social media sites, where Facebook dominates the largest share of social media news consumers (Grieco, 2017). The same study shows that Facebook also sees the most loyal group of news users that half of its news consumers get news from the social media site alone. Reddit, YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Snapchat and

WhatsApp share a smaller amount of news consumers in comparison; however, it is worth noting that Reddit has a small but more exclusive audience, with only 4% of U.S. adults get news from the site and only 38% of these population use three or more social media sites for news (Grieco, 2017). This sets a crucial background to the current study of interest because a better understanding of strong news dissemination and distribution on the internet continues to be a promising line of inquiry.

### ***1.7. Research Questions***

This doctoral research tackles the question of why some news articles are distributed and shared more than others online via social media. While there has been some research on why some stories are more newsworthy and why people choose to share news in general, it is not clear what essentially drives a consistent sharing pattern. Relatively little work has touched on the evaluation of news interest at the intersection of information appeal and community resonance motivations, although many studies have suggested that these two elements are both key to understanding sharing behavior. By employing a content analysis of online news, an experiment testing the four features of information appeal and a questionnaire surveying people's motivation and likelihood to view and share a story, this dissertation sets to address this deficit by asking this overarching question: What motivates people to share news, therefore increasing the degree of stickiness of a story? Specifically, the study posits the following research questions:

***RQ1: To what extent does a story's content appeal affect whether individuals are motivated to share a story?***

Here the study focuses on stories' content features as the first layer of influence that affects individual news sharing behavior. As discussed in the following chapters, news stories need to acquire the basic communication utility function that news content should be informative, valuable and useful, among other characteristics. Results from the content analysis show that a story's human-interest personalization level is the greatest common factor that the most shared stories encompass. Such human-interest personalization includes content features such as emotional testimony, localized identification, and partisan provocation. It is hypothesized that individuals are more likely to share a news story if the story's content appeal is high.

***RQ2: To what extent does the audience's social engagement needs affect whether individuals are motivated to share a story?***

Here the present research is concerned with the second layer of influence that affects individual news sharing behavior. This relates to a central hypothesis of this dissertation that individual preferences toward more personalized stories are rooted in one's motivation to effectively maintain social relationships. We cannot understand this motivation to share without considering the motivations linked to everyday social interactions. The expectation here is that stories that allow citizens to express self-interest, maintain a certain social image, resonate with an existing idea, echo with a popular opinion, show support to friends and connections, and sustain social relationships are more likely to be shared due to the abovementioned social and psychological benefits. Ultimately, this builds on findings from previous studies that discuss gratifications such as entertainment and forging social connections as main motivations for media consumption. It also illuminates that although the use of

newspapers and television news is not directly associated with information sharing (Weeks & Holbert, 2013), there are potential psychological needs of the audience that political news may stimulate and thus, exert an effect on sharing behavior online.

### ***1.8. Dissertation Structure***

Chapter 1 of this dissertation introduces the background of the research problem and why the current research topic is important to media scholars and practitioners. It highlights findings from previous studies and existing knowledge of practice in audience engagement leading up to the theoretically promising paradigm that this dissertation proposes. It has introduced the methods that will be used in the study, which is a mixed-method design combining a content analysis and an experiment.

In the first phase of this mixed-method study, I monitored the lists of “Most emailed articles today” and “Most shared articles on Facebook today” on the New York Times’ website and collected a total of 323 articles from July 3, 2017 to August 31, 2017. The articles were coded by the following items: video Presence, Photo/Image Presence, Social Media Link Presence, Interactivity, Human Interest Personalization, and News Framing. Article qualities such as the article type, section in which it appeared, breaking news or non-breaking news, political story type, and the amount of times that an article had appeared in the lists for more than once were also recorded. Results from the content analysis informed the development of a quantitative instrument in the second phase of the mixed-method study to further explore the research problem.



This second phase of the study utilized an online experiment that employs a between-subjects design in which each participant was randomly placed into only one out of four groups (one control group and three treatment groups). The dependent variable of the present study is the likelihood of news sharing by individuals, and the independent variable is a story's personalization level. As identified in the review of literature, content personalization is guided by three theoretical categories of news stickiness: emotional testimony, localized identification, and partisan provocation. Through two groups of news stimuli in the topics of immigration and military policy, each participant was randomly exposed to one version of the story and asked how likely they were to share the article they just read. Following such experiment, the participants were invited to complete a post-experiment questionnaire that further examine their news sharing habit. Results from the experiment were able to confirm the power and authority of one's social engagement needs in driving news sharing behaviors.

Chapter 2 and 3 direct the focus to the two separate appeals that affect political news sharing and situate the discussion in academic literature, further reviewing traditional qualifiers of newsworthiness and characteristics of compelling news stories as well as further analyzing motivations for audiences' online behaviors that are not limited to news sharing. Both chapters position the dissertation in the direction of extending our existing knowledge of news dissemination patterns and suggest a conceptual design of key terms and themes that are of central interest for this research.

Here the dissertation also discusses the potential broader impact of the current research. It lays out the implications of the central research questions for our understanding of news distribution and audience engagement. Such implications also propose challenges for media organizations to produce more sticky news content and more effectively manage audience activities and expectations. These items provide important theoretical insights into how content and social factors are the key mediating mechanism that drives online political news sharing, which is of significant value to journalists and media outlets that are in a never-ending pursuit of story production that resonates with the audience. This significance is also backed up in the final chapter where a comprehensive conclusion is discussed.

Chapters 4 through 6 describe the method design of this study and present the findings. The mixed method project includes a content analysis of the 320 most-shared news articles on the New York Times' website, sampled in July and August of 2017. It also includes an online experiment testing whether personalized stories are more likely to be shared, subsequently surveying the public on motivations related to news sharing in general.

The following sections of literature review will start with a comprehensive examination of how human-interest personalization stems from the literature of newsworthiness and how it fits as a part of content appeal that drives news sharing. This will fill an important gap in the understanding of audience engagement with news as we bridge the connection between news reading and news sharing. Following the discussion of content appeal, the dissertation will review the individual motivations for news consumption and identifies the psychological factors that may

encourage sharing as well. This dissertation seeks to evaluate news sharing as a further step in the news engagement spectrum. Content and social factors that motivate earlier steps such as news reading are indispensable and have been widely researched, but what motivates the audience to read may not motivate them to share. This dissertation seeks to illuminate why people share news, a critical question as the audience becomes more powerful in driving visibility of certain news stories.

## Chapter 2: News Stickiness – Content Appeal

This dissertation studies the concept of news stickiness and factors that motivate the audiences to share news. In particular, the researcher measures stickiness through two factors: a news story's content value and the audience's social engagement needs. Though it is clear that news sharing is both important and frequent, not much is known about why certain types of news stories are stickier than others. Decades of research suggest information sharing has an important impact on attitudes and decision making (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). About 59 percent of digital users report that they frequently share content with others online (Allsop et al., 2007). Most of what we already know about news sharing stems from data-driven, rather than theory-driven, studies. Research shows that a handful of studies that explain news sharing only focused on technology innovations as a main contributor, instead of information content and news attributes (Kumpel et al., 2015). To fill in some of the gaps, this chapter specifically explores how a news story's content appeal affects whether individuals are motivated to share that story online.

The chapter identifies two elements that account for content appeal: human interest personalization as a news presentation style and episodic framing. There has been a significant degree of similarity among research findings on what makes news stories worth reading (i.e. newsworthiness) (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). However, news reading and news sharing are two different processes, and it is important to differentiate engagement from exposure, although the two are related. What would be considered a worthy story to *read* may not have much to do with whether it is a worthy story to *share*. It is

possible that a news consumer may click on and read a story but refrain from sharing it or taking any further actions. In other words, stories can be newsworthy but not necessarily “sticky.” Thus, this study defines sticky news online using a description proposed by Heimbach et al.’s (2015): a property of content that enhances the likelihood to be shared by multiple users in the digital space. News stickiness is equated with information transmission beyond the sheer attention or evaluation garnered by the content (Valenzuela et al., 2017). However, since one needs to have the desire to consume a story first before they would consider sharing it, knowing what the audience likes to read or consume is fundamental to understanding what they choose to share.

This section of the dissertation draws on framing, one of the most popular theories of media effects, with a particular emphasis on the affective and behavioral aspects of framing. This is an understudied area because a large amount of literature emphasizes the cognitive effects of news framing (de Vreese, 2012), which explains that highlighting certain aspects of an event or issue may potentially influence how the audience *thinks* about a particular event or issue. How content may predict news stickiness by influencing the audience’s behavioral needs, such as what they may *do* with the information read, remains lesser known (Cappella et al., 2015).

The present research makes several important contributions in the discussion of how content characteristics affect news stickiness. First, this chapter reviews studies of both what journalists and the audience consider to be newsworthy and measure elements of news content that drive people to share news. Second, the findings provide insight into how to craft contagious news content that can benefit

from large-scale social sharing. Essentially, this chapter seeks to tackle how newsworthiness could be related to share-worthiness. Understanding the information appeal that motivates people to share news online can help news organizations manage audience engagement better and improve content visibility.

### ***2.1. Personalizing the News***

One of the key elements that drives reader interest in reading and possible subsequent sharing of stories is news personalization. Specifically, this dissertation focuses personalization as a type of content format and narrative presentation and argues that there are three elements of personalization that can drive sharing: emotional testimony, localized identification, and partisan polarization. Together, the presence of these indicators in news content influences the story's stickiness and therefore promotes news sharing. For this dissertation, the concept of personalization refers to the journalistic practice of content manipulation that aims to increase news vividness by associating an ordinary human face, a specific group, and location as well as heated partisan debates to newsworthy events (Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2005; Bas & Grabe, 2015). This is distinct from common conceptions of personalization under consideration when discussing online news, which range from recommendation systems, web design, and algorithmic filtration such as Google searches (which rely on an individual's search history, demographic information, and geographic location, for example see Lafrance, 2017). However, personalization – as conceived of in the present research – entails more than the appearance of customized interface design and ultra-personalized content.

The following sections will discuss three typologies that are specific to a story's content appeal and extract personalization as the shared attribute that defines what kind of news is more likely to be consumed and, consequently, shared.

### **2.1.1. Emotion-Provoking News Content**

Personalized news content is particularly powerful usually due to its effectiveness at pulling on the strings of people's emotions. The emotional aspects of content related to the cognitive effect of news may affect whether it is shared (Heath et al., 2001). Many studies have analyzed the cognitive and attitude-related effects of news frames in a variety of news topics. Research shows that emotionally evocative content might be particularly viral due to its potential to pass on positive or negative reactions (Berger & Milkman, 2011). In comparison of whether positive content is more sticky than negative content online, or vice versa, findings confirmed that emotions evoked by positive content usually drive stronger social sharing of news. Many studies assign specific human reactions to study the audience's emotional responses, such as anger, sadness, anxiety, surprise, hope, and pride (Kim, 2016; Myrick, 2017). These emotions function as mediators in the relationships between specific news content and responses of the readers (Kim 2016).

There are four major ways that personalized news content could be emotionalized. First, sensationalism and its capability to provoke attentions or arousal responses in viewers is deemed as a powerful agent of content emotionalization (Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001). Emotional news content had traditionally been associated with infotainment and soft news that are linked to the less professional and desirable practice of journalism, where the paradigm of objectivity is challenged

(Gripsrud, 2000). Many aspects of the form and content of television news may be considered as generally indicative of attention grabbing, namely tones of the anchors, movements of the camera, sound effects, the story focus, etc. By virtue of their attention-provoking capacity, such features may be described as tabloid packaging (Grabe et al., 2003). However, many argue that emotional news can hardly be seen as the opposite of objectivity (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Ward, 2005). Even the most revered and exemplary journalistic writings employ frames to suggest to audiences ways in which the news should be understood (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987).

Second, arousing content such as violence, disasters, and negative materials are often associated with the functions of enhancing audience memory and stimulating heightened persuasiveness (Slattery & Hakanen, 1994; Bas & Grabe, 2015). The human sensitivity to this kind of information explains why both journalists and their audience pay so much attention to deviant or bad news (Davis & McLeod, 2003; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). For example, social and political instability such as protests, demonstrations, and military turmoil; natural disasters; and economic instability all come with the potential to threaten the status quo in the country in which they occur (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001; Shoemaker et al., 1987; Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006). Therefore, arousing content in media messages may be described by three categories of information features that are expected to attract attention: (a) tabloid packaging, (b) concreteness, and (c) proximity.

Third, in line with proximity, personalization and exemplification are a major journalistic technique that news could be emotionalized. Assigning an ordinary, non-



expert layperson view in news reporting typically increases the vividness of newsworthy events through emotional response (Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2005). Here, it is important to differentiate between emotional personalization and traditional sensationalism: the former focuses on the presence of an ordinary citizen's face who has experienced certain social issues personally, facilitating empathy and memory from other ordinary citizens in the audience group (Bas & Grabe, 2015). This style of personalization moves beyond manipulation of news topics and packaging dimensions, which are common operationalizations of news sensationalism. Together, such emotional personalization in news speaks to the cognitive mechanisms of audience groups.

Emotional personalization in news embodies two dimensions: empathy-inducing testimony and identification. In personalized news, facial expressions and movements of regular citizens featured in a close-up television shot testifying to their personal experience with certain issues could evoke emotional responses in the audience (Hatfield et al., 1994). Additionally, in entertainment research, Cohen (2001) argues that exposure to emotional experiences of ordinary people will possibly trigger similar levels of empathetic responses. The identification mechanism works by encouraging users to temporarily adopt the perspectives and experience of media characters (Cohen, 2001). The limited literature on such emotion-provoking news features adds an understudied body of research on content personalization. Although scholars have acknowledged through existing studies that emotions are affected when exposed to certain types of news stories, the influence of news personalization on audience's news selection and sharing behavior requires more scholarly attention.

Fourth and finally, partisan news media provide an extension to the practice of content personalization with the goal of eliciting emotions among viewers. The fact that political news is inherently emotional has been well established among scholarship, but most studies so far have only focused on connections between political news consumption and opinion formation or political participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Diehl & Ardevol-Abreu, 2017; Wojcieszak et al., 2016). Partisan news stories encourage emotional responses through the topics they cover or by emphasizing one party over another (Baum & Groeling, 2008). Such emotions may predict political information sharing online, which are important factors to understand at the intersection of digital media use and motivations of the audience's online behavior. Studies have shown that liked-minded exposure of political news may be associated with increased campaign activity and early voting decisions (Brundidge et al., 2014; Dilliplane, 2011). Additionally, news consumption leads to increased political knowledge and cultivates a sense of political efficacy (Eveland et al., 2009).

More recent scholarship shows that heavily emotional political messages are more likely to be shared and distributed. In an attempt to evaluate the emotional effect of political news on audience's sharing behavior, Hasell and Weeks (2016) examined a sample of political stories in a variety of topics and found that certain topics in particular generate more emotions and attention from the readers, which affects what stories get shared. Additionally, a study of Twitter messages discovered that emotionally negative political messages were more likely to be retweeted (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). These studies provide crucial theoretical insights into how online partisan news media influence information sharing by identifying

particular emotions as key cognitive mechanisms. However, they did not touch on how such effect may take place with a group of articles of the same topic and why certain stories covering the same event may be shared more.

### **2.1.2. The P-I-C-K Content Model**

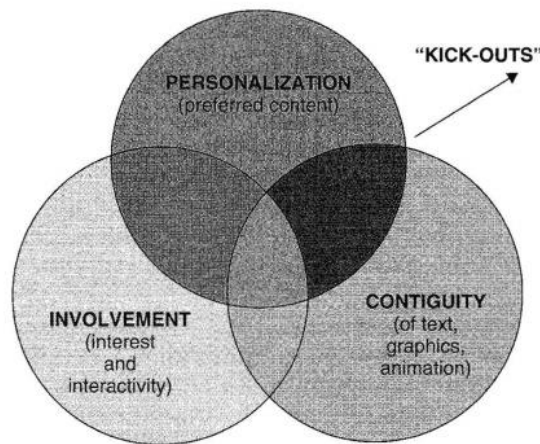
The delivery of personalized news content has been mostly reliant on news aggregation sites and online algorithms as the modern editorial tool. The goal was to adjust information content and format based on the ability to predict user interests (Sela et al., 2015). The emphases of such practice include the interface design (Inbar et al., 2008), the layout of the information, and bridging the gap between people's declared interests in news topics and their actual interests in specific news items (Sela et al., 2015). To better reach an audience, personalization has also been widely applied in the field of educational psychology and multimedia learning. The principle states that learners are more likely to relate to information with personalized messages and therefore process the content more effectively (Reichelt et al., 2014). Children are also more likely to be engaged with more personalized books (Kucirkova et al., 2014). The P-I-C-K content model, as a theoretical framework, builds on the above findings and suggests that the organization and presentation of content within a complex news story affect reader comprehension of the content (Yaros, 2009). This pertains to the focus of the present research as it explores specific features from the framing perspective and posits that personalizing messages can be more effective in shaping news engagement and sharing.

The P-I-C-K content model is situated in the digital age where the internet has played an integral role in structuring the audience's choices in news selection. As

social networking sites move toward hosting news content on their own services, news outlets are losing more control over how content is shared in the social space (Somaiya et al., 2015). The rise of social media has coincided with shifts in not only the production of news, but also in how audiences consume the content (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010). Today, interaction with news products rarely occurs in discrete intervals such as reserving time to watch the evening news or reading the morning newspaper. Rather, contemporary audiences now constantly receive stream of information from digital devices throughout the day (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). Some studies posit that users no longer intend to discover the material, but rather stumble upon the news content (Tewksburg, Weaver & Maddex, 2001, p. 533). At the same time, content has been increasingly personalized, which may further constrict the spectrum of information that consumers encounter (Thurman, 2011; Pariser 2011; Beam, 2014; Beam & Kosicki, 2014). In this context of “ambient journalism” (Hermida, 2010), news content must be optimized to be “clickable” and accessible to gain critical mass in social spaces (Kallinikos & Mariátegui, 2011). Therefore, the content should be more engaging to the audience (Ksiazek, Peer & Lessard, 2014). The key questions here are how the general audience engages in complex news issues when the internet offers so many different choices and what kind of news products stand out in a sea of information.

With the goals of addressing how non-expert Internet users navigate through endless choices of news information and identifying more effective methods for news organizations to engage audiences while competing with so much other information, Yaros (2009) proposed a cognitive “P-I-C-K” model that synthesizes research from

educational psychology and communication. The model embodies four concepts: 1) personalization; 2) involvement; 3) contiguity; and 4) cognitive “kick-outs.” The combination of all four concepts is important to help the understanding of how to maximize audience’s news interests and produce more effective journalism (Yaros, 2009). For the purpose of the present research, only the first two components of the model will be discussed as they are the most closely related to human interest personalization.



*Figure 1: P-I-C-K Content Model (Source: Yaros, 2009)*

The first component, personalization, supports the idea on which the “PICK” content model is built – engaging audiences requires an orchestration of multiple factors that work together to improve content consumption and distribution. This dissertation proposes that one of the keys to understanding why some news is “sticky” lies in not the medium but in the ways in which information is structured as well as in user behavior (Eveland & Dunwoody, 2001). Today technology companies such as Google and Facebook allow the audience to get news in real time, tailored to their own interests across multiple platforms. But news organizations are increasingly on board to offer more personalized content to help them attract audiences to their

sites and keep them coming back (Lafrance, 2017). The personalization of news consumption is considered a shortcut for people to block out stories that do not remotely interest them and receive only those that they care about enough to click on. It has been proposed that the challenge for future news production is not only whether audiences should be provided with personalized information of interest, but to what extent the information *should* be personalized (Yaros, 2009).

Traditionally, information personalization has been mostly considered as a technological design. It is considered as the use of technological features to adapt the content to the explicitly registered preferences of individual users (Thurman & Schifferes, 2012). In other cases, it was referred interchangeably with customized content (Lavie et al., 2010). Some consider it linked to customer satisfaction. Personalization has always been more widely discussed in the context of advertising and marketing (Manzato et al., 2011)

Personalization extends beyond where and how news organizations meet their audiences. Smartphone users can subscribe to push notifications for alerts on the specific coverage of topics that interest them. Facebook users can decide which news organization's updates will appear on their news feeds (Lafrance, 2017). Studies have shown that personalized messages can be more effective at engaging and persuading an audience compared to mass messages (Rimer & Kreuter, 2006; Roberto et al., 2009). Other research (Thurman & Schifferes, 2012; Lopez-Nores et al., 2012; Sundar & Marathe, 2010; Lavie et al., 2010; Yaros, 2009) has indicated that once tailored and personalized, the audience may engage in content they have no individual interest in due to the presence of temporary situational interest. For

example, audiences who are not generally interested in sports could be drawn to a story about baseball simply because of its personalized headline related to one's location. While it is widely known that effectively personalized advertisements and online messages have blossomed into a multi-billion-dollar industry (MacMillan, 2010; Pariser, 2011), little is known about how news organizations specifically approach tailoring news to audience preferences.

The second PICK component, involvement, is unpacked into two dimensions: interest in and interactivity with the information. Many scholars have also proposed that interactivity is one of the defining characteristics of new media (Boczkowski, 2002; Jenkins, 2006; McMillan, 2002b). In general, the ability to act, react, interact, and co-create online as a continuum from exposure to interactivity is seen as a key demonstration of user engagement (Ksiazek et al., 2016). The benefit of interactive features is not limited to the enhancement of user experience; it also relates to a story's potential to better inform citizens with more engaging and valuable information and process (Tedesco, 2004). Interactivity embraces many layers of capabilities on news sites -- clicking on a story or commenting as a user-to-document interactivity (Stromer-Galley, 2004), and sharing as a user-to-user interactivity (Chung, 2007; Jensen, 1998). Building on this work, this dissertation examines news sharing as one of the most common types of expression on online news sites.

Motivation with the use of interactivity features is a combination of both media content characteristics and social practices. On the content level, users take advantage of each interactivity feature differently and their behaviors change based on different story context. Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2012) examined the types of

interactivity that are often found on online news sites: clicking, e-mailing, and commenting. They noted that online news users take advantage of various interactive features online in different ways due to contextual matters. On the psychological and social practice level, research has shown that regardless of the context, audiences tend to avoid potentially controversial topics in their interactions (Boczkowski, 2010a; Palmgreen et al., 1980). This means that forwarding stories by email is influenced by the stability of preexisting sociability patterns (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2012). They argued that different interactive features by audience members lead to different patterns and involvement with those features, which are key to driving sharing behaviors and contributing to news stickiness.

Interactivity as one of the most unique defining and fundamental features of engagement with online news offers an interesting content specificity in the new author-audience convergence age (Deuze, 2003). News sharing as a form of social bonding experience transcends the action of a click of a button, as sharing behaviors may also trigger discussions by stimulating online and offline conversations. As an affordance that allows users to actively manipulate information content via special design features, interactivity is believed to be a fundamental component of the broad phenomenon of user engagement, which highlights the multi-directional flow of information (Jenkins, 2006; Thurman, 2008). Many scholars have also proposed that interactivity is one of the defining characteristics of new media (Boczkowski, 2002). There are three types of interactivity features in media usage, defined by McMillan (2002): user-to-system, user-to-user, and user-to-document. More specifically, the user-to-system type of interactivity refers to the interactions between users and



technologies, such as individual relationships with news aggregation sites as Google News. User-to-user interactivity refers to the interaction between multiple users on the same platform, such as instant messaging, online comment, blogging services, and conversations. The user-to-document interactivity refers to media functions that allow users to participate in the news making process, provide feedback, and modify texts. Although these three types of interactivities sufficiently embody the main activities that users engage to interact with media content, they fail to include the basic conception that more news articles nowadays include multimedia content embedded in the article that allows users to click, maneuver enticing features to cater to their own interests.

Interactivity, as a typical part of the multimedia engagement features applied in news reporting today, has witnessed a hike in its usage during the past decade (Steensen, 2011). Whether such stylistic and presentational features are merely ways for news organizations to improve quality of reporting or retain the audience's attention remains a debate among scholars (Dowling & Vogan, 2014; Rue, 2013; Washeck, 2013). However, a recent study on the cognitive and affective effect of multimedia journalism on the audience found that multimedia features do not necessarily enhance knowledge acquirement or boost emotional responses from the audience (Pincus et al., 2017). This shows that embedded multimedia stories are not substantially different than text-based stories in terms of the effect they generate. Due to findings like this, combined with how universally practiced multimedia content has become, this dissertation turns the attention to content framing to seek relevant factors that may effectively promote audience sharing. Limited research has been

found to address what personalization and involvement connote in the context of new media; however, it is expected that personalized news content and news sources may allow individuals to relate to the information better.

## ***2.2. The Role of Human-Interest Personalization in News Sharing***

In order to understand what makes a news story worthy of sharing, it is critical to first reflect on what makes the story worthy of reading. News personalization has rarely been referenced in the literature of newsworthiness; however, scholars have always alluded to human interest as one of the key criteria that reliably predict high-quality news receiving a great amount of audience attention.

### **2.2.1. Personalization as a part of the Newsworthiness Typology**

#### *Normative Newsworthiness Criteria*

Information features and framing techniques play a crucial role in lending visibility to a story as well as influencing how citizens process news information and arrive at individual judgments (Gross, 2008). Research on the definitions and standards of newsworthiness and news quality shares a long and well-established history. The information filtering process employed by journalists and the consideration of whether their criteria are detrimental to society have concerned scholars for decades (Schudson, 2004). Studies found that a newsworthy and high-quality story has tremendous capability in guiding the opinion of audience members on certain events, policies, and issues in predictable ways (e.g. Druckman, 2001; Sniderman & Theriault, 2004). Here the research is interested in how personalization,

as a content feature, has been frequently discussed in the literature of newsworthiness and news quality in facilitating stronger news consumption.

The basic and traditional standards of newsworthiness from the journalistic point of view are useful in helping us understand what makes a story sticky in the long term. Journalists fulfill an important role in society as gatekeepers, filtering and transmitting information daily in the form of news articles (Shoemaker et al., 1991). Several key factors affect the process of news making, including ease of information access, information availability and readiness, journalists' news values, work routines, organizational pressure, and financial constraints (Tukachinsky, 2013). To capitalize on online user traffic, news stories also need to acquire the basic communication utility function that news content should be informative, valuable, and useful. In addition, more prominent stories not only appear more often in news, but also receive greater coverage and are given more importance (Feeley et al., 2016).

Human interest personalization has been identified as one of the key characteristics of newsworthiness. There are three typologies introduced as to what constitutes intrusive and immersive news. The first set includes frequency, threshold, vividness, meaningfulness, consonance, unexpectedness, continuity, composition, reference to elite persons, personalization, and negativity (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). Condensing the list, the second typology proposed prominence, human interest, conflict, oddity, timeliness, and proximity as the more commonly recognized newsworthy qualities (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Building on this, Harcup and O'Neill (2001) further identified ten qualities that include power elite, celebrities, entertainment, surprise, bad news, good news, magnitude, relevance, follow-up

stories, and newspaper agenda. Personalization, human interest, proximity, and relevance are a few of the commonly referenced features that these paradigms identify.

Newsworthiness		
Galtung and Ruge (1965)	Shoemaker and Reese (1996)	Harcup and O’Neill (2001)
frequency, threshold, unambiguity, meaningfulness, consonance, unexpectedness, continuity, composition, reference to elite persons, personalization, and negativity	prominence, human interest, conflict, oddity, timeliness, and proximity	power elite, celebrities, entertainment, surprise, bad news, good news, magnitude, relevance, follow-up stories, and newspaper agenda

*Table 1: Newsworthiness Summary*

In comparison, categories of newsworthiness embrace an overlapping degree of similarity. For example, “negativity” and “unexpectedness” in Galtung and Ruge’s study are equivalent to “bad news” and “surprise” in Harcup and O’Neill’s concepts, respectively. Many frequently applied terms can be drawn from these definitions over the last few decades. Based on these standards, some scholars proposed that the key factors in determining a story’s newsworthiness today are essentially the same as the sensationalist penny press in the nineteenth century with mass-market appeal and tabloid style (Johnstone et al., 1995). These features are subsequently used to evaluate unusual events such as terrorism, due to the reason that such events develop in exotic locations, involve bizarre confrontation and characters and are politically noteworthy.

*Deviance vs. Social significance*

For a long time, scholarly literature lacked examination on why certain events receive more coverage than others, which called for new theoretical developments.

This gap is addressed by the proposal of two broad concepts in a more parsimonious model of newsworthiness and its indicators: social significance and deviance (Shoemaker et al., 1987). Social significance describes “the extent to which an event has an impact on people and society” (Zhang et al., 2013). It can be evaluated in three dimensions: political, cultural, and economic significances. Deviance is defined as “a characteristic of people, ideas, or events that sets them aside as different from others in their region, community, neighborhood, family, and so on” (Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006). In other words, it refers to unusual events that are less likely to occur frequently in daily lives (Lee & Choi, 2009). It consists of three dimensions: statistical, normative, and social change deviances. Studies of the coverage of terrorism events, for example, placed attention on the deviance-focused approach as a key construct to evaluate newsworthiness due to the event’s unique nature. Both approaches in this two-fold model have been widely applied previously.

So why do certain events receive more coverage than others? Shoemaker et al. (1987)		
Two indicators	Social Significance	Deviance
Definitions	Social significance describes “the extent to which an event has an impact on people and society” (Zhang et al., 2013).	Deviance is “a characteristic of people, ideas, or events that set them aside as different from others in their region, community, neighborhood, family, and so on” (Shoemaker et al., 2006)
Dimensions	Political, cultural, economic, and public	Statistical, normative, and social change
Influencing factors	Social and political climate	Human interest in unique events and issue proximity
Examples	Civil protests, gender equality, racial tensions, and people killed by police	Terrorism events, homicides

*Table 2: Indicators of Newsworthiness*

Human interest personalization serves as a distinctive element in the deviance-focused approach. Instead of social impact, the deviance-focused approach looks to singular, specific news events and investigates their uniqueness. For example, it has been suggested that the media often take a special dedicated interest and attention toward reporting on homicide as the most newsworthy of all crimes (Gekoski et al., 2012). Victims provide the “human interest element” of crime news (Chermak, 1995). However, not all homicides receive equal attention. While some are covered extensively, others receive little to no attention from the media. For example, multiple studies have confirmed that race and gender biases could shape journalists’ assessment of newsworthiness (Lundman, 2003; Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002; Min & Feaster, 2010). Homicides or missing children involving African Americans and

females are significantly underrepresented in news coverage. Some explained that this case is usually due to the novelty, rarity, expectedness, or unusualness of the story itself (Chermak, 1995), as news is often considered as “something out of the ordinary” (Keir et al., 1986). In general, analyses found that in the events of breaking news, journalists believe that unusual features identified in a story or extreme details that are uncommonly seen in daily lives are always of particularly stronger interest to the audience (Gekoski et al., 2012), yet some argued that the “if it bleeds, it leads” rule of thumb may be outdated, and that journalists’ perception of the audience’s news habits and preferences is increasingly becoming out of touch (Buckler, 2005).

The social significance-focused approach tests the degree of newsworthiness of a given news story mainly by considering the weight of a story’s topic and how it is framed. One common finding in previous literature shows that significant magnitude of impact often leads to an increase in news coverage (Gruenewald et al., 2009). Such level of newsworthiness may also be heightened during a particular time in society, connecting it to current debates, social tension, and affairs that provide a social background to the story’s popularity. Stories regarding civil protests, racial tensions, and police killings become especially sensitive during a time when racism and criminal justice issues are widely discussed in a particular culture. Similarly, gender, race, disability, sexuality, and celebrity elements play a significant role in determining newsworthiness levels of many stories (Gekoski et al., 2012).

Additionally, others have explained that the degree of newsworthiness of a story is also related to the “worthiness” of all parties involved in the story, where some

figures are regarded as deserving or undeserving of one's attention (Gekoski et al., 2012).

The social significance of event explains why impactful topics receive coverage, but it falls short at accounting for what type of coverage receives more audience attention, which could potentially lead to sharing. For example, in a study evaluating the coverage of World Cup matches, the significance of a match is defined based on how close the participating countries are to the country of the media report (Shoemaker et al., 1991). Brazil was considered more significantly relevant than the U.S. for the Korean media in terms of soccer games. Results show that the significance effect was more pronounced in predicting the amount of media coverage than deviant effect because a match between two strong teams are covered more than those involving a weaker team, even if it is the first time that the country had participated. However, what is unknown here is which approach would potentially garner stronger audience attention. One could argue that human interest personalization in the deviant effect of coverage may encourage more news consumption due to its framing proximity and event rarity.

Personalization in the deviance-focused approach matters because it allows the audience to easily associate with the characters portrayed in the story. Audiences are more likely to pay attention to or resonate with a story that covers the loss of innocent lives due to the fact that the story involves blameless victims and may be considered a rare event (Steimel, 2009), which is a strong illustration of the power of human-interest framing. Research suggests that the lack of public sympathy in how people perceive some victims to be worthy or unworthy of losing their lives plays an



important role in how a homicide story is received (Greer, 2007). Secondly, dramatic ongoing stories and developing details around the clock spark an interest among the public due to the idea that the cause is unknown, the manhunt is not over, or that there is a “killer at large” (Gekoski et al., 2012). Such news is considered newsworthy because of individuals’ innate fascination with extremely violent and heinous details and it is our human nature to be drawn to shocking details (Chermak, 1995). As it relates to both deviance- and social significance-focused approaches, Shoemaker (1996) argues that our interest in news is often influenced by the fact that humans are innately interested in unique events that have some significance to their particular culture and society. The Olympics, for instance, are both unusual and culturally significant to the public.

Human interest personalization affects newsworthiness also because issue proximity often resonates with an audience. Issue proximity is often related to how certain topics are processed cognitively by the audience. The more relevant the information is associated with one’s geographical location and personal interests, the more likely such stories are assigned more attention by individuals (Fournier et al., 2003). Once an issue becomes personally relevant, individuals are more likely to consider it, take action because of it, and develop attitudes toward it (Visser et al., 2006). In the context of political issues and voting, issue importance plays an essential role in determining and guiding what audiences perceive as newsworthy (Hyun & Moon, 2014). Taken together, human interest personalization in the deviance-focused approach of news coverage typically increases the level of arousal

in the audience, thus triggers message processing and an emotional response (Shoemaker et al., 2006).

### **2.2.2. Personalization as a Way of News Quality Enhancement**

#### *Normative News Quality Criteria*

For news organizations that are committed to quality journalism, personalization is a valuable asset in news decision-making (LaFrance, 2017). Generally speaking, interpreting quality is a tricky and daunting task. The rapid growth of the internet and improved accessibility of web information has amplified the problem of information overload in the digital age, making the quality of news services vary to a great extent. Elements that define strong, interesting, and compelling news have set scholars on a constant quest for newer and more relevant perspectives. It is a challenge to define quality because it is usually open to individual interpretations based on certain indicators (Wallisch, 1995). News products fit in this category especially well as what makes a story compelling and interesting is subject to individual evaluation. To alleviate the pressure of seeing “quality is a highly contested topic when discussed in the context of news journalism” (Anderson & Egglestone, 2012), news organizations, following the lead of technology companies, are increasingly betting that personalized content is a good editorial strategy (Thibault, 2017).

High-quality news stories play an important role in initiating the first step of audience engagement: content exposure. Without news selection and sufficient exposure first, news sharing would be pointless and unlikely to occur. Although it is crucial to differentiate between the two processes and clarify that exposure does not

guarantee sharing, news selection is a necessary first step in making sure that news sharing has a chance to happen. Human interest personalization helps the audience manage information overload by making each individual's news diet one of a kind (LaFrance, 2017).

The foundation of quality news is that it needs to be functional and informative to the public about a given topic. Although quality cannot be directly measured, many relevant dimensions can be reliably assessed (Bogart, 2004). Early research stated that quality journalism should be more comprehensive, offer forums for compromise and criticism, present a representative picture, communicate the day's intelligence, and feature the goals and values of society (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947). Additionally, Denis McQuail looked at the Quality Assessment of Broadcasting project of NHK, the Japanese public broadcaster. He used a number of quality criteria, including the degree and type of craft skill; resources and production values; originality; relevance and cultural authenticity; values expressed; integrity of purpose; and audience appeal (McQuail, 2005, p. 343). What remains unknown is how each of these criteria could be achieved.

There are a few more detailed catalogs of news quality criteria where personalization has been identified. Some researchers (Schatz & Schulz, 1992; Arnold, 2009) proposed a few basic quality dimensions for news evaluation: relevance, accuracy, diversity, impartiality, comprehensibility, and conforming to journalistic ethical standards. Table 2.3 summarizes the six quality dimensions of news items. Relevance, as the first dimension, is very much consistent with content personalization where concrete group and location identification are involved.

<b>Relevance</b>	<b>Accuracy</b>	<b>Diversity</b>	<b>Impartiality</b>	<b>Comprehensibility</b>	<b>Ethical</b>
Focus on socially relevant issues	Complete and accurate information	Diversity of viewpoints	Balance of viewpoints	Completeness	Respect for personal rights
Present most important aspects of the issues	Precision	Diversity of sources	Balance of sources	Simplicity	Elimination of discrimination
Up-to-dateness	Transparency			Coherence	Protection of different attitudes
				Conciseness	

*Table 3: Normative News Quality Dimensions*

Definitions of news quality also differ by organization size and power structure within the organizations. Compared to traditional mainstream news organizations, smaller or online news media that are just taking off on the stage of internet and multimedia journalism often have a different set of compelling news standards. Within traditional news media such as a print newspaper, editors and the news staff often possess different standards of what constitutes appropriate news (Belt & Just, 2008). A news director may perceive a “niche” as following the market demand and pursue market placement strategies (Hamilton, 2004). Larger newspapers tend to value staff enterprise, professionalism, comprehensive news coverage, and interpretation, while smaller newspapers favor local news, community values, and community leadership (Gladney, 1990). Larger newspapers also tend to support the organization’s reputation, while smaller publications concentrate more on community values (Reader, 2006).

It is important to recognize, however, that quality journalism may not always grab and hold the audience's attention. Scholars have noted the tendency of news to focus on conflict and events (Iyengar, 1991; Patterson, 1994), which is similar to the deviance-focused approach of newsworthiness. In the case of local news, research shows that television news often features stories on crime, murder, and disasters with dramatic visuals (e.g. Bennett, 2005; Kaniss, 1991). While many blamed this problem on the competitive news marketplace (McManus, 1994), some observed that tabloid journalism has become an acceptable formula for success for news (Belt & Just, 2008). Tabloid, sensationalism, and human-interest personalization are generally referred to as journalistic norms that fall short of generating information through objective means (Bas & Grabe, 2015). However, personalization of news has demonstrated a facilitative role in narrowing knowledge gaps and triggering emotions among the audience (Belt & Just, 2008). Personalized content enhances the quality of news by moving beyond news events, topics, and information packaging styles, thereby eliciting stronger impression formation that improves news stickiness.

### ***2.3. Framing Effects on News Sharing***

In addition to personalization, episodic framing is the second factor of a story's content appeal that could potentially drive news stickiness. As discussed earlier, the present research is interested in specific content features from the framing perspective and posits that personalizing messages can be more effective in shaping news sharing. It is helpful to reflect on the framing literature and evaluate how content framing traditionally influences audience perception and behavior. Although how media coverage affects public opinion is not of concern here, it is important to

consider agenda-setting from the perspectives of what media information might be presented to an audience, how the topic is framed, as well as the particular aspects of a story that are made more meaningful, noticeable, and in whole, stickier.

The conceptualization of agenda setting and framing theories has long attracted a robust body of research and scholarship in great depth and breadth. To examine the role of media in influencing public opinion and audience perception, media scholars often refer to McCombs and Shaw's study on the 1968 presidential election, yet overlook that fact that one can trace back the discussion of agenda setting to Walter Lippmann's 1922 classic, *Public Opinion*, which postulated that the media filter reality. Lippmann did not propose the agenda-setting theory, although he did indicate in his work that public opinion responds to pseudo-environment and the world constructed by the news media (1922).

Although Lippmann touched upon the idea that the news media are crucial in shaping people's perception of reality, the origins of the contemporary agenda setting approach stems from the 1960s. Subsequent research has also generally centered on how media coverage of certain issues primes policyholders' understanding. In a nutshell, the definition of agenda setting lies in the transfer of news salience from the news media to the public (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002). Also known as the Chapel Hill study, McCombs and Shaw surveyed a group of randomly selected undecided voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and found a strong correlation between the deemed importance of political issues and those that were represented in the news media. The study hypothesized that "the mass media set agenda of issues for a

political campaign by influencing the salience of issues among voters” (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002, p. 177).

Immediately following the 1968 Chapel Hill study, McCombs and Shaw replicated it and followed up with a sample from voters in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1972, which also concluded that the salience of public agenda is heavily influenced by that represented in the news media. Additionally, emerging from these discussions on political campaigns, scholars have explored additional topical areas and other media formats, and even in cases outside of the United States. For example, in a study that examined race in media coverage of school shootings, the authors investigated how major national newspapers portrayed the Virginia Tech shootings, with race being the key factor portrayed as a major crime trigger (Park et al., 2012). Recently, more scholarly attention has been geared toward forms of new media and cross-media such as news websites and blogs. Empirical analysis has found that blogs help set the news agenda as journalists depend on bloggers’ specialized knowledge, while the content of the blogs may often be influenced by news media (Heim, 2013). These studies are built on compelling evidence from previous research that continues to establish causal connections between news media and public opinion.

Scholars generally identify two levels of agenda setting. The 1968 Chapel Hill study focused on the North Carolina political election and campaign as an event whose framing is portrayed and influenced by media agenda. This is what we refer to as first-level agenda setting. However, specific topical issues are not the only matters that news media can use to prime public opinion. Different attributes that describe such issues may also increase news salience, which significantly affects a story’s

stickiness. This constructed additional layer of news media roles is the second level of agenda setting, also known as attribute agenda setting.

As second-level agenda setting emphasizes certain characteristics of the issues over others, many scholars connect this line of research with framing, and consider that the two theoretical theses can be applied interchangeably. Second-level agenda setting is based on the premise that objects in the news have “various traits and characteristics that comprise their images” (Kiousis & McCombs, 2004, p. 38). As McCombs and Reynolds (2002) discussed, an important part of the news agenda comes from the attributes that the mass public construct in their minds when they think about a certain object. For example, constructs such as political candidates can be dissected further by their cognitive and affective attributes such as trustworthiness and the types of evaluations they receive (Golan & Wanta, 2001).

The key premise in the framing literature is that frames may guide the audience’s thoughts by highlighting certain aspects of an event, issue, or policy. News frames are an effective way for news organizations to compartmentalize information to communicate it to the audience (Gitlin, 1978). Robert Entman’s definition in his proposed paradigm in 1993 was that to frame is “to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (p. 52). A frame suggests how the issue should be thought about and understood (Nelson & Kinder, 1996). According to McCombs et al. (1997), framing is largely an extension of agenda setting. Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) proposed, “Within the realm of



political communication, framing has to be defined and operationalized on the basis of this social constructivism. Mass media actively set the frames of reference that readers or viewers use to interpret and discuss public events.” Previous studies have mostly focused on frames that are more specific to a single event, issue, or context. This dissertation, however, is interested in more specific framing features and techniques that can be applied to an entire topical group.

Of different types of frames, human-interest personalization in news coverage has shown a widespread effect on political attitudes. Agenda setting and framing are based on similar cognitive processes in which news media is expected to transform coverage and shape individual perceptions. How agenda setting and framing actually affect news sharing is not well known. Framing is also a more selective process. Among the vast number of attributes that are used to describe an object, only a limited number of meaningfully related attributes are framed for discussion and interpretation accordingly. This potentially influences how audiences perceive the issues portrayed in the stories, which would increase or decrease a news story’s stickiness level greatly.

News personalization is considered a type of news frame in this dissertation. Studies have found that personalized human-interest details exposure has implications for the intended persuasiveness of the message and unintended effects on attitudes toward other citizens (Springer & Harwood, 2015). Episodic frames describe an event or issue by offering specific examples, cases, and reports (Gross, 2008). Research shows that interviews and messages from ordinary citizens are usually more vivid and concrete than plain numbers or interviews with politicians and officials (Brosius &

Bathelt, 1997). This shows that personalization may sometimes be examined interchangeably with episodic framing, a news strategy that depicts issues by focusing on certain individuals and events (Iyengar, 1991). In a study examining the effects of anti-Social Security messages on young adults in the U.S., Springer and Harwood (2015) argued that framing at the individual level should enhance attitudes that individual-level solutions are most relevant. Their results confirmed this hypothesis and found that participants in the episodic conditions were more negative about Social Security than those in the thematic conditions. This confirms Iyengar's (1987) suggestion that episodic frames encourage individualist perspectives on issues.

Springer and Harwood's study offered support for Iyengar's underlying logic that episodic framing is more likely to prompt audiences to assign individualistic attributions to a story they read. In his book "Is Anyone Responsible?" Iyengar (1991) analyzed the effects of episodic and thematic framing in television news. He found that episodic framing in political news coverage diverts the audience's attention and leads people to hold individuals accountable for their own predicaments. It presents recurring problems as discrete instances (Iyengar, 1991). Iyengar examined news coverage, yet he did not test the effects of episodic framing on audience's reading and sharing behavior. This dissertation fills this gap to a degree by analyzing whether news stories with episodic frames are more likely to be shared.

### **2.3.1. Exemplification as a Form of Episodic Framing**

By utilizing a particular individual's experience or a specific event to demonstrate an issue, episodic framing also has led to the discussion of the exemplars effect (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997). In the exemplification

theory, which focuses on the effects of exemplar presentations on the formation of beliefs about events and issues (Zillmann, 2002), exemplars refer to citizen depictions or events that share attributes with other members in the same population. The exemplars help to illustrate abstract issues, humanize topics, and offer a more appealing presentation of the issues to the audience (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). The vividness of exemplars makes the message more memorable and triggers perception influencing of an issue (Trans, 2012).

Similar to episodic framing, exemplification theory discusses the depiction and effects of single persons or events in the news. Research shows that exemplars who have direct experience with an issue may exert a stronger persuasive effect on audience's attitudes than those who are not affected (Hovland et al., 1953; Zerback & Peter, 2018). In addition to the exemplars used to illustrate involved individuals that share common experience on an issue, another type of exemplars is made up of opinion statements by people who are not directly involved in the issue (Beckers et al., 2016). This is commonly referred to as illustrations of public opinion on the topic or the so-called "people on the street" interviews employed by journalists (Beckers et al., 2016). Although studies have established that difference in the level of involvement among exemplars used in the media greatly influences perceptions of social reality, this dissertation is more interested in the emotional testimonial and group identification involving directly affected exemplars in the news.

The similarity between an exemplar and the population it represents may influence the strength of exemplar effects (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). The tendency of the audience to resonate with a topic only increases when the exemplar and the

population whose opinion was estimated are matched (Peter & Zerback, 2017). Research also shows that compared to national exemplars, local exemplars are more effective at influencing perceptions about a local issue (Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997). Popular exemplars are seen as having greater effect on perceptions of an issue than expert exemplars because the former is perceived as representing public opinion and their accounts are usually taken more seriously than expert exemplars (Lefevere et al., 2012). Although discussions suggested that episodic framing and the use of exemplars would often lead to more individual-level thinking than broader thematic framing (Iyengar, 1991), the issue of what people do with the messages after being influenced and forming an opinion remains inadequately unexplored.

#### ***2.4. Newsworthiness and News Quality – Do Audiences Think Differently?***

Studies have already identified that the audience's topic selection online often differs from that by a quality press (Schaudt & Carpenter, 2009). In other words, there is a gap between journalistic news selection and audience news selection (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2012). Despite this important finding, results in terms of a systematic and comprehensive list of factors that attribute to audience understanding of interesting news stories are still somewhat limited. As previously stated in the chapter, exposure is a necessary first step before engagement. What kind of news does the audience choose to be exposed to in a world with an abundance of information? Since this dissertation argues that news sharing stems partially from a psychological motivation of social engagement (detailed later in Chapter 3), it is particularly relevant to lend some perspectives on what the audience select to read first before being inspired to share what they have read.

It would be unfair to say that journalists do not consider the audience's news preferences when it comes to news production. Today journalists can observe the audience's news interests through the constant availability of click rates, rankings, and page views for low cost and in unprecedented detail. Scholars such as Welbers et al. (2016) concluded that a particularly more relevant point of discussion now is to what extent the preferences and interests of the audience *should* be taken into account. To date, some studies have explored related topics such as the effect of audience clicks on news placement (Lee et al., 2014), while others have tested the impact of audience news selection on the reception of newspaper and television coverage (Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006). There is also a growing body of research focusing on the influence of news factors in terms of audience participation and interactivity in the comment sections of online news articles (Weber, 2013). What specific content factors that the audiences are particularly drawn to remain vague and undeveloped.

Recent research has attempted to reconcile these differences by considering news values on social media (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). Today, some consider the key question for news organizations on boosting online traffic is, "what works best on Facebook?" (Bell, 2015). It was found that while there was some overlap in the news quality items identified in newspaper and social media stories, the value that stood out most in the social media datasets was entertainment, which has increasingly become part of the definition of "shareability" (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). Although exactly how to define "shareability" remains tentative, identifying such important trait of news stories aids in the proposition of an updated set of contemporary news values.

The audience's perception of newsworthiness is also related to how distant the topic or idea is to them, and this has been introduced in cognitive research as the Construal Level Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010). In a networked media environment in which news is increasingly disseminated quickly among individuals, it is imperative for us to offer a more detailed look at the primary influences that motivate the preference of online users in news selection. The Construal Level Theory has been widely discussed in social and interpersonal communication. It has also been applied in various communication research to shed light on how people form opinions based on perceived psychological distance of the message. We construe the different events in our lives in various ways every day, and the Construal Level Theory (CLT) as a cognitive-oriented psychological theory defines that we cognitively interpret objects and events at different levels, which are determined by the psychological and social distance between our cognition and the objects.

The effect of news personalization often showcases the outcome of the Construal Level Theory. When an object is psychologically distant, it represents a high level of construal; when the object is psychologically proximate, it is often associated with a low construal level (Peng et al., 2013). There are four types of psychological distance within the framework of the Construal Level Theory: temporal distance, spatial distance, social distance, and probability (Trope & Liberman, 2003). People assign general knowledge and common sense to interpret something that is yet far away in time and analyze with greater effort and details when it is absolutely necessary (Lutchyn & Yzer, 2011). In general, people postpone the consideration of concrete, detailed aspects of future events. This association between temporal

distance and levels of construal is also applicable to political communication as it often means different decisions made within different amount of time for different people.

Findings of the relationship between the Construal Level Theory and political communication have been quite mixed. Studies have posited that abstract information may or may not reduce attitudinal differences between people's perception of certain liberal or conservative messages. Ledgerwood et al. (2010) reasoned that abstract information allows people to think beyond current and situational status to reach in line with their main morals, values, and beliefs. They found that political polarization is greater when people think abstractly. However, Yang et al. (2013) found through a study of opinions toward building a memorial around Ground Zero, that liberals and conservatives have reached better agreement, therefore reduced political polarization. To solve the questions and discrepancies raised from these mixed findings, Luguri and Napier (2013) conducted a study on the interactive effect of construal level and identity and discovered that identity salience is a key. When people are reminded about their political inclination, liberals and conservatives are more polarized when thinking abstractly; when people consider their nationality and such difference, the political polarization is reduced.

The various levels of construals have been used in recent research to demonstrate potential qualities of shareworthiness. In an attempt to extend and modify the concept of newsworthiness to explain news sharing, scholars found that geographical distance and cultural distance were part of the shareworthiness framework (Trilling et al., 2017). Domestic issues, which pose closer proximity, were

found to receive a higher amount of attention. Conflict and human interest, in comparison, were somewhat less important, although they both showed a strong influence on Facebook. These findings significantly extended the consideration of what makes certain news stories shareable and further validated the salience of demographic proximity as a strong predictor of shareworthy content.

In recognizing the audience's perspectives on compelling news qualities, studies have confirmed that personalized content presents lower levels of construals that the audience finds more relevant. Digital media now actively encourage participation and content contribution by audience members, who often blur the line between what is acceptable or unacceptable according to the traditional rules of what constitutes publishable news. In a study of examining the news quality of citizen and online journalism, Carpenter (2010) indicated that research in this area tends to focus more on the publication level, which is sometimes dictated by personal opinions of newspaper editors, rather than the judgment by news consumers. The amount of attention news articles receive from audience members has increasingly become part of an essential standard by which effective news production is measured. Several factors play a key role in influencing the audience's evaluation of quality news such as trust toward media sources, attitudes toward media sources, as well as personal news consumption habits and routines (Lee, 2010). Tsfati et al. (2006) found that audience members often rate neutral and balanced coverage highly and consider it important. Emmer et al. (2011) also confirmed that audiences seek out relevant, accurate, and user-friendly coverage more so than stories that are less comprehensible



or trustworthy, which showed that the traditional news quality criteria prevail not only in news production, but also in news selection.

In analyzing how audiences navigate through and make sense of information provided via multiple layers of media platforms including print, broadcasting, online and mobile, Schroder (2015) operationalized the notion of “worthwhileness” in determining audiences’ news selection habits, and factors that set the standards for contemporary quality news. These dimensions, defined by Schroder, help to explain why some news media are chosen to be part of one’s news repertoire while others are not. The “worthwhileness” dimensions include time spent (whether a news story is worth our time spent reading it or not), public connection (content that helps individuals maintain social relations in one’s own networks and beyond), normative pressures (the consumption of certain news stories depends on how much and how often it is circulated among one’s social circles), participatory potential (the affordance of interactively sharing, “liking,” commenting, and contributing media content), price (affordability and convenience of a media product), technological appeal (adaptation of technological advances that makes news consumption a user-friendly and pleasurable experience), and situational fit (convenience of media consumption suitable for the time and place of use). These dimensions are close to the heart of the present research and provide interesting parallels that guide the question of what qualities of news are considered indispensable to attract audience attention.

### ***2.5. Research Question I***

The above conclusions are helpful in addressing the following areas: 1) what events traditional news organizations believe as newsworthy and how audiences may

perceive differently; 2) standards both news organizations and audiences use to evaluate news quality; 3) framing techniques that lead to inclusion or exclusion of various features in news content; and 4) the value and benefit of human interest personalization and personal involvement in news products. All of these issues are crucial to our understanding of news features in conjunction with audience choice; however, they are mainly aligned with the lofty ambition of understanding audience's news *consumption* habit. Little is known about whether newsworthy items are also "sticky" to the masses and how human-interest framing and personalization drive audience's news *sharing* behavior.

Limited results are dedicated to identifying news characteristics that make a story not only read-worthy, but also share-worthy. Some of the studies were ambiguous in terms of their experimental design. Many relied on a broad overview of different media outlets and a wide range of news topics when studying what type of stories are more viral, instead of focusing on the coverage of one single event and exploring which stories are more likely to stand out. The various conceptual dimensions have not been empirically tested, and concepts such as "emotional provocative content" were only characterized in terms of positivity or negativity, making research in this area inconsistent and in need of further exploration.

Building on the aforementioned metrics, the present research will empirically examine a list of qualities that define content appeal in association with one's desire to repeatedly visit and share a story in the social media environment, particularly in the U.S. context. It posits the first research question:

***RQ1: To what extent does a story's content appeal affect whether individuals are motivated to share a story?***

Following the theoretical arguments and empirical work so far, we expect personalization and episodic framing of content to moderate a news story's shareability. Therefore, the concept of news content appeal is operationalized as follows:

1) **Human Interest Personalization:** Provocative content and headlines intended to arouse interest, curiosity, and reaction among the audience.

- Emotional Testimony (e.g. use of lay-person interviews, features contributed from audience, and content potentially relevant to one's geographic location and personal identity.) (Grabe et al., 2001).
- Localized Identification (e.g. discussion of the involvement of specific groups or geographical locations; empathy-producing testimony that has the potential to provoke identification and emotional contagion in viewers.) (Aust & Zillmann, 1996; Cohen, 2001).
- Partisan Content (e.g. explicitly expressed political attitudes and perspectives that potentially evoke negative discrete emotional responses in audience members) (Hasell & Weeks, 2016).

2) **Episodic Framing (Iyengar, 1991):** Stories that shed light on a much more comprehensive media narrative going on in society, which resonates with people on a deeper level about a broader issue the story informs on. For example, stories on school or mass shootings sometimes trigger emotions in regard to concerns for children's safety and gun control problems.

- Presentation from the angle of concrete instances (e.g. specific individuals and events that are depicted or quoted, with detailed descriptions of individual fates or experiences as well as the people directly involved in the issue.) (Iyengar, 1991; Gross, 2008)
- External references (e.g. connections made to a broader issue that deserves public attention.)
- Extended discussion (e.g. connections drawn toward other topics stemmed from the discussion at hand that may or may not be directly relevant.)

These qualities unpacked the first factor in the news sharing behavioral process, content appeal. They will serve as the initial step to aid in the understanding of the type of content that typically draws audience attention and also encourages them to share further. However, it is important to keep in mind that although being engrossed by the content is necessary to initiate news reading and exposure, it is not enough to predict that the audience will subsequently share what they just read. The audience must be also motivated socially and psychologically in order for sharing to happen. The relationship between reading and sharing as well as the function of social engagement needs will be expanded on in the following chapter.

## Chapter 3: News Stickiness – Social Engagement Appeal

This dissertation examines news stickiness as the central thesis and why certain news stories are shared more than others. As reviewed previously, to call news “sticky” means that there is an enhanced likelihood that the news story will be shared by multiple users in the digital space (Heimbach et al., 2015). The present study is guided by the perspective that sharing behavior is considered a joint product of informational and personal factors (Bandura, 1986). In particular, the researcher measures stickiness through two elements: a news story’s content value and the audience’s social engagement needs. This chapter mainly focuses on the second attribute and proposes the research question: To what extent does a story’s social engagement appeal affect whether individuals are motivated to share a story? Specifically, this chapter suggests that social engagement appeal is made up of five elements that help explain sharing behavior: Reciprocal value, individual interest, information utility, persuasion potential, and the bandwagon effect.

The previous chapter discussed the influence of news framing effects and content personalization as the significant information factors on the audience’s news sharing behavior. However, framing techniques are not the only agent that determines whether a story is worth sharing or not. The act of news sharing is carried out by humans and therefore, driven by the innate human needs that extend beyond the evaluation of content captivation. Motivations determine not only *which* media to consume, but also *how* to consume the media (Eveland, Jr., 2004). The association between human psychology and news sharing has already been identified in academic scholarship, because “people are not hooked on YouTube, Twitter or Facebook but on

each other. Tools and services come and go; what is constant is our human urge to share” (Hermida, 2014; p. 1).

Social engagement needs as a part of the most essential emotional needs for people play an important role in influencing human behavior. At its core, the process of news sharing represents the essence of news-related activities on social media (Kümpel et al., 2015). A particularly interesting observation that speaks to core ideas in this dissertation proposed that two behavioral steps (or sub-dimensions) make up news sharing: “internalizing” through news seeking and browsing, and “externalizing” through link posting and forwarding (Choi, 2016). Limited research has tested whether such distinctions can be applied widely in the social media environment (Choi et al., 2017).

The other focus of this chapter relates to the use of social networking sites and specific sharing behaviors unique to these platforms. It should be emphasized that news consumption on social media is very different from that on traditional news outlets due in particular to the greater availability of news sources and distribution tools (Choi & Lee, 2015). Social networks have become an important source for news (Pew Research Center, 2017); however, social media only provide the modes for news distribution and do not produce content. We as audiences and individual users acquire news and information through shared content from other connections and news organizations on these platforms. In the meantime, news consumers also point others to news by sharing via posted links to news stories. In other words, news obtained on social media consists mainly of what is shared by other users as well as by news organizations or journalists who people “like” or “follow” on the networks

(Choi et al., 2017). In this sense, news sharing and social media use are closely connected since the convenient information diffusion tools available on social media strongly encourage link posting and reposting behaviors (Lee & Ma, 2012). This inherently means that the more people use social media, the more likely that they are going to receive or disseminate news (Choi & Lee, 2015).

There are multiple motivations for news sharing on social media. Scholars found that information seeking, socializing, entertainment, status seeking, and prior social media sharing experience are all significant determinants that predict a higher likelihood of sharing (Dunne et al., 2010; Park et al., 2009; Lee & Ma, 2012). Such studies were commonly drawn from the uses and gratification (U&G) paradigm as well as social cognitive theories, which confirms that to understand user behaviors, it is crucial to match news content attributes to user psychology. When users are sharing news, it is the end goal of interacting with other *users* that motivates them to interact with the *content*. Therefore, this dissertation argues that we cannot understand this motivation to share without considering the motivations linked to everyday social interactions.

In this chapter, the social engagement appeal of news that propels one's psychological motivation for sharing is constructed in the following five dimensions. The cognitive needs such as these in this dissertation are not defined by measurement of the amount of "effect" or "value" recorded because they are not quantifiable. Instead, the present research posits that a perceived presence of each of the following intention inducers is ultimately responsible for news sharing. The motivators may

either work in conjunction among one another or individually affect sharing behaviors.

<b>Social Engagement Needs</b>				
<b>Reciprocal Value</b>	<b>Individual Interest</b>	<b>Information Utility</b>	<b>Persuasion Potential</b>	<b>Bandwagon Effect</b>
Content that generates reciprocity and allows individuals to maintain social relationships within their network of connections and beyond when shared, mainly in the form of discussion.	Content that touches on an issue or topic that emotionally resonates with one's interests, needs, or identity.	Content that one's connections in a social network may find useful and compelling, which promotes one's image as the bearer of useful and important information; content that has the potential of connecting information that a particular part of one's network may not be exposed to.	The likelihood of reinforcing one's own viewpoints, influencing others' opinions, raising awareness and echoing perspectives or voices that are not often heard. This does not mean that individuals necessarily expect a response, but they want to amplify how they feel as individuals.	Simply sharing a new article because other people have shared it and potentially trusting a popular opinion.

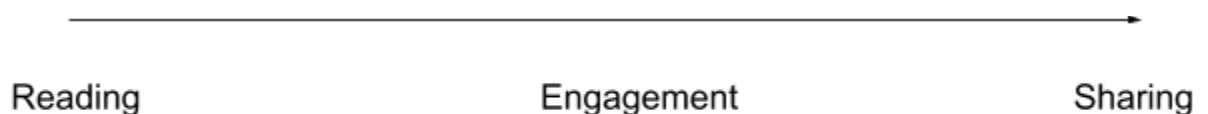
*Table 4: Five Dimensions of Social Engagement Needs*

Before each dimension is unpacked and expanded, it is important to first review what sets the focus of this present research apart from that of other existing studies and where the advancement of knowledge lies in better understanding of audience motivation. The following sections will start with such discussion of general motivations behind news sharing. It offers a more granular overview of how the examination of news stickiness at the intersection of content and behavioral analysis advances the theoretical discussion.



### 3.1. General Motivations behind News Sharing

There are three stages that constitute how audiences process news: the consumption stage (e.g. browsing, reading, selecting), the participation stage (e.g. commenting, tagging), and the distribution stage (e.g. sharing). This dissertation is interested in recognizing *why* users take actions to share news in the final stage, which is also considered the *post-consumption* stage. It is crucial to further understand whether the appeal of user interaction would motivate a member of the audience to distribute a story. Major literature in the field of communication studies has mainly focused on user motivations for the media consumption and participation stages (Kim et al., 2016; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2016; Lin et al., 2017; Sundar & Limperos, 2013; Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2012; Brown et al., 2012). What happens after these two stages has been investigated only to the extent of an add-on discussion and remains an understudied area (see Coppini et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2016). Overall, it is assumed that news consumption for audiences follows the following process:



*Figure 2: News Consumption Process*

While many studies (Van den Bulck & Claessens, 2014; Santana, 2013; Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2012; Domingo & Heinonen, 2008) have successfully identified the main driving forces behind information *consumption*, the innate social engagement needs are an area that has rarely been discussed previously and the literature on this is somewhat inconsistent. From the audience perspective, scholars

have focused on habit, companionship, passing time, and entertainment as the main motivations for media content consumption (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). The overarching concept is that the more strongly viewers are motivated to consume and share news, the more actively they will engage in various audience activities (Lin, 1999). In other words, to explore the qualities that make certain news topics stickier than others, one needs to step back and evaluate these questions: After reading a story online, why do people subsequently proceed to click on the share button? Furthermore, why do some of us feel the need or urge to share what we see with the rest of the world? We cannot understand this motivation to share without considering the human needs to be engaged socially with others.

Besides media consumption, audience *participation* is the other area that has garnered much attention among scholars in analyzing audience behavior (Khan, 2017; Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Mitchelstein, 2011). Participation is usually considered in the form of commenting, which is separate from the act of sharing. Existing literature has largely focused on the "secondary gatekeeping" nature behind one's news sharing behavior, which explains why one person decides to pass on certain information to others (Singer, 2014). Since the start of online journalism, audience members have been given a new opportunity to share their thoughts and opinions on news articles. Issues that play a central role in society have a tendency to provoke thoughts and conversation among citizens. It is understood that online participation has allowed more venues for personal communication, which can be directly affected by technological capabilities such as editing tools, location services, and mobile features (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2016).

Many social networking sites were initially designed to afford users the platform to keep in touch and communicate via direct conversations with those they know in real life; however, the dynamic has quickly shifted toward a virtual space for content to be reached by the maximum audiences. Considering the internet has become a huge convergent form of media, it is important to explore the gratifications users are achieving that serve as the motivation behind sharing behaviors on the internet. In a study on Facebook uses, Joinson (2008) concluded that there is a strong correlation between posting information and a sense of social connection. The social connection aspect often stands out in the context of the new media environment because usually when individuals set out to engage in a new piece of information, what ultimately drives them to share the consumed information depends on the dual factors of content engagement *and* user engagement (Joinson, 2008). Therefore, in addition to the content factors described in the previous chapter, social-based motivation as a form of appeal is equally important in the post-consumption stage.

To this end, many studies have only flirted with the thought of motivation behind sharing when discussing social and online media uses. The Uses and Gratification theory has contributed to the understanding of what social and psychological factors influence media use motives (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). The Uses and Gratification theory is an audience-centered approach that concerned with people's social and psychological needs that generate expectations of news sources (Katz et al., 1974). It postulates that people have innate needs that can be satisfied by the media (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). The theory is based generally on the conceptual shift from what media do to audiences, to what audiences do with the

media, and how an audience's needs and desires help to decide the types of media selected for consumption (Rubin, 2009). Based on the early work by Katz et al. (1974), the theory addresses the interaction between the innate needs of media users and media context, where gratifications are conceptualized as "need satisfactions." More broadly, it is argued that the needs of an individual to be satisfied by the media depend upon an individual's pre-existing needs, regardless of technological medium or a particular context (Haridakis, 2002).

The original discussion of the uses and gratifications theory predates online communication and social media by several decades. It mainly related to audience behaviors, goal-oriented media usage, and the multiplicity of personal needs engaged that are believed to be useful in understanding the theory's role in new media evaluations (Gudelunas, 2005). Sundar and Limperos (2013) postulated the overlap in gratification typologies that recognizes technology as a source of gratifications, modality-based gratifications (different methods of presentation), agency-based gratifications (agency affordance of the internet), interactivity-based gratifications (allowing users to make real-time changes to content), and navigability-based gratifications (affordance for user movement). The researchers argued that integrating these typologies should be a parsimonious way to apply uses and gratifications theory to newer media. Even today, the gratifications such as information-seeking, entertainment, competition, and challenges that were common with television watching still apply to new media types such as YouTube, blogging, interactive news, and social networking Web sites. Much attention is needed to focus beyond these

traditional socio-psychological needs and considered further typologies in this category.

Motivations for using social media have been thoroughly investigated and are well documented at this point. Several motivations have been identified: social connection needs (Han et al., 2015); seeking friends, social support, information, and convenience (Kim et al., 2011); as well as entertainment, sharing problems, and social information (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). By using social media platforms, people with the motivations of self-presentation and relationship building are more likely to stay on the sites longer than intended (Chen & Kim, 2013). The present research builds on the discussion and conclusions above and explores news sharing on social media platforms. The following sections will unpack the five dimensions of social engagement needs and explain how each dimension is closely related to an individual's news sharing motivation.

### ***3.2. The Social Engagement Appeal of News Sharing***

#### **3.2.1. Reciprocal Value – Relationship Building**

The essence of sharing news on social networking sites lies in sharing *experiences* with others (Choi, 2016). Collective experience often enhances social bonds and strengthens social relationships. Relationship maintenance is considered the most outstanding factor that triggers sharing behavior. Achieving social connection in the context of news sharing provides the pleasure of forging and reinforcing social ties among users as a crucial gratification people obtain from using the internet (LaRose & Eastin, 2004). Socializing is also part of the biggest reasons for people to join online groups and conversation (Park et al., 2009). Furthermore,

sustaining valued human connection is considered a main factor that drives social engagement, as news sharing in social media is a communal social experience illustrated by the development and maintenance of relationships (Dunne et al, 2010; Lee & Ma, 2012). The connectedness people feel through the act of sharing often develops between news consumers and other audience members, motivated by a shared interest in a given topic (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Moreover, people who have stronger needs to learn interesting things, give advice, participate in discussions, as well as meet new people generally spend more time on sharing new information, and such need to connect with others is positively associated with the frequency of news sharing, length of revisits, and total amount of comments (Chen et al., 2011; Johnson & Yang, 2009). This is also related to why people join social media sites in the first place, as social connections are enabled by the satisfaction of the need for information as well as connectedness with those who share similar interests.

News shared among internet users may create the information source that lays the foundation to foster social connections and relationships (Lee & Ma, 2012). Broadly speaking, this summarizes two main motivations for news sharing. First, the social connection can be enhanced through news sharing, that one's social status is associated with how well informed and intelligent one may appear from passing on useful news. Second, social validation and relationship development (Bazarova & Choi, 2014) are strong drivers for information disclosure on the internet (Krasnova et al., 2010).

Within online sharing, people push to keep the connection alive by deliberately trying to maintain a relationship with one another. More people are

willing to share information online because it passes on an item of interest from one person to another, essentially creating an illusion of experiencing things “together” (Ito, 2005). In a study examining online photo sharing as mediated communication, Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar (2010) evaluated conclusions from a few previous studies that found the functions serving personal photo sharing behaviors are: constructing personal and group memory, creating and maintaining social relationships, as well as self-expression and self-presentation (Van House et al., 2005). Furthermore, when exploring whether the use of mobile phone cameras would create an effect on photo sharing, the basic motivations were well aligned with the reasons mentioned above. Depending on one’s privacy settings, many “shares” are often automatically available to be viewed by strangers, which is a form of intentional sharing among the public. This creates a type of “accidental” sharing that could foster a sense of engagement and, eventually, draw people into more active sharing.

However, many of these factors documented above may not be completely applicable to explain news sharing motivations because news is an informational content format that is distinct from photos, personal updates, or videos, etc. According to Simpson and Weiner (1981), a news story is considered as the report of recent, important, and interesting events or occurrences. News is also evaluated based on timeliness, objectivity, prominence, and accuracy (Sundar, 1999), and it has much more influence on public opinion and shaping people’s perceptions of social reality than personal commentaries (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009). Therefore, the motivations for news sharing transcend beyond the basic gratifications of television, entertainment, or video game enjoyment. In a study examining gratification factors in

information seeking and socializing, Lee and Ma (2012) suggested that in the event of crisis news such as the earthquake and tsunami disasters, instant updates can be found on many social media platforms where a large number of stories, photos, and videos were shared. Here, scholars argued that sharing behaviors around news stories could be motivated by the desire to achieve a sense of belonging (Rubin, 1986) and habitual media use from previous experience based on familiarity of social media (Diddi & LaRose, 2006). Although a considerable number of internet users have had experience in sharing news stories via social media (Purcell et al., 2010), discussion of factors that influence such sharing behaviors has been somewhat scarce.

Finally, while social relationship maintenance has been established to be a primary motivator of news sharing, it may also serve as a key consideration that *prevents* one from sharing information with others. Research suggests that the relationship between the information bearer and the recipient is likely to influence the bearer's expectations and concerns prior to sharing news (Dibble, 2014; Cupach & Metts, 1994). This has been widely discussed in the context of bad news sharing as people are generally reluctant or unwilling to be the bearers of bad news (Dibble, 2014; Weening et al., 2014; Dibble & Levine, 2013). This is largely because without personal knowledge of the targeted recipient or audience, the message sender might be concerned about self-representation, unintentional embarrassment, or simply being perceived as impolite (Dibble & Sharkey, 2017). Meanwhile, in the case of medical emergencies, sometimes even bad news contains information crucial to the recipient and failing to deliver the message in a timely and accurate manner may result in other undesirable consequences, making it important for us to understand factors that



contribute to one's hesitation and unwillingness to share certain types of news (Dibble & Sharkey, 2017).

Another interesting observation related to the negative psychological reaction to news sharing is that we have different attitudes toward taking or avoiding risks. For example, similar to the discussion in the previous chapter, information low in quality is often linked to a heightened risk of information dissatisfaction, insecurity, and unreliability (Ghasemaghahi & Hassanein, 2015). Additionally, news sharing on social media often entails the act of self-disclosure of personal information, which is influenced by perceived risk, privacy concerns, information control, and sensitivity (Xu et al., 2013). Privacy-related reasons are considered as primary inhibitors of the self-disclosure of personal information associated with news sharing (Zlatolas et al., 2015; Chen, 2013). Many social media users realize that information sharing online is a potentially risky activity and take measures to mitigate such risks (Koohikamali & Sidorova, 2017). Out of all potential risks, online reputation damage and loss, if the shared information was perceived as low quality by others, was found to be an outstanding factor influencing information-sharing intentions (Koohikamali & Sidorava, 2017). This is especially helpful in further understanding approaches to combat the sharing of fake news from the standpoint of the online psychology of users.

### **3.2.2. Individual Interest – Emotional Relevance**

As previously mentioned, news sharing and social media use are positively associated and this association is frequently contingent upon individual news interest. In the case of political stories, news media use and political interest are separate, but

very closely correlated with each other (Boulianne, 2011). As examined through previous research, interest in a given political topic may influence how people process news messages covering such a topic (Krosnick & Brannon, 1993).

The present research proposes to link the concept of “interest” from the field of educational psychology, with the discussion of news selection. The concept itself is not novel. Case studies in education research have confirmed that personal interest in a topic seems to serve as a driving force for information gains (Chi & Koeske, 1983). The concept has been commonly applied in relation to knowledge acquisition and will help to determine whether established user interest in content would predictably trigger sharing intentions. It is important for the present research to note that the focus of discussion here relates to the notion of enduring interest, which is often defined as “individual interest” (Renninger & Hidi, 2011) or “personal interest” (Schiefele, 1999). Additionally, one must also be mindful that interest levels may diminish or grow over time. Someone who shows immense interest in politics may lose such interest ten years later. On the other hand, a subject that has never been of particular interest to someone may start to grow on them sometime later or be sparked by a particular event.

The relationship between individual interest and better learning is well established at this point. Although there has not been sufficient discussion in terms of how much and how exactly interest affects learning, the standard hypothesis that scholars have agreed upon is that being interested in a subject determines how much we learn about it (Schraw & Lehman, 2009; Renninger, 2000; Ainley, 2012). Schraw and Lehman (2009) found that individual interest increases learning due to improved

engagement and making mundane topics more appealing and challenging. Towlinson et al. (2003) recommended that instructional materials should be aligned with the learner's personal interests in order for the benefit of teaching to be maximized. Correlational analyses have mostly accepted the fact that individual interest is a causal factor for learning. To illustrate, a meta-analysis of 121 studies carried out by Schiefele and colleagues (1992) echoed the positive association that individual interest exerts on knowledge acquisition, where interest is the independent variable and learning outcome is the dependent variable.

As a cognitive phenomenon that intertwines with behavioral effect, the concept of individual interest is appropriate and valuable to the process of news engagement and dissemination. As an example, research has repeatedly shown that political interest and news consumption are positively correlated. Karnowski et al. (2018) demonstrated that the impact of political interest on news consumption has increased over time, and if such interest has a positive influence on information consumption, it is possible that it also has an influence on news sharing. Since news sharing is a socially engaging activity, Choi and Lee (2015) postulated that political interest mediates the link between news sharing and social network heterogeneity due to the diverse and mostly meaningful individual opinions. They also suggested that people with higher levels of political interest are more likely to share news on social media.

Lastly, information acquisition speaks to a fundamental need of humans. One's most stable and consistent informational needs arise from uncertainties and the urge of "being in the know" (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Intrinsically motivated individuals

usually demonstrate great interest in personally relevant information (Renniger, 2000). Additionally, intrinsically motivated individuals seek information in a manner highly congruent with their goals (Kruglanski et al., 2000). Interest in a given issue influences how people process related news messages (Krosnick & Brannon, 1993). Politically interested individuals are more likely to select news content that shares their point of view (Choi & Lee, 2015). While the relationship between individual interests and news consumption is well established, research on whether such relationship may extend to news sharing remains unknown.

### **3.2.3. Information Utility – Status Seeking**

As the discussion in the previous chapter exemplified, content features are a factor in how likely a story will be shared by users. An important part of the content features that may drive sharing is a story's information utility. The utility serves as a particular news function as well as the audience's evaluation of how relevant it is to one's own interest (Hastall, 2009). The motivational aspects of media use suggest that individuals choose certain types of media based on, firstly, a thorough evaluation of their instrumental functions and utility value (Fry & McCain, 1983). Content high in information utility is especially helpful for news consumers to gain knowledge, develop an opinion, and reinforce an action or a position (Atkin, 1973). The perception of a story's information utility level is crucial because it often – as a mediated link – influences how relevant the news consumers believe the story to be and the extent to which news consumers may act on such content (Hastall, 2009).

Although information utility constitutes one important content characteristic of news stories, it is often subject to the audience's appraisal and evaluation, making

it relevant to one's psychological needs. The information utility model hypothesizes three dimensions: the perceived magnitude of challenges or gratifications, the perceived immediacy, and the perceived likelihood of their materialization (Knobloch et al., 2003). To demonstrate this model in the case of political news, a news story about President Trump's new immigration policy may be framed and understood as an important update and having major consequences on the current immigration climate (great magnitude), quick to take effect (imminent), and likely to affect many people and carry substantial outcomes (likelihood of materialization). The individual perception of the above three dimensions will differ. Studies have found that information utility operationalized by these dimensions influences news audience's exposure, processing, and retention of news (Knobloch et al., 2002).

This dissertation recognizes an explicit distinction between information conveyed in mediated content (actual information utility) and news audience's evaluation of such content (perceived information utility). The Construal Level Theory establishes the relationship between psychological distance and the way people perceive certain information. Essentially, information representation is more abstract and decontextualized as the temporal distance increases and events may become more concrete and contextualized as the temporal distance decreases (Trope & Liberman, 2003; Nan, 2007). This theory postulates that we cognitively interpret objects and events at different levels determined by the psychological and social distance between our cognition and the objects (Peng et al., 2013). Scholars have proposed a number of attributes that affect the function of different construal levels including the importance of an event and one's perception of the probability of an

occurrence. For example, due to the way people evaluate political debate messages with personal political knowledge and choices, different results may occur with voting behaviors depending on the perceived magnitude, immediacy, and likelihood of materialization (Knobloch et al., 2003) of the debate context. Therefore, in the present research, information utility represents a cognitive mechanism that significantly influences one's news sharing intention and behavior.

By discovering more useful and relevant information, status-seeking has also been revealed to be an inherently significant association with one's news sharing intention. Some argue that news sharing is triggered by the need to draw people's attention and therefore obtain status among one's social circles (Lee & Ma, 2012). According to Ma et al. (2011), if the information turns out to be useful, the sharer will, in turn, be able to establish their reputation among social connections. Information high in perceived utility encompasses a stronger likelihood of recirculation and, consequently, more recognition. Some proposed "getting recognition" as one of the key motivations for news sharing due to the extent of attention one can easily achieve by retweeting and reposting news. Choi's 2016 study shows that the knowledge sharing, also known as getting recognition, is a significant predictor for news posting. By acting like opinion leaders and having a sense of agency, people feel that they are important actors within the social media space and are able to establish their own identity (Sundar & Nass, 2001).

Study results also confirmed that news sharing is influenced by the need for information "gathering" and "donating" (van den Hooff & de Leeuw van Weenen, 2004; Krikelas, 1983). Online information is often reframed, reevaluated, and

repurposed by other users. This means that information online is repackaged and re-created through the sharing process, which is called news recontextualizing (Choi, 2016). This effect is especially pronounced when users share news links alongside their own thoughts and comments. News stories shared can be kept in one's profile as a private collection for future retrieval should the need arise (Ma et al., 2011). This inquiry circles back to the discussion of uses and gratifications theory, which shows that sharing behavior is rooted in media use motivations as well as basic social needs. Certain types of motivations sought from the media will also drive different ways of news processing. Motivations determine not only *which* media to consume, but also *how* to consume the media (Eveland, Jr., 2004).

In line with the discussion of information seeking, Karnowski et al. (2018) explain that the influence of information utility on news sharing indicates that people share news both to look for further information and to retrieve already encountered information. Information utility constitutes a key ingredient of news that consumers readily share. Sharing an article serves as a kind of service for spreading useful information or social bookmark in one's personal timeline. To extend this idea, results from a study showed that news consumers share news containing information utility because they perceive this news to be of value to an online community (Chiu et al., 2007). Across different content domains in news stories, information utility embedded in a story determines the extent to which readers may want to share with others (Bobkowski, 2015).

#### **3.2.4. Persuasion Potential – Opinion Leadership**

Recent research identifies the importance of news sharing as a way to help people form opinions about the information encountered online (Bright, 2016). Information credibility on social media improves when the person sharing the information holds values that match the recipient (Metzger et al., 2003). Since social media users are often bombarded with an abundance of information from a wide variety of sources of varying credibility, the audience often relies on certain cues and indicators to reduce such cognitive burden. The information poster's trustworthiness and credibility may act as such heuristic cues (Chaiken, 1980). If a friend shares a news story from a particular media source, others may assume that the source is trustworthy because someone they know already uses it (Turcotte et al., 2015).

This enhanced trait of source credibility embraced by certain groups of people is made possible by the classification of opinion leaders. Initially, opinion leaders were conceptualized as politically interested, engaged, knowledgeable, and trusted sources of information within their social networks (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). Other measures of opinion leaders refer to people who shape public opinion by selectively sharing media messages to their connections (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944), characterized by their self-perceived ability to persuade and depth of opinion sharing (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009; Weimann et al., 2007; Feick & Price, 1987). People in "opinion leadership" position online help "opinion followers" evaluate news content exchanged on social media.

As Figure 3.1 shows, the persuasion potential of information is highly regarded by opinion leaders. Early research examined one's perceived opinion leadership by asking whether the user had tried to persuade a friend's choice or



consumer decision (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). These “leaders” are generally engaged, knowledgeable, and trusted sources of information within one’s social network and are able to influence others while holding diverse contacts and discussions (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Opinion leaders exhibit general behavioral inclinations that often replicate their offline pro-social habits (Wright & Li, 2011). People who are extroverted and less socially lonely generally share more information online than introverts and those who are shy and socially lonely (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010).

Opinion leaders tend to share news because of their social temperament (Weimann, 1991; Feick & Price, 1987). Since opinion leaders are generally more assertive, extroverted, and socially active, it was found that they tend to share information due to the gatekeeping practices in which they regularly engage: They gather news information first from various sources, filter what they consider to be worth sharing, and pass along the information to other members in their networks (Bobkowski, 2015). They are more involved in news and more informed about news in general. Research shows that opinion leadership affects perceived information utility and subsequent news sharing. Opinion leaders consume more news and, therefore, identify more persuasion potential and information utility in news stories (Bobkowski, 2015).

The interfacing effect of content and personality on news sharing has been addressed extensively (Bobkowski, 2015), yet only through single factors in each category. The study successfully established that opinion leadership predisposes certain groups of audiences more than others to disseminate news. Additionally, it

considered what it is about opinion leaders that motivate them to share news online, which are divided into three components: 1) strong gatekeeping inclinations; 2) heavy media use, and 3) sociable characteristics. This is an important contribution because it not only acknowledges the fact that the opinion leaders carry significant influence, but it also addresses why someone would want to be an opinion leader in the first place due to the prominent gain of social status. To assist with a clearer understanding of this effect, the joint influence can be summarized as follows: It illustrates that news sharing could be cognitively motivated by the combined factors of 1) information with high perceived utility value and 2) one's personal status and reputation gain within his or her social networks.

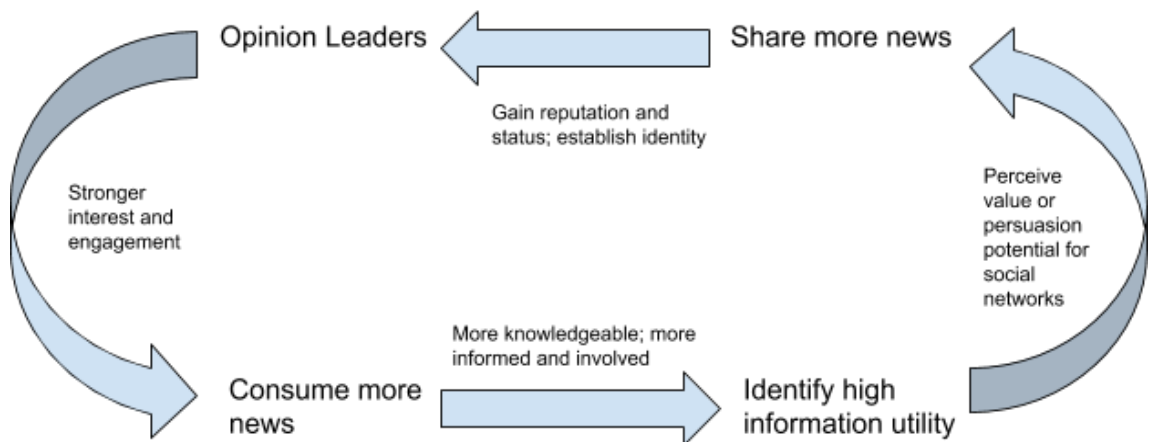


Figure 3: Relationship between opinion leadership and information utility

Last but not least, opinion leadership generates a sense of empowerment to users on all community levels, which serves as a strong motivation for users to share and distribute information. The psychological sense of community has been applied in the context of organizational communities where being a part of an organization has an influence on the broader community and the organization allows members to connect more broadly within the community (Hughey et al., 1999). One's

consideration of potentially persuading fellow community members largely concerns the idea of social and psychological empowerment. Empowerment has been theorized to be associated with community well-being at the psychological, organizational, and community levels (Christens & Lin, 2014). Laverack (2006) elaborated on this notion and pointed out that at the community level, empowerment incorporates member participation and resource mobilizations that help sustain power and control in the local context. At the organizational level, however, empowerment involves mediated mutual support among members who contribute to the broader sense of shared community.

Along with the categorization of empowerment dimensions in community building, research also has discovered that sociopolitical control is frequently associated with community engagement and participation (Speer et al., 2001). The likelihood of strong psychological empowerment may also predict stronger sociopolitical control that serves as the mediator between user participation and sense of community. In the face of breaking news events, the immediate sense of vulnerability may be overcome by community resilience as a typical collective behavior, such as the emergent togetherness, solidarity, unity or “community spirit” observed in the 2005 London bombings (McAslan, 2011). In line with this thought, online news sharing behaviors as a contextualized existence build a sense of community and relationship within the group, with empowerment mediating social control and lowering member alienation.

### **3.2.5. Bandwagon Effect – Imitative Sharing**

Investigating the role of behavioral motivations behind the bandwagon effect, the framework of Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) offers strong theoretical support. The paradigm, developed as early as 1975 by Fishbein and Ajzen, posits that the behavioral intention is determined by the attitude toward the behavior and the subjective norms correlated with the behavior. The subjective norms, also referred to as social pressure, are a key component of this chain because it is defined as the perception of whether an individual's peers think the behavior should be conducted. This also means that a person may perceive the need to take certain actions because everyone else is exhibiting the same behavior (Interis, 2011). How the audience's news sharing behavior may follow this framework is unknown at this point. Media scholars in this field have mainly focused on the impact of the website interface and popularity metrics on the audience's perceptions and attitudes toward news products and rarely touched on whether such attitudes and perceptions may lead to behaviors such as sharing.

In association with a story's potential for sharing, popularity metrics act as important cues to help the audience cope with information overload and content ambiguity. The bandwagon heuristic (Sundar, 2008; Chaiken, 1987) originates from a crowd mentality in which humans tend to believe that if others have accepted something, it is probably good for them as well. One way to evaluate the amount of attention a news article has received is to look at the aggregated user representations such as likes, ratings, recommendations, and similar metrics, which convey impressions of value to the users (Fu, 2012). The audience's sharing decisions are

likely to be influenced by these popularity cues due to lack of private knowledge about a variety of topics, leading them to consult historical references and actions (De Vany & Lee, 2001).

The background for this phenomenon stems partially from the uncertainty that comes with user-generated content. Users who visit websites with such content are often confronted with a large amount of information without specific directions or pointers as to what to consume (Flanagin & Metzger, 2008). Citizen-produced content varies greatly in quality and focus, with relevance and value often uncertain and unpredictable for other users. While many sites are equipped with a large range of introductory information in all fonts and sizes that aims to help the visitors with better navigation, the majority of online users come with limited prior knowledge of the information and site layout available (Kim & Gambino, 2016). Frequently, they would only rely on searching or random browsing for tailored direction (Fu, 2012). This phenomenon is particularly unique in the digital age where online users are often faced with a multitude of choices.

Another problem that leads to user reliance on proximal cues is information overload. Useful design features online may significantly and effectively lessen the mental strain that one may feel from the availability of too many choices. The previewing of videos and excerpts of information such as thumbnails and keywords presented in some news articles are important for one's attention processing (Tversky, 1969). Video view counters and the number of shares a news article receives are also part of these popularity metrics that perpetuate viewership bandwagons. These metrics enabled by multimedia -- such as a higher view count or a larger amount of

feedback -- usually make content appear more appealing or trustworthy to the average user. Multimedia interaction in news presentation online also influences one's tendency to consume certain types of news. As a result, one may find it convenient or popular to consume content based on such indicators and “jump on the bandwagon” (Fu, 2012).

Such bandwagon heuristics have always been in play in attracting customers for businesses. Interface cues such as positive customer reviews, star ratings, and sales numbers such as the title “best sellers” often lead to more favorable impressions of products (Sundar, 2008). These cues are also amplified in news aggregation systems, where researchers have suggested the use of navigational aids and tools as well as better visualization of website design (Chung et al., 2005) to facilitate the display of relevant information. By trusting the popularity metrics, users employ quick judgment and essentially take "mental shortcuts" to evaluate news online (Sundar, 2008). The environmental cues create indicators that function as quality indicators in assisting with the efficiency of online news processing (Sundar et al., 2007).

### ***3.3. Research Question II***

In conclusion, social engagement appeals for online news sharing spans the spectrum of relationship maintenance, individual interest, information utility, opinion leadership, and the bandwagon effect. As we attempt to understand news ‘stickiness’, this dissertation argues that we cannot understand this motivation to share without considering the motivations linked to everyday social interactions. Based on the discussion above, this dissertation poses the following research question:

***RQ2: To what extent does a story's social engagement appeal affect whether individuals are motivated to share a story?***

Building on the above discussion, the social engagement appeal of news that propels users' psychological motivation for sharing is proposed as:

- 1) **Individual Interest:** Content that touches on an issue or topic that emotionally resonates with one's interests, needs, or identity.
- 2) **Reciprocal Value:** Content that generates reciprocity and allows individuals to maintain social relationships within their network of connections and beyond when shared, mainly in the form of social discussion.
- 3) **Persuasion Potential:** The likelihood of reinforcing one's own viewpoints, influencing opinions, raising awareness, and echoing perspectives or voices that are not often heard. This does not mean that individuals necessarily expect a response, but they want to amplify how they feel as an individual and make a point.
- 4) **Information Utility:** Content that connections in one's social network may find useful and compelling, which promotes one's image as the bearer of useful and important information; content that has the potential of connecting information that a particular part of one's network may not be exposed to.
- 5) **Bandwagon Effect:** Simply sharing a new article because other people have shared it and potentially trusting a popular opinion.

These considerations should serve as the foundation on which the audience's psychological motivation to share news in this dissertation is evaluated. In addition to the content analysis of the most shared articles on the *New York Times* website, the present research carried out an online experiment that was followed by a

questionnaire surveying individual motivations for sharing based on the five dimensions mentioned above. These dimensions informed the design and application of the research methods, which will be explained in detail in the following chapter.



## Chapter 4: Methodology

The overarching thesis question for this dissertation is: What motivates people to share certain political news stories online, therefore increasing a story's level of news stickiness? This study will contribute to our understanding of news content features and audience's communicative behavior that help shape information diffusion in the event of political news. Here the research examines how each dimension of a story's content appeal as well as audience's social engagement needs as defined in previous theoretical discussions will affect the likelihood of news sharing among individuals. This chapter introduces the design of the present study as a two-phase mixed-method research involving a quantitative content analysis and an online experiment.

To start, it is important to recognize the foundation on which the method design of the present study is built. Employing a multi-method design of a quantitative content analysis and an experiment, the main research thesis represents a synthesis of two key areas identified in the gap of existing literature: 1) Factors that contribute to news stickiness are set apart from those contributing to newsworthiness; and 2) News sharing is a social process primarily motivated by one's psychological needs to engage with others.

The present research employs a two-phase multi-method design, which is often referred to as a sequential exploratory strategy. According to Creswell (2009), this strategy starts with a first phase of qualitative data collection and analysis, followed by a second phase of quantitative data collection and analysis that builds on the results of the first qualitative study. It is often conducted to determine the

distribution of a phenomenon within a chosen population (Morse, 1991). This strategy is especially helpful in allowing the researchers to explore quantitative instruments while also expand on qualitative findings. For this dissertation, the first framing content analysis of news articles read and coded informed the stimuli in the second study.

#### ***4.1. Study 1: Content Analysis***

##### ***Sample***

In the first phase of this multi-method study, the sample is a dataset of articles drawn from the *New York Times* website. The *New York Times* is chosen because of its highly esteemed journalism reputation of long history (Kim & Chung, 2017), having won 122 Pulitzer Prizes, which is more than any other newspaper in the United States. Due to its status as a daily newspaper with the largest combined print-and-digital circulation (The New York Times Company Annual Report, 2017), it is a highly visible news source that generates a significant amount of sharing traffic on all content produced. For this study, lists of the “Most emailed articles today” and “Most shared articles on Facebook today” on the *New York Times*’ were collected from the trending section (<https://www.nytimes.com/trending/>) at the end of every weekday for eight consecutive weeks in July and August 2017.

A total of 323 articles were collected and coded from July 3, 2017, to August 31, 2017. The time period was generally free from any major political changes or events in the nation (e.g. a national presidential election or terrorism attack) that could skew the political news coverage in the media or cause any overemphasizing of certain topics. Articles collected over several weeks facilitated an investigation of

common themes and consistencies among the most shared news stories in the *New York Times*.

The sampling process was divided into two stages of data collection. First, the researcher manually followed the lists of “Most emailed articles today” and “Most shared articles on Facebook today” at 5:00 p.m. each day during the week of the defined time frame. Each list included ten articles, and every article was read and recorded in an Excel spreadsheet using itemized themes. The weekend stories were omitted from the data collection due to less political coverage or breaking news and a higher repetition rate for older articles. Duplication was eliminated by retaining the initial publication of each repeated article and recording the dates and the number of its reappearances throughout the coding period. The sampling posed no discrimination toward article type and format. All articles in the lists were examined in their entirety regardless of editorial style, content specifics, or length.

For example, on Thursday, January 5, 2017, in the “Trending” section of the New York Times’ website, the top five “Most Emailed” articles include:

“52 Places to Go in 2017”

“One Man’s Quest to Change the Way We Die”

“Intelligence Report on Russian Hacking”

“Why Rural America Voted for Trump”

“The Home Buying Decision”

On the same page, “Popular on Facebook” (most shared articles on Facebook of the day) generate the following top five stories:

“52 Places to Go in 2017”

“In Break with Precedent, Obama Envoys Are Denied Extensions Past Inauguration Day”

“Putin Led a Complex Cyberattack Scheme to Aid Trump, Report Finds”

“Rumors of Hillary Clinton’s Comeback”

“Why Rural America Voted for Trump”

Two articles in these lists were duplicates but would be coded only once. However, it was noted that these articles appeared twice in the same day. This is potentially significant because it signifies that a particular article was one of the most shared articles of the day through *both* email and Facebook, or the article became one of the most shared articles within a few days of its original publication.

### ***Coding of Content***

Each article was coded along the dimensions of interface appeal, content value, and episodic and thematic framing. Each is operationalized as follows:

Dimension 1) **Interface Appeal**: The technical or digital affordances via which the content is consumed enable an interactive and convenient experience to share a story.

- Convenience of sharing features (e.g. presence of easily recognized technical features that makes for easy sharing such as a “share” or “e-mail” button.) (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2012)
- Cross-platform availability (e.g. viewing options of an article for a variety of platforms such as mobile, tablet, desktop, that motivate sharing behaviors.)
- Interactive affordances (e.g. likelihood of interaction with news content via games, quizzes, or joint experience with one’s social connections.)

- Multimedia Elements (e.g. use of photos, sound effects, video and graphics) (Grabe et al., 2001).

Dimension 2) **Human Interest Personalization**: Provocative content and headlines intended to arouse interest, curiosity, and reaction among the audience.

- Emotional Testimony (e.g. use of lay-person interviews, features contributed from audience, and content potentially relevant to one's geographic location and personal identity.) (Grabe et al., 2001).
- Localized Identification (e.g. discussion of the involvement of specific groups or geographical locations; empathy-producing testimony that has the potential to provoke identification and emotional contagion in viewers.) (Cohen, 2001).
- Partisan Content (e.g. explicitly expressed political attitudes and perspectives that potentially evoke negative discrete emotional responses in audience members) (Hasell & Weeks, 2016).

Dimension 3) **Episodic vs. Thematic Framing**: Episodic framing discusses an issue by offering specific examples and case studies. Thematic framing, on the other hand, places issues into a broader context, which usually include stories that shed light on a much more comprehensive media narrative going on in society, which resonates with people on a deeper level about a broader issue the story informs on (Gross, 2008).

Specifically, these three dimensions were measured by the indicators in the coding protocol (Appendix A) including: Video Presence, Photo/Image Presence, Social Media Link Presence, Interactivity, Human Interest Personalization, and News Framing. The coding also identified the following elements in each story: the section

in which it appears, whether it could be considered breaking news, political story type, and the amount of reoccurrence of sharing.

Ten percent of the total sample was coded by a second coder who is a well-trained, experienced researcher. The coder followed the same protocol provided by the researcher and examined 30 randomly selected articles from the sample. Intercoder reliability was estimated by calculating the percentage of agreement between the researcher and the second coder for each coded variable. Such agreement for the ratings of variables reached .86 on average, which confirmed that the coding design was reliable.

Results from the content analysis showed that the common characteristic shared by all articles coded was human interest personalization and episodic framing of content. This element informed the development of a quantitative instrument in the second study to further explore the research problem.

#### ***4.2. Study 2: Experiment on Individual Motivations for Sharing***

Based on the assumption that audience attention can be influenced by many different factors, this dissertation posits that the audience's sharing behaviors online are largely determined by two factors: specific elements of the content factors and the level of user perceptions with the story. The first factor is found in the content and the second factor is found in the person consuming the news. To measure the second factor, this project employs a form of audience engagement measurement. Specifically, the content analyses of articles only showed *which* stories get shared most but does not answer the question of *why* those stories get shared the most. Thus,

the second study in this dissertation is an experiment measuring individuals' motivations for news sharing.

It should be noted that results from the content analysis (the first factor) suggested that human-interest personalization in a story appeared to be a variable that influences a story's stickiness. Human-interest personalization is defined in this dissertation as emotional testimony, localized identification, and partisan provocation. Therefore, the experiment manipulates the level of a news story's personalization to determine whether the more personalized version is more likely to be shared. This relates to a central hypothesis of this dissertation that while individual preferences toward more personalized stories are critical variables, so is one's motivation to share news with his or her social networks.

However, although the content analysis has shown which elements are most likely to be shared (because we can both measure elements within a story and how often it is shared online), the analysis does not answer the question of *why* these stories were shared (or *why* episodic framing and personalization appear more frequently in some shared stories). The experiment's post questionnaire is used to specifically measure why individuals might share particular stories, while making sure the stories in question have particular elements under study.

### ***Design***

This experiment employs a between-subjects design in which each participant was randomly placed into only one out of four groups (one control group and three treatment groups). The between-subjects design was used to avoid order effects that may occur in within-subject designs. Once the experimental procedures and post

questionnaire design were pre-tested with a smaller and separate sample, the online experiment was launched.

### *Independent and Dependent Variables*

The dependent variable of the present study is the **likelihood of news sharing** by individuals, and the independent variable is **a story's personalization level**. As identified in the review of literature, content personalization is guided by three theoretical categories of news stickiness: emotional testimony, localized identification, and partisan provocation. Emotional testimony includes comments and interview with laypersons that increases the vividness of news through emotional response. Localized identification indicates content mentioning specific geographic locations and group identity that are directly concerned with the issue in discussion. Partisan provocation means content regarding pro-attitudinal and partisan information that elicits emotional responses from partisan news users.

### *Measures*

H2 predicts that a story with stronger social engagement appeal will be more likely to motivate audiences to share it online. The social engagement appeal of news that propel users' psychological motivations for sharing is measured in five dimensions (reciprocal value, personal interest, information utility, persuasion potential, and bandwagon effect) with indicators such as: "How likely are you to share a news story due to the following reasons?" Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging with 1 = Definitely; 2 = Somewhat likely; 3 = Neither likely nor unlikely; 4 = Somewhat unlikely; to 5 = Not at all. Participants were asked



to indicate their answers to the following indicators for each dimension. The Cronbach's alpha statistics were generated via reliability analysis on SPSS.

1) The dimension of *individual interest* is content that addresses an issue or topic that emotionally resonates with one's interests, needs, or identity. This dimension was measured with an index of three seminal indicators, which were, a) The news story pertains to my personal interest; b) The news story resonates with who I am; and c) The news story helps reinforce an existing personal belief that I would like to advertise. The three items produced a Cronbach's Alpha  $\alpha$  of .84, surpassing the minimum reliability value of .70.

2) The dimension of *reciprocal value* or content that generates reciprocity and allows individuals to maintain social relationships within their network in the form of social discussion, was measured with a two-item index asking responses to the statements: a) The news story is about something one or more of my friends would enjoy or care about; and b) The news story will generate a discussion or response from my social connections. The two items produced Cronbach's Alpha  $\alpha$  of .60.

3) The dimension of *persuasion potential* is defined as the likelihood of reinforcing one's own viewpoints, influencing others' opinions, raising awareness and echoing perspectives or voices that are not often heard. This does not mean that individuals necessarily expect a response but may want to amplify how they feel as an individual making a point. This category was measured with one item: "The news story has the potential to influence people's opinion."

4) The dimension of *information utility*: Content that connections in one's social network may find useful and compelling, which promotes one's image as the

bearer of useful and important information; content that has the potential of connecting information that a particular part of one's network may not be exposed to. This dimension was measured with one item: "The news story contains useful information that other people should know about."

5) The dimension of *bandwagon effect*: The user sharing a news article because other people have shared it and because the user potentially trusts popular opinion. This dimension was measured with one item: "The news story contains a popular or majority opinion that I want to echo."

Covariates included:

a) *Overall sharing behavior*, measured in an index of two items: "How often do you share news online?" (Likert scale measure from 1 = Never, to, 5 = Daily) and "How much do you usually discuss political news topics with others?" (Likert scale measure from 1 = Not at all, to 5 = A great deal). The reliability test of the index resulted in a Cronbach's Alpha  $\alpha$  of .69.

b) *Pre-existing attitudes toward political news*, measured in an index of two items: "How interested are you in political news in general?" (Likert scale measure from 1 = Not at all interested, to, 5 = Very interested) and "Rate yourself: I believe I have a good grasp on current political events and what is in the news." (Likert scale measure from 1 = Strongly disagree, to, 5 = Strongly agree). The reliability test of the index resulted in a Cronbach's Alpha  $\alpha$  of .83.

Finally, demographic information includes age, gender, education level, and location. Participants were also asked to indicate their level of knowledge of political news and their news sharing habits. The questionnaire ends with an open-ended

question that allows the participants to further elaborate on motivations for sharing that were not sufficiently covered in the previous questions.

### ***News Story Stimuli***

H1a predicts that a story with *emotional testimonial* content will be shared more than a story without emotional testimonial content. H1b predicts that a story with *localized identification* content will more likely to motivate audiences to share it online than a story without such content. H1c predicts a story with *provocative partisan* content will more likely to motivate audiences to share it online than a story without such content.

The stimuli tested were two short newspaper stories on immigration and military, respectively. Both topics are matters of interest in the domestic policy area that involve notable new developments proposed by the Trump Administration in 2017. To be consistent with Study 1 of the content analysis, the researcher specifically looked for original articles published by the New York Times. The topics of immigration and military were selected due to their high visibility in the national political spotlight, significant and consistent news coverage, controversial nature, and strong possibility that the members of the public have acquired considerable knowledge and formed an opinion on them. These characteristics may be especially helpful in determining why certain type of coverage of these high-profile topics in the news are more likely to be shared by the audience. See Appendix B for complete article stimuli comparison table. An original news story plus three manipulated versions of the original were used for the two topics of immigration and military

policy. The author consulted with a former journalist to create the manipulated content.

### **Topic 1: Immigration**

The original news story addressed the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and President Trump’s announcement regarding the possible banishment of this program. A second story titled “Trump Moves to End DACA and No New Applications Accepted” was selected as the experimental stimulus (see appendices). The content of the story was partially adapted from the original piece titled “Trump Moves to End DACA and Calls on Congress to Act” published on September 5, 2017, by the New York Times. The stimulus article was 530 words in length. The story was manipulated into three more personalized versions (including the headlines) to include more relevant information directly related to the audience’s potential interests and location.

Story 2 (emotional testimony): “For Some DACA Recipients, Losing Work Permits and Protection is Just the Start” (560 words). The story detailed interviews, opinions, and stories from DACA recipients from all across the country, citing personal situations and potential consequences should such policy change were to take effect.

Story 3 (localized identification): “DACA Beneficiaries in Maryland Face Challenges Ahead” (500 words). The story localized the policy’s impact in the context of Maryland and cited opinions from specific local groups such as Under Armour (based in Baltimore) and the University of Maryland.

Story 4 (partisan provocation): “Right and Left React to a Prospective DACA Deal” (600 words). The story highlighted the battle of opinions between Democrat and Republican lawmakers regarding the policy. Specific names, political party affiliations, and state origins were included to showcase the heat of argument and tension surrounding this particular debate.

## **Topic 2: Military**

The second news story discusses military policy, specifically how transgender members were banned from serving in the troops, per President Trump’s recommendation in July 2017. The story titled “New Policy Says Transgender People Will Not Be Allowed in the Military” was selected as the experimental stimulus (also see appendix). Similar to the first immigration topic, stories in topic two were also revised based on the original article from the New York Times titled “Trump Says Transgender People Will Not Be Allowed in the Military” published on July 26, 2017. The stimulus article is 465 words in length and was also rewritten into three more personalized versions:

Story 2: (emotional testimony): “‘I Will Forever Be an American Soldier,’ Transgender Service Members Respond to Trump’s Ban” (554 words). The story cited opinions from the perspectives of a female Army soldier based in Germany to increase vividness.

Story 3 (localized identification): “For Maryland Transgender Service Members, a Mix of Sadness, Anger and Fear” (591 words). The story contextualized the potential influence of the policy in the experience of a student at the U.S. Naval Academy (based in Annapolis) and particular actions taken by Maryland advocacy

groups. It mentioned that Maryland was one of the 44 states and the District of Columbia that filed a joint suit seeking to block the implementation of the transgender ban.

Story 4 (partisan provocation): “Some Republicans Welcome Military Transgender Ban; Most Democrats Don’t” (439 words). The story focused on several Republican lawmakers’ support for the ban and Democrats’ arguments against it. Similar to Story 4 in the immigration category, debate and contrast of opinions were highlighted in particular.

### ***Pre-Testing the Instrument***

Before the experiment was widely shared and executed, the instrument was pre-tested with a separate sample of 30 undergraduate and graduate students. Participants were asked to provide feedback on survey questions. Feedback was relatively minor in the context of question wording and the choices provided for multiple choice questions.

### ***Experiment Sample***

The experiment employed an online snowball sample recruited via sharing the experiment survey link by email and on social media. The survey link was originally distributed to a convenience sample of students and faculty at three mid-Atlantic universities and through Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and multiple group listservs to potentially reach a diverse population beyond the campus community. In the meantime, the researcher also sent out periodic reminder emails and social media posts to increase response rate. All participants were encouraged to share the study link with friends and families.

As a participation incentive, undergraduate students from an undergraduate journalism class at one of the recruited universities were invited to complete the online experiment in exchange for course credit offered by the instructor. All participants also had the chance of entering to win one of ten \$10 Amazon gift cards by providing their email addresses for contact purposes only. Winners of the gift cards were drawn immediately after the completion of data collection.

A total of 393 participants were recruited, of which 314 completed the study. All participants indicated themselves as 18 years of age or above and residents in the United States through a screening question. Experiment participation was entirely voluntary. The experiment survey was made available for three entire weeks in December 2017. Data collection was completed between December 1, 2017, and December 22, 2017.

The sample of 314 participants consisted of 55% female and 37% male respondents, with 8% of the respondents preferring not to indicate their gender. White or Caucasian participants comprised 57% of sample, Asian or Pacific Islander 19%, Black or African-American 6%, and Hispanic or Latino 3%. In terms of age groups, 64% of the participants were between 18 and 29 years of age, followed by 15% who were between 30 and 49, 11% between 50 to 64 years of age, and 4% 65 or older.

### ***Procedure***

The experiment was administered on Qualtrics, an online survey platform. Upon opening the link to the experiment, participants first viewed a page with general study information that described the purpose of the study as understanding online news consumption, without priming the participants with questions on motivations

for news sharing. The researcher's contact information was also provided. After participants agreed to take part in the study, they were asked to digitally sign the consent form by proceeding to the following page. The survey did not provide the chance for participants to save and return later. Participants were also prevented from going back to previous pages once the survey was started. They were able to complete the survey only once from one IP address. The study was reviewed and approved by the IRB with an "exempt" status as it is considered to present the lowest amount of risk to potential subjects. Before being exposed to the stimuli, participants were instructed that, "You will now be prompted to read a news article in the following page." They were informed that they had the option of choosing one out of two news story topics of interest to read and answer a final 14-question questionnaire including two questions that measured users' immediate reactions to the content. The average time to complete this survey was 15 minutes. As discussed above, the two topics provided were immigration and military policy. Once a topic selection was made, the participants were randomly exposed to one of the four story versions: 1) The original story with no personalized content; 2) a story with emotional testimonial content; 3) a story with localized content; or 4) a story with provocative partisan content. The assumption is that the participants would consider the news article as a real news story written by professional journalists and published in a newspaper.

After reading the randomly assigned story, the participants were immediately asked to indicate how likely it was they would share the story they just read on social media such as Facebook or Twitter. The second question is how likely they would share through email. Those who selected "somewhat unlikely" and "very unlikely" to



either question were asked to further explain. The participants were asked to choose up to eight reasons that they thought motivated news sharing, how frequently they would share political news, how much they would discuss political news with others, how interested they are in political news in general, how strong they believe their understanding of political news is, and their preferred platform for news sharing in ranking order. For each selection of individual motivations of news sharing, participants rated the items with a 1-5 Likert scale. Prior to completion of the questionnaire, the participants were also invited to elaborate on particular motivation factors that drive their news sharing behavior through an open-ended question. A debriefing and thank-you message was displayed at the end of the questionnaire.

In summary, there were a few things about the method design that were carried out due to consideration of resources and timeliness and could benefit from some revisions if time and budget allowed. First of all, both of the content analysis and the experiment used article samples from the *New York Times*, which provided valuable insights but still lacked diversity in perspective and reporting style. Additionally, since the dissertation is interested in political news sharing, an important covariate to take into consideration would be the existing attitudes of the participants toward the topics in discussion before they read the stories. Lastly, if time permits, a bigger sample could also be useful to further validate the data.

Despite the concerns above, the mixed-method study was a significant step forward in the understanding of online news sharing behaviors. The following two chapters will unpack the findings from the content analysis and the experiment and

explain in details how content and psychological factors must be present simultaneously in maximizing motivation for one to share news stories.

## Chapter 5: Results – Content Analysis

This section reviews the common characteristics among the most shared articles online in the *New York Times*, a well-respected U.S. media outlet with worldwide influence and readership. The *Times* has won more Pulitzer Prizes than any other newspapers and is currently ranked second in the U.S. by circulation (Victor, 2018). On top of such highly esteemed reputation, the *Times* also has a dedicated “Trending” section that includes lists of “Most emailed articles today” and “Most shared articles on Facebook today,” making the publication a reliable source for article samples in the present research.

The findings from the content analysis showed that what set the most shared articles apart from the others were not the general content features (i.e. use of videos or photos) but the framing techniques applied, which typically involved human interest personalization. The results underscored the more salient points emphasized in the literature on news virality, which are highlighted in the definitions of newsworthiness and news quality criteria as personalization and episodic framing (see Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Harcup & O’Neill, 2001). This content analysis was valuable to the present study of news stickiness because it was critical to decoding which elements in the text were present and therefore, distilling which elements might affect news stickiness.

The main goal of the content analysis was to understand the content characteristics shared by the group of articles with the highest sharing rate on the *New York Times* website. As outlined in the research methods chapter, each article was read and coded based on an established coding protocol. The protocol was

constructed to allow for both a basic quantitative analysis and qualitative thematic analysis. It was structured in four parts. The first part collects basic information of the articles such as article titles, publishing dates, and web addresses of the articles. The second part provides information regarding the types of the articles, the sections in which they are located, types of political news, and whether the articles were breaking news or not. The third part concerns content features typically identified in online articles today: the use of videos and photo as well as social media links and interactive features. Last but not least, the fourth part addresses the framing of the stories, which looks for information that illustrates news personalization and episodic elements.

Finally, the coding scheme provides a “reoccurrence” category that allows the researcher to record whether an article has been on the “most shared articles” list more than once. Since the lists on the *New York Times* website are updated daily, articles that made the lists on multiple days signify a particularly high sharing rate. This presents extra significance in analyzing their content features. A total of 323 articles were collected and coded from July 3, 2017, to August 31, 2017. Articles collected over several weeks facilitated an investigation of common themes and consistencies among the most shared news stories in the *New York Times*.

## ***5.1. General Content Features***

### **5.1.1. Various Levels of Personalization**

Before I dive into the findings on specific personalization elements of the stories and content framing, some general observation from the content analysis was also noteworthy. First of all, several articles stood out by having no personalized

content as defined in this dissertation. Such stories generally fell into the category of news topics that garner individual interest among certain audiences. As previously discussed, education psychology literature has proposed that strong individual interest in certain topics tends to have long-lasting effects on a person's knowledge and values, therefore motivates greater comprehension of content (Schiefele, 1999). Due to the likelihood of pure interest in a story without influence of personalization factors, several topical groups emerged in the sample of articles, which were all part of the "most shared articles of the day" lists:

- 1) Political stories that are of broad national interest without strong controversial discussions. These stories include claims by intelligence agencies that North Korea missile could reach the U.S. in a year, Trump's criticism on China as meeting with North Korea drew near, China exerting power over Europe as Trump withdrew more from the world, and general anti-terrorism tactics like getting tough on Pakistan in order to win Afghanistan.
- 2) Soft news that caters to specific group of audiences potentially with dedicated interest in the topic, i.e. news that resonated with a particular interested group. Although most of the stories coded were political news, a few non-political stories also made the lists as one of the most shared articles of the day. For example, stories on Usain Bolt's stride, how networking is overrated for job seekers, saving money for a 35-year-old, better living habits, and an iceberg breaking away from the Antarctica could easily draw some of the audience's attention if readers were interested in sports, the job market, life hacks, or traveling.

3) Stories with a more personal tone that touch on rare occurrences could be especially intriguing to some readers. A story reporting on a woman who was found with 27 contact lenses in her eyes was on the most shared list of articles for three days in a row in mid-July. One story discussing the benefit of standing desks and advocating for a standing commute to work as a healthier lifestyle also made triple occurrences in the most shared list. Last, but not least, two photo slides made the most-shared lists as well. One of them showcased fireworks across America on the Fourth of July and the other documented conditions in Texas towns after Hurricane Harvey. Still images can be more powerful and salient than videos of the same subject or event (Irby, 2004).

The more interesting comparison to the aforementioned set of articles is a group of articles that were marked with all three elements. What set these articles apart from the rest was that they are not only of broad national interest, but also controversial, triggering a wide variety of responses and opinions from different sides of political divide. The subjects of these stories fall into the health care debate; tax reform, the rally and violence in Charlottesville in August 2017; immigration policies; and President Trump's travel ban on certain countries. Issues derived from these topics of interest have long been in the center of debate in national politics, with the tendency to attract heated discussion among the public. They were often contextualized with emotional testimonials that vividly illustrate the weight of such issues on individuals, with a focus on certain groups and geographical areas. Moreover, many controversial political stories reference both sides of the issue as a

way of accentuating where the controversy comes from and how people from different sides view such topics.

### **5.1.2. Multimedia Elements**

Media and non-textual content of a news story constitute important components of news stories today, as research has shown that the use of photos and videos may increase a story's journalistic value (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2012). However, although stories with multimedia elements may be more audience-friendly, the use of photos, videos, and links have largely become the norm in online news presentation today so that these are hardly unique features anymore. This means that the presence of multimedia content did not necessarily set the sample articles apart. It also means that the high sharing rate of these articles could not have been attributed to the presence or absence of multimedia. Indeed, contrary to this assumption that multimedia content may increase a story's popularity, most of the articles coded in the present research did not have any embedded videos. Only 11% of the articles included videos. Similarly, only 5% of the articles coded came with interactive features such as a graph, chart, or customizable tools with which readers could interact.

Compared to videos and interactive features, the presence of photos, images and social media links were much more prevalent in these articles, as with most news articles nowadays. Virtually all (more than 99%) of the articles coded had at least one photo with the story. The vast majority of the articles either had one photo to lead the story on top of the page or included multiple photos spread throughout the page. The same trend goes for the use of embedded links, as virtually all (over 99%) of the

articles were written with multiple hyperlinks and social media posts directly related to various areas of content. This practice has become increasingly popular in news writing as hyperlinks allow the readers to cross reference facts, other articles, and bios while also allowing the author to provide evidence of claims and quotes in the article.

The use of multimedia elements in the articles coded in this research could be extremely specific to the *New York Times* and may not represent the overall style of news writing and presentation in other publications. The sample mainly consisted of long form stories and news analyses that emphasize excellent writing and deep knowledge. This finding could not be generalized to conclude that videos or interactive features are not encouraged in all reputable publications; however, it was relevant for measuring popularity within a single publication.

### **5.1.3. Article Type**

It was important to record the types of articles and the sections in which each article was placed in as it helps us explore which topical areas generally garner stronger audience attention. To comply with the set standard of the sources of samples, article types were defined into ten categories, based on classification provided by the *New York Times*: 1) news; 2) portrayal of a central figure; 3) reporter's notebook; 4) memo; 5) journal; 6) reviews; 7) news-page column; 8) editorial observer; 9) op-ed column; and 10) op-ed contribution.

Interestingly, most of the articles were opinion pieces and not generic news reports, which could be unique to the *New York Times*. Almost 34% of the articles were indicated as part of the journal category, which is defined as a closely observed



and stylishly written feature articles giving the readers a vivid sense of place and time. Op-ed columns are essays written by a columnist and were among the second largest group, with 23% of the more-shared articles in this group. Following them were editorial observer articles (13%), generally defined as more personal, distinct, and signed articles by an editorial board member, and news-page column articles (10%) which is a writer's unique and original insights and perspectives on a news situation.

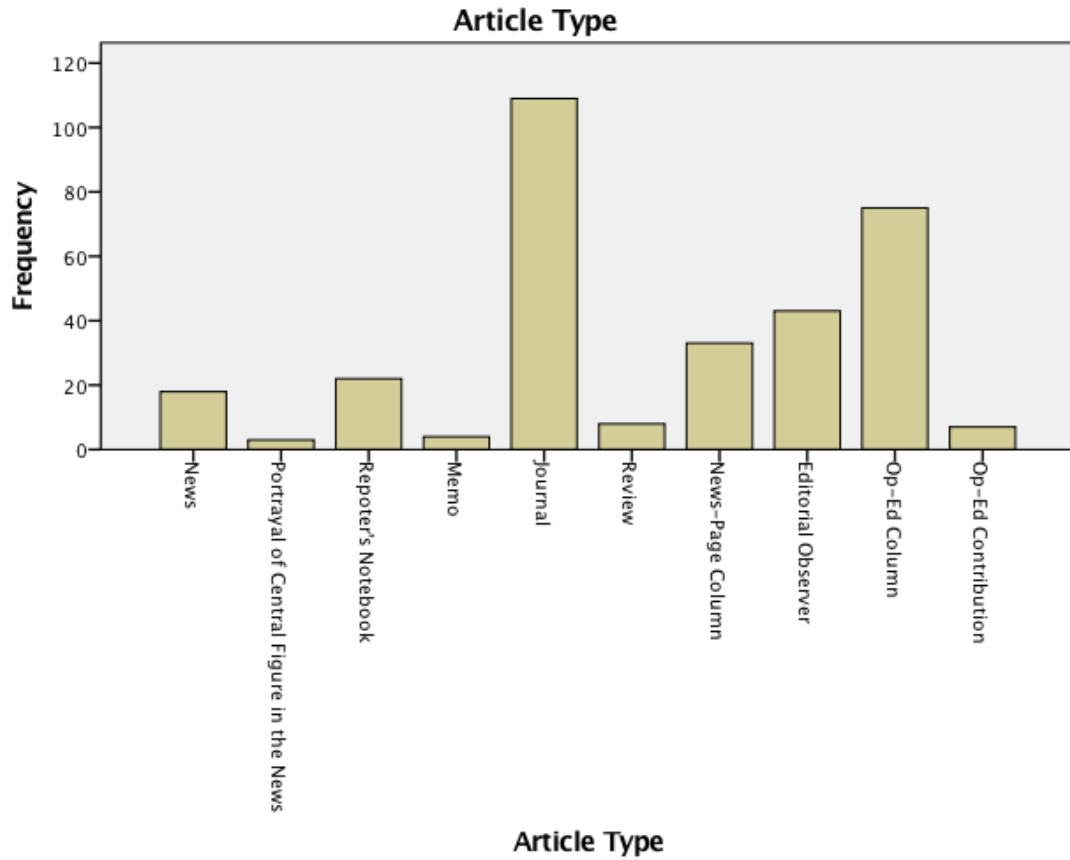


Figure 4: Article Type

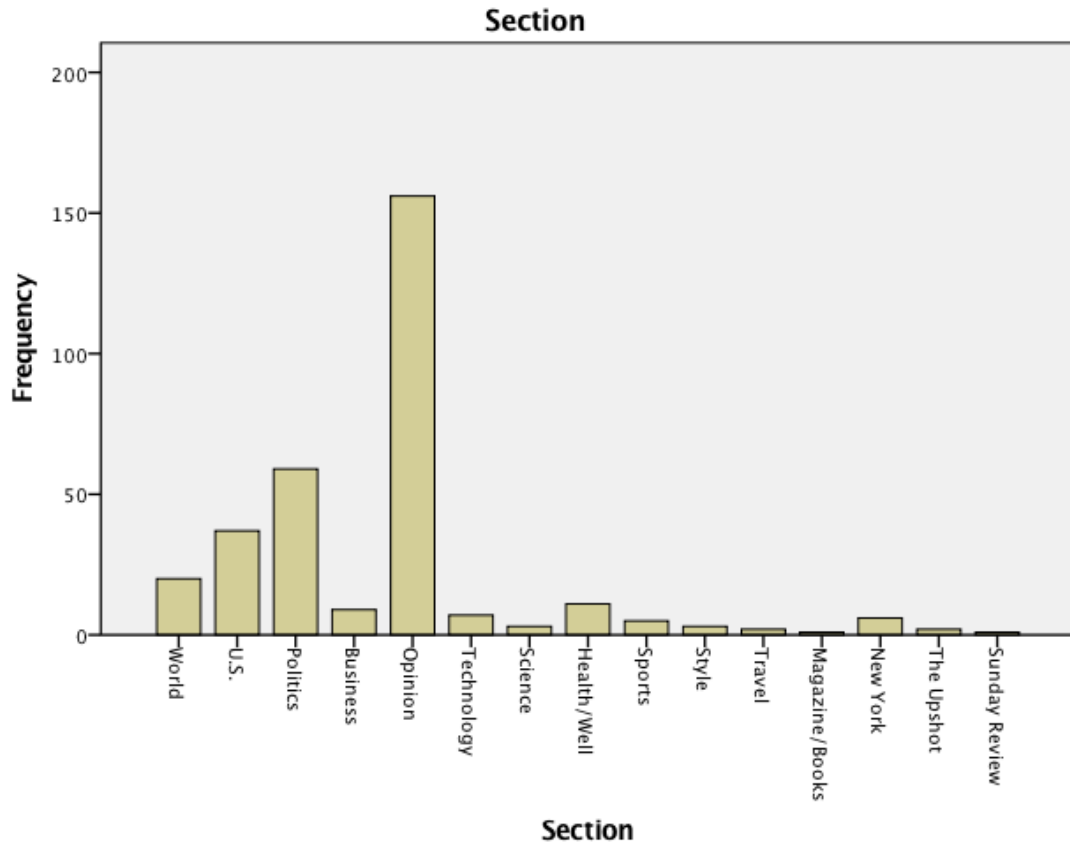


Figure 5: Article Section

There are 15 major news sections identified in the *New York Times*. The coding protocol follows the categories, which include World News, U.S., Politics, Business, Opinion, Technology, Science, Health/Well, Sports, Style, Travel, Magazine/Books, New York, The Upshot, and Sunday Review. An overwhelming amount of 48% of the articles were opinion pieces. The second largest representation was politics, which made up 18% of the most-shared stories. Stories in the U.S. section constituted approximately 12% of the total sample, and the rest of the sections each had less than 10% of articles coded. This parallels with the findings earlier that the majority of the articles were also journal and op-ed column pieces that typically fall into the opinion or politics sections of the *New York Times*. It shows that most of

the articles shared by the readers of the *New York Times* were also opinion and political articles. It could also reaffirm the assumption that most readers who read the *New York Times* are generally interested in long form journalism and editorial news analysis.

The present research is interested in what motivates people to share political news online. There have been many ways to unpack political news types. The categorization used by the Pew Research Center's public opinion research was borrowed for this study and it expands political news into 18 categories in the U.S. context: 1) elections; 2) world politics/international affairs; 3) national politics/domestic policy; 4) local politics; 5) crime/security; 6) courts; 7) business; 8) education; 9) economy; 10) environment/nature; 11) science and technology; 12) health and fitness; 13) race and gender; 14) life and entertainment; 15) religion; 16) people and event memorial; 17) other; 18) unrelated to politics. Of all 322 articles, about 35% were related to national politics, and 20% mainly concerned world politics. The other topics were significantly less common in the sample.

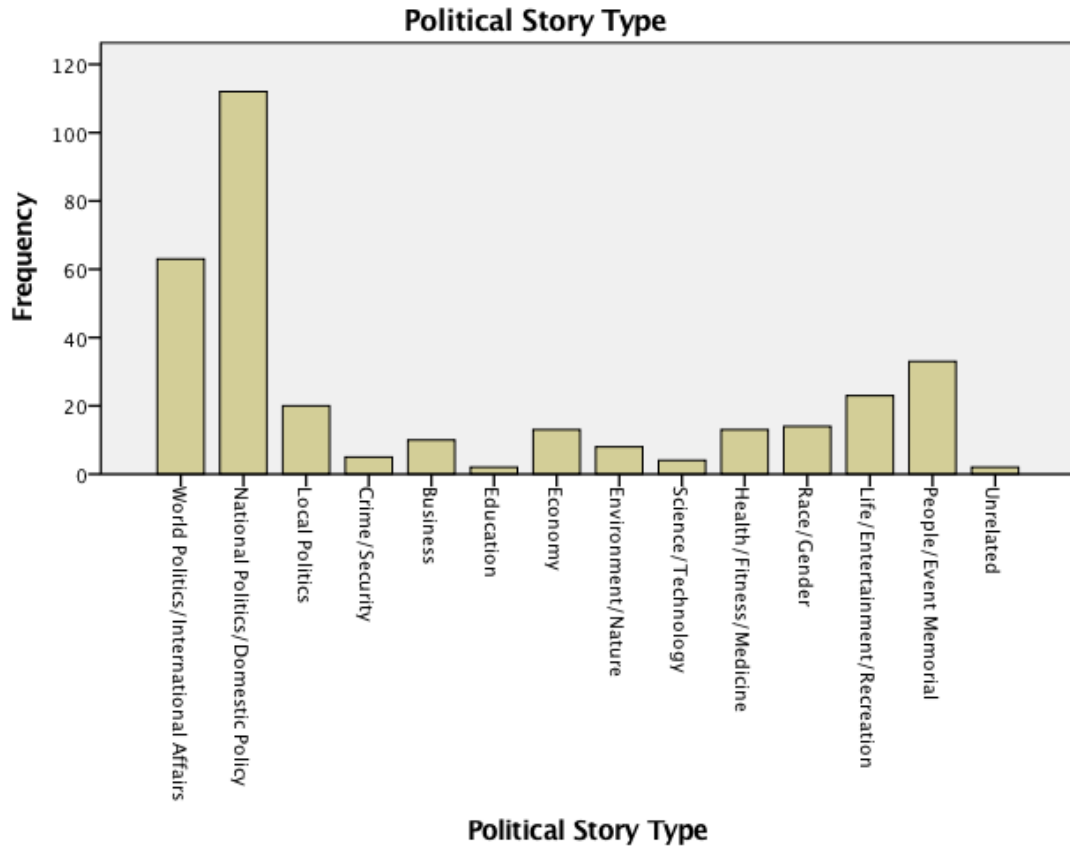


Figure 6: Political Story Type

#### 5.1.4. Breaking News and Repeated Appearances

The breaking news category led to an interesting finding because none of the articles coded were considered breaking news. This could be explained by the type of writing and reporting at the *New York Times*, which excels in in-depth analysis and generally refrains from short, announcement-type of stories.

In terms of the rate of recurrence of stories in the “most shared articles of the day” list, 60% of the articles only made the list once, while nearly a quarter of the articles (24%) made appearances twice. Some 14% of the sample had three appearances. This does not mean that the reoccurrences happened consecutively; in some cases, an article could be on the list one day and come back two weeks later. It

is also important to note that there were two “most shared” lists on a single day that the present research monitored in the months of July and August of 2017 – the “most shared on email” list and the “most shared on Facebook” list (see screenshot below). This means that one article could be shared the most on email *and* on Facebook on a single given day. In addition, another factor that contributed to the seemingly high rate of recurrence is that if an article had appeared on both lists on the same day, it was recorded as two appearances.




<b>Most Emailed</b>	<b>In Case You Missed It</b>	<b>Popular on Facebook</b>
Most emailed articles today	A recap of last week's most popular articles	Most shared articles on Facebook today
		
<p>A Really Good Thing Happening in America</p>	<p>Trump Engaged in Suspect Tax Schemes as He Reaped Riches From His Father</p>	<p>Nikki Haley to Resign as Trump's Ambassador to the U.N.</p>
<p>Why Some Italian-Americans Still Fiercely Defend Columbus Day</p>	<p>The Senate Should Not Confirm Kavanaugh. Signed, 2,400+ Law Professors.</p>	<p>Major Climate Report Describes a Strong Risk of Crisis as Early as 2040</p>
<p>The Paranoid Style in G.O.P. Politics</p>	<p>Kavanaugh's 1983 Letter Offers Inside Look at High School Clique</p>	<p>Voter Registrations Spike as Deadlines Loom. Taylor Swift Had Something to Do With It.</p>
<p>West Virginia's Small-Town Revival</p>	<p>Major Climate Report Describes a Strong Risk of Crisis as Early as 2040</p>	<p>Women, What Is Your Reaction to Kavanaugh's Confirmation?</p>
<p>How Do I Explain Justice Kavanaugh to My Daughters?</p>	<p>Banksy Painting Self-Destructs After Fetching \$1.4 Million at Sotheby's</p>	<p>Life on the Dirtiest Block in San Francisco</p>
<p>Major Climate Report Describes a Strong Risk of Crisis as Early as 2040</p>	<p>20 Killed in Limo Crash in New York; Deadliest U.S. Accident in 9 Years</p>	<p>White Women, Come Get Your People</p>
<p>The Secret to Aging Well? Contentment</p>	<p>Kavanaugh Is Sworn In After Close</p>	<p>Migrant Children in Search of Justice: A 2-Year-Old's Day in</p>

Figure 7: New York Times Web Screenshot – Trending Section

## 5.2. Personalized Elements

As introduced earlier in this dissertation, the present research measures news stickiness through two factors: a news story's content value and the audience's social engagement needs. The content appeal of a story can be unpacked into two elements: human interest personalization and episodic framing, as shown below.

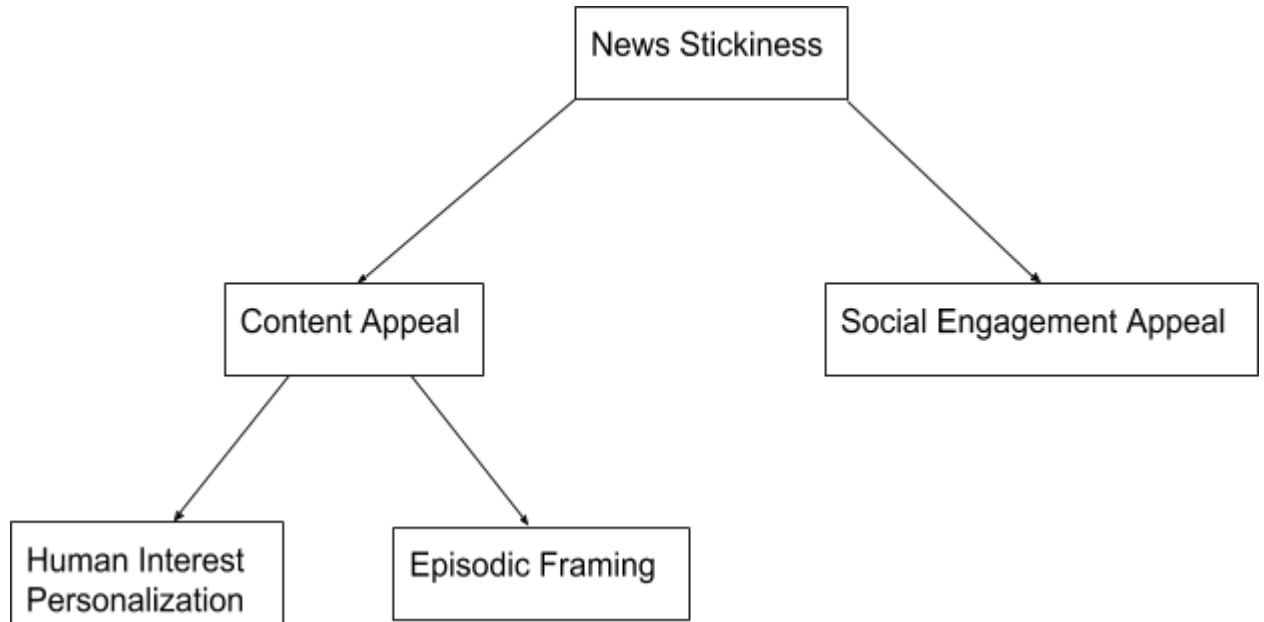


Figure 8: Conceptualization of News Stickiness

### 5.1.1. Emotional Testimony

The first indicator of news personalization, as defined in this dissertation, is emotional testimony. Specifically, it refers to the use of lay-person interviews, features contributed from audience, and content potentially relevant to one's geographic location and personal identity (Grabe et al., 2001). Coding results showed that the number of articles with and without emotional testimonial content were about even. About 48% of the total articles coded were written with emotional quotes, while 50% of them were without.

**HIP (Emotional Testimony)**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	With Emotional Quotes	155	11.8	48.1	48.1
	Without Emotional Quotes	162	12.3	50.3	98.4
	Unsure	5	.4	1.6	100.0
	Total	322	24.4	100.0	
Missing	System	996	75.6		
Total		1318	100.0		

*Table 5: Human Interest Personalization – Emotional Testimony*

In the context of the sample articles for the present research, there were two types of stories in which emotional quotes were applied abundantly. The first type was characterized by stories written about the effect of the policy change and tangible influences that specific groups of population had received. Particularly, these stories referred to the three “bans” the President Trump had implemented in the summer of 2017 – banning transgender people from serving in the armed forces, banning the renewal of benefit by DACA recipients, and the travel ban that prevent people from certain Muslim and Middle Eastern countries from entering the U.S. Instead of reporting on the policy change alone and re-stating any official announcement on the update, these articles often focused on a central figure or group who could be affected by these policy changes and then expanded the stories surrounding the central figure’s or group’s personal story. The emotional weight and characters of such articles became especially pronounced when they are written in first person by a columnist in the Opinion section.

As an example, in the case of President Trump’s announcement that transgender people are not welcome in the U.S. military, Boylan (2017) focused on

one Machinist Mate First Class in the U.S. Navy and started the story by telling about her nervousness in attending a reunion of the crew of the U.S.S. *Francis Scott Key*<sup>1</sup>. Monica Helms was ambivalent about attending because she had come out as transgender and she was not sure how her shipmates would react. Boylan cited a few service members who were quoted as saying, “I came from a long line of people who have served in this country. To have someone say to me, I’m not worthy to be allowed to serve, simply because I’m different, is a horrible and bigoted way of looking at things.” The story went on to include the voice of more transgender service members who had begun coming out before retiring: “I served this country to protect everyone’s rights and freedoms and one would think that would include my own.”

The other type of stories where emotional quotes are largely seen were updates on a political agenda with a personal twist. The topics of such stories may not be entirely novel; some of them revolved around long-time subjects of national interest such as the tax reform, police brutality, racial tensions, and climate change. How these stories attracted audience sharing could be due to the fact that they offered a fresh perspective and insights from a layperson’s standpoint while engaging the reader in a long-held interest in a particular topic. Some of the related topics were parallel with new development that shed new light on a traditional discussion.

For example, the summer of 2017 witnessed the riots and rally of Charlottesville that provoked a series of political discourse and deliberation on white supremacy, neo-fascism, and domestic terrorism. The riots were not one-time events; in fact, the events traced their roots back to 2015 when a mass shooting took place at

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<sup>1</sup> Link to story: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/26/opinion/trumps-contempt-for-transgender-heroes.html>



a Charleston church in South Carolina, which prompted efforts across the country to remove Confederate monuments from public spaces. Such efforts have often faced a backlash from people who claim they wish to uphold Confederate heritage. Similar to other topics of longtime interest, the background of the Charlottesville rally was nothing out of the ordinary, yet the ramifications and response by different groups in society could spark especially compelling exchange of views in a new era. In one story featuring an African American man in Florida reflecting on Charlottesville<sup>2</sup>, he was quoted as saying, “I’m not surprised. This is the world we live in; this is the country that we live in. We have a lot of racism embedded in our country, in our history.” He went on to recall how his grandparents who lived through racism in the south would feel if they had witnessed Charlottesville: “To think that I am reliving some of the rhetoric that my grandmother heard. If my grandmother was here today, she would be in disbelief that we are having the same conversations.”

Another notable example is a story on the battle of the affirmative action that brought the support for bridging inequality in education and employment into a new context. The story centered around Austin Jia<sup>3</sup>, an Asian American student at Duke who was rejected by multiple Ivy League colleges in 2015 despite his high GPA, perfect SAT score, and record of extracurricular activities. Jia was quoted as saying, “My gut reaction was that I was super disillusioned by how the whole system was set up.” The article ended with Jia questioning the admissions process: “I felt that the whole concept of meritocracy – which America likes to say it exercises all the time –

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<sup>2</sup> Link to story: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/16/us/black-voices-race-charlottesville.html>

<sup>3</sup> Link to story: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/us/affirmative-action-battle-has-a-new-focus-asian-americans.html>

I felt that principle was defeated a little in my mind.” In this case, emotional testimonial content often elevates one’s sense of empathy. The strategy works because it speaks to the audience’s tendency to resonate with someone’s experience by applying the words of real people involved, affected, or sometimes victimized by a policy or situation.

### **5.1.2. Localization**

In terms of the second indicator of news personalization, localization, the feature is more explicitly recognized in the coded articles. In the present research, localization refers to content mentioning specific geographical locations and group identity as main media characters that adopt the story perspectives (Cohen, 2001). Out of all coded content, about 65% of the articles were identified with specific groups or population in the story content. Nearly 35% were not framed with clear indication of any relevance to a distinct group or location. Unlike emotional testimonial content, stories with identified groups and location would be written with or without any direct quotes from the parties involved, as long as relevant individuals and organizations were discussed.

### HIP (Localized Identification)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	With Identified Groups	210	15.9	65.2	65.2
	Without Identified Groups	112	8.5	34.8	100.0
	Total	322	24.4	100.0	

*Table 6: Human Interest Personalization – Localized Identification*

Localization, as a framing feature, was more prevalent in the sample articles because most news stories were concerned with one or more particular age, racial, gender, economic, or geographical demographic that could be easily pinpointed for added relevance. It is important to note here, though, that this feature encompasses two dimensions: location and group identification. The first dimension, location, refers to specific geographical areas on which the audience form cognitive judgment based on spatial and psychological distance. Research shows that when an object is psychologically distant, it represents a high level of construal; when the object is psychologically proximate, it is often associated with a low construal level (Peng et al., 2013). Locations that are particularly distant could be interpreted as less relevant. The second dimension, group identification, relates to specific racial, gender, and age demographics that the audience directly identifies with (Cohen, 2001).

Clearly identified locations and groups are expected to automatically elicit orienting responses in the audience, depending on the perceived psychological distance. Moreover, the discussion of potentially relevant individuals and their experience also add to the concreteness and proximity of a story. In general, aspects of the articles that had elements of localization were divided into three broad

categories – general political news, critique of President Trump, and non-political soft news. Below I will discuss how these topics fit into the two dimensions of localization: location and group identification.

The first dimension is location identification. In the context of U.S. journalism, these stories generally stem from the standpoint of a particular state in terms of geographical locations. In the case of the coverage on the surging housing costs in California<sup>4</sup>, framing the stories in a localized context also further increased the relevance of discussion to California residents and those who are particularly interested in the housing market in California. In similar fashion, a few stories also discussed a blistering heat wave that threatened Seattle<sup>5</sup>, where only a third of the population have air-conditioning. The stories could be appealing to the affected Seattle residents or anyone with vested interest in the area. According the Construal Level Theory, the amount of psychological distance that one perceives from an object or event depends on how abstract or concrete such object or event is considered to be. Location identification essentially functions by defining the spatial and social distance perceived by the audience through content consumption.

For stories with clearly identified demographic groups, topics spanned national affairs including health care reform, tax reform, net neutrality, police brutality, housing costs, etc. These stories generally stem from the standpoint of a specific population in terms of demographics. For instance, a story on the student loan crisis adopted the perspectives of Samantha Watson, a 33-year-old mother of

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<sup>4</sup> Link to sample article: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/17/us/california-housing-crisis.html>

<sup>5</sup> Link to story: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/01/us/seattle-portland-heat-wave.html>

three who took out private loans and graduated with a degree in psychology in 2013<sup>6</sup>. She was among the tens of thousands of people who may get their debts wiped away because critical paperwork is missing. Another example of putting a story in the context of those affected is titled, “What Jewish children learned from Charlottesville.”<sup>7</sup> The story appeared in the “most shared of the day” lists three times and was especially powerful by drawing on historical connections with the author’s cultural heritage as well as a reflection on the negative influence of fascism. These stories could be potentially powerful in triggering emotional association with audiences who have been or currently positioned in similar situations.

Similarly, another story on the first encounters with racism by teens profiled four teenagers across the country and told the readers what happened to them, how they reacted, and how the encounter affected them later as adults<sup>8</sup>. The characters represented multiple minority races, and each had a different experience to tell, from being followed by the police to having a derogatory slur directed at them. Inserting specific groups and their perspectives into the stories allow the readers to identify with the topic with greater emotional proximity.

The stories on the critique of President Trump, as the second major topical category that utilized location and group identification framing, mainly involved editorial analysis of the latest policy changes and their effects on one or more groups of population. Since the article sample was collected in the summer of 2017, many of

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<sup>6</sup> Link to story: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/17/business/dealbook/student-loan-debt-collection.html>

<sup>7</sup> Link to story: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/15/opinion/jewish-charlottesville-anti-semitism.html>

<sup>8</sup> Link to story: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/us/first-encounters-with-racism.html>

the editorials and opinion pieces on the president had much to do with a few key events: the transgender ban in the military, change in policy on DACA, the U.S. relationship with Russia and North Korea, and the Charlottesville chaos. In addition to describing any announcements made by the Administration, the stories were often linked to particular backlash by groups, organizations, or locations affected. One may also argue that since the *New York Times* is largely a liberal news organization, often under attack by President Trump in recent years, most of its editorials and other writings were especially critical of the current administration and therefore, shedding negative lights on news surrounding the president's behavior and actions. However, this is counterbalanced by the *Times*' reputation as a quality news outlet, in which objectivity and balance are clearly important factors in coverage.

Lastly, non-political news stories (or soft news) with localization content appeared far less frequently compared to the previous categories, although most of these soft new stories centered around lifestyle and fitness topics with the highest rate of recurrences in the "most shared of the day" lists. In the *New York Times*, lifestyle topics are related to stories such as "The summer bucket list of a 35-year-old woman", "Are you a carbaholic? Why cutting carbs is so tough", "How cool works in America today", "For kids with cancer, focusing on quality of life", "For baby boomers, dismay, and opportunity" and "Self-driving people, enabled by Airbnb", etc. Descriptive headlines also played crucial factors in letting the audience know the exact context the stories are situated in. Topics such as "Live in a poor neighborhood? Better be a perfect parent", "A backlash builds against sexual harassment in Silicon Valley", and "Struggling schools improve on test scores, but not all are safe" allowed

for clear judgment on whether the specific locations or groups in question would be relevant to oneself.

### **5.1.3. Partisan Provocation**

As previously discussed, partisan provocation content refers to attitudinal and partisan information that elicits emotional response from partisan news users (Arpan & Nabi, 2011; Hasell & Weeks, 2016). It is a key framing technique prevalently used in political news coverage, although not all political news stories were equipped with clear partisan information from both sides of the aisle. This does not mean that the article was simply opinion or one-sided (although interpretations of partisanship or even bias will differ among individuals). In our sample of 322 articles, slightly over half of them (51%) were written with clear partisan content, while 49% of them were not. Partisan information was especially pronounced in news stories regarding controversial topics such as the update on DACA and transgender ban in the military. Voices and debate from supporters, empathizers, and people who are against the change were clearly exchanged in the articles. In more general political news topics including issues surrounding international affairs, however, the tone was more unified in similar viewpoints. The cumulative percentages, though, only showed a small difference and that the partisan content was not extremely more pronounced than non-partisan content.

As expected, the partisan content in the *New York Times* articles were frequently leaning left and often framed with perspectives clearly in disagreement with the President's viewpoints or actions. For example, a story on how Trump is

driving up health insurance premiums cited statistics that were on the rise in 2018<sup>9</sup>. The calculations were also backed by predictions of several government agencies and insurance companies. The article mentioned that the new administration's overall approach to health care was to continue criticizing the Affordable Care Act and take "small steps to undermine it without unleashing a full-force assault." Under the same topic regarding health care, another story touched on the Trump administration's intention to stabilize health markets, but the administration won't say how. The article focused on a recent discussion with a Trump administration official who failed to give a clear picture of any numerical goals for sign-ups under the health care law, and how concerning that could be to doctors and patients in general.

The partisan coverage was not limited to political debates. In a story documenting Trump's rally in Phoenix where he called journalists "sick people," multiple journalists and media organizations were described as enraged by such condemnation<sup>10</sup>. The article emphasized the fear among journalists that verbal attacks on the profession could lead to physical attacks. Activist groups were also quoted as saying, "To see this sort of attack coming yet again from the president is deeply disturbing" and that the remarks were "despicable, extremely deceptive, and dangerous." In such coverage, links to tweets written by journalists and other celebrity accounts were also included to illustrate criticism and backfire issued by members of the press, in wake of Trump's accusatory comments.

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<sup>9</sup> Link to story: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/15/opinion/how-donald-trump-is-driving-up-health-insurance-premiums.html>

<sup>10</sup> Link to story: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/23/business/media/trump-rally-media-attack.html>



For non-partisan content in the sample articles, a pattern could be drawn from stories about international affairs where the central focus is of significant interest to the American public, yet the tone of the coverage was more balanced. Several stories were related to the nuclear crisis in North Korea and potential Russian meddling with the U.S. election. These stories typically described the problem and current status if it was ongoing, while referring to opinion and perspectives from different political spectrums in the United States. For example, the coverage on North Korea’s launch of nuclear missiles examined concerns, threats, and strategies, including putting pressure on China and seeking responses from South Korea and Japan<sup>11</sup>. Similarly, a story on Trump blaming Congress for poor U.S. relations with Russia cited agreement and disagreement from both Democrats and Republicans<sup>12</sup>.

**HIP (Partisan Provocation)**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	With Partisan Content	165	12.5	51.2	51.2
	Without Partisan Content	157	11.9	48.8	100.0
	Total	322	24.4	100.0	

*Table 7: Human Interest Personalization – Partisan Provocation*

The difference in the number of articles with and without partisan content was smaller than expected. In general, partisan debates and arguments were more visible in stories covering policy changes that would require legislative actions in Congress and social issues that are particularly sensitive and controversial among different

<sup>11</sup> Link to sample article: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/05/world/asia/north-korea-war-us-icbm.html>

<sup>12</sup> Link to story: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/03/us/politics/trump-twitter-congress-russia.html>

groups in society. For example, the health care reform was a heated discussion with Republicans calling for the removal of Obamacare. Where the disagreement between the Left and Right would occur was well documented in news analysis of this topic. The transgender ban in the military also faced strong backlash from not only individuals who were personally affected and some democratic lawmakers, but from advocacy groups and activists supporting LGBTQ rights and social equality as well. Similarly, the potential change to benefits for DACA recipients prompted strong debate between immigrant-friendly politicians and more conservative leaders.

Partisan content was also strong when a controversial figure's name and actions – instead of particular events – were the focus. Prominent names were mentioned in the article sample and all were coded with partisan provocation information. These were exemplified in the coverage of Attorney General Jeff Sessions' announcement on changes with DACA; Steve Bannon's disagreement with Trump on North Korea; Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis' response to Trump's transgender ban in the military and how the Pentagon would react; response from the Left and Right on Anthony Scaramucci's dismissal; the President's advisor Jared Kushner's security clearance crisis, and an article criticizing Vice President Mike Pence. One exception to this rule, though, was the reporting on Senator John McCain's health condition and cancer treatment, which were not discussed in any context of partisan struggle during this time period.

Interestingly, stories regarding U.S. foreign policy and international affairs rarely drew much hostile partisan debate, according to the coding results. This is possibly due to the relatively unified national interest when facing foreign powers.

For example, Congress cast a unanimous vote on sanctions against Russia and North Korea during a period where tension between the U.S. and the two countries had escalated<sup>13</sup>. This was also evident in stories such as “U.S. opens door to talks with North Korea, while flexing military muscle” and “Can anyone stop Iran from taking over Iraq?” In line of unified interest, there were a few stories concerning the development of Hurricane Harvey in Texas and relief efforts across the country that were mainly embedded with emotional testimonial and localization content, without any partisan provocation content.

## ***5.2. Episodic Framing***

The present content analysis aimed to identify two types of framing techniques – thematic framing and episodic framing. Episodic framing applies when news stories focus on individuals who illustrate and exemplify an issue (Iyengar, 1991), while thematic framing refers to content with extended connections made to a broader issue beyond the main topic in discussion (Harcup & O’Neill, 2001). In other words, episodic framing would focus on an *individual* and single *event*, whereas thematic framing would focus on the *issue* and *trends* over time.

Both frames were identified in this content analysis, with a larger portion of the sample framed episodically. Coding results showed that the vast majority, about 61% of the articles, were framed episodically, and 38% of the articles were identified with thematic framing. This also confirmed the first hypothesis of the research that more personalized stories are more likely to be shared by the audience.

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<sup>13</sup> Link to story: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/25/us/politics/house-sanctions-russia-trump.html>

## News Framing

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Thematic Framing	123	9.3	38.3	38.3
	Episodic Framing	196	14.9	61.1	99.4
	Both	1	.1	.3	99.7
	Neither	1	.1	.3	100.0
	Total	321	24.4	100.0	

*Table 8: News Framing Results*

Similar to the sub-categories identified in the human-interest personalization elements, episodic framing was largely evident in stories that touched on specific individuals, groups, and geographical locations as the parties involved or affected by the discussion of the topic. The personalized news stories serve as a form of augmentation to make the topics more newsworthy and relevant, and therefore, encourage government officials and groups to action by awaking public support on behalf of the individuals affected. It has been summarized that an episodic frame would approach the audience as private consumers seeking better information, whereas a thematic frame would consider the audience as public citizens asking for better policies (Benjamin, 2007). The distinction also lies in how people view a given problem and whether there is a need for individual or institutional solutions to the problem (Benjamin, 2007).

### ***5.4. Final Remarks***

This content analysis examined a sample of 322 most-shared articles in the *New York Times* in a two-month period in 2017. It serves as the first phase of a two-phase multi-method design in the present research by unpacking concept appeal, defined as one of the key factors of news stickiness. Results from the content analysis showed that the common characteristic shared by all articles coded was the personalization and episodic framing of content, which also helped to confirm the first hypothesis: A story with stronger content appeal will be more likely to motivate audiences to share it online.

This chapter also reviewed the other content features related to the sample articles, such as multimedia elements, topic of the stories, and types of stories. Findings showed that a vast majority of the articles were written with embedded images, videos, and social media links. This also illustrates that the presence of multimedia elements did not necessarily set these most shared articles apart from the rest. As analyzed previously, multimedia content has increasingly become the norm in news presentation. As it is now so ubiquitous, it is unlikely to be a key factor in influencing sharing decisions.

The types of the stories also deserve a note here. Most of the articles in the most-shared sample were opinion and op-ed pieces, and only a small portion of the sample was made up of generic news. This could potentially skew the results somewhat, especially in terms of the partisan dimension of personalization. Opinion pieces written the *New York Times* columnists were generally personal in tone, expressing a one-sided view of a given issue.

As noted earlier, the content analysis of articles only showed us *what* stories get shared most, yet it was not able to answer the question of *why* those stories get shared most. There were also some curious concerns raised in the content analysis. For example, for the localization dimension of personalization, the Construal Level Theory helped us understand the effect of psychological and spatial distance on one's perception of issue importance. Another explanation, though, could be about the level of personal interest triggered by the perceived psychological distance. This means that, for instance, if the audience show personal interest in a particular location or group, the importance and relevance of such location or group are automatically elevated. However, interest is related to one's psychological function and cannot be assessed through an analysis of content. Thus, the second phase of the study – an experiment surveying individuals' motivation for news sharing – is crucial. Results from the content analysis were used as key stimuli in the online experiment, and the quantitative results will be discussed in the following chapter.

## Chapter 6: Results – Experiment and Survey

This chapter identifies findings from the online experiment and post-experiment questionnaire by applying inferential statistics to analyze the data. It was concluded in the previous chapter that human interest personalization was the most outstanding element present in the most shared news articles in the *New York Times*. The quantitative experiment builds on such findings and evaluated how each dimension of human-interest personalization - emotional testimony, localized identification, and partisan provocation - affected news sharing motivations of the participants. Results from multiple quantitative analyses showed that localized identification features stood out as the strongest content factor that influences the likelihood for a story to be shared. Results also varied by story topics. For the story group in the topic of immigration, all three dimensions of human-interest personalization have been found to be positively associated with the likelihood of sharing; however, for the story group in the topic of military policy, only localized identification has been confirmed to be positively associated with the likelihood of sharing. Additionally, it was found that social engagement needs such as reciprocal value, personal interest, and information utility were the strongest motivating factors in helping the audience decide whether a story is worth sharing or not. Covariate factors such as one's general news sharing habit, news engagement level, and political ideology were also found to be of significant influence over sharing behaviors. The following sections will unpack these research outcomes in details and explain how each conclusion is reached.

As this dissertation has highlighted in previous chapters, to call news “sticky” means that there is an enhanced likelihood that the news story will be shared by multiple users in the digital space (Heimbach et al., 2015). The present study is guided by the perspective that sharing behavior is considered a joint mechanism operated by informational and personal forces (Bandura, 1986). In particular, this work measures stickiness through two crucial elements: a news story’s content appeal and the audience’s social engagement needs. In other words, the process of news sharing is made driven by the interactive effect of news stories with specific content appeals and the audience’s psychologically motivated intentions.

Through a content analysis of a sample of most shared news articles on the *New York Times* website, results from the previous chapter confirmed that the content appeal of a sticky news story is comprised of two factors: news personalization and episodic framing. These findings are an important step forward in our quest for the understanding of new stickiness, but several questions remain unanswered. Why do online audiences respond well to these types of stories when it comes to sharing? Are there other behavioral or psychological factors that affect the audience’s sharing choices? In order to address these questions, this project will evaluate the audience’s online news selection in real time in a controlled condition, as well as a survey exploring the audience’s direct motivation and preferences. With results from the online experiment, this chapter will help to answer the second research question: To what extent does a story’s social engagement appeal affect whether individuals are motivated to share a story? Specifically, the social engagement appeal is made up of



five elements that help explain sharing behavior: Reciprocal value, individual interest, information utility, persuasion potential, and bandwagon effect.

As discussed in the methods chapter, the experiment was administered online through the internet survey platform, Qualtrics. A total of 393 responses were collected between December 1, 2017, and December 22, 2017. Among these responses, 79 were removed because they dropped out of the study at various points and thus failed to complete the entire experiment and questionnaire. As a result, the survey yielded 314 valid responses for analysis.

The sample of 314 participants was 55% female and 37% male, with 8% preferring not to indicate gender. White or Caucasian participants comprised 57% of the sample, Asian or Pacific Islander 19%, Black or African-American 6%, and Hispanic or Latino 3%. In terms of age groups, 64% of the participants were between 18 and 29 years of age, followed by 15% in the 30 to 49 years old group, 11% for 50 to 64 years of age, and 4% 65 years or older. Almost half of the respondents were currently attending college (44%), followed by 28% with a master's degree or higher. About 20% of the participants had a high school diploma with some college education without a degree. A small percentage (11%) of participants had earned a bachelor's degree but not higher. Just over a quarter (28%) of the participants were "strong Democrat" in terms of political ideology, 24% indicated "independent," 15% were "weak Democrat," and 17% were "leans democrat." The percentage of participants who indicated "leans Republican," "weak Republican," and "strong Republican" were at 8%, 3% and 4%, respectively.

Before reporting on the full results of the findings of the experiment, it is important to note some of the ways in which the participants accessed the survey. In terms of the browser information, about 45% of the participants completed the experiment on Google Chrome on desktop, with the second largest group (34%) using Safari for iPhone. As to operating systems used, the majority of the participants, which is about 48%, used an iPhone, followed by 29% who used the MacIntosh system, and 17% used Windows. A small portion of the participants completed the experiment on an Android or an iPad. These findings are not directly related to the main research questions of the present study, but the emerging pattern of mobile usage shows a change of individual practice about where and how the audience consume information online.

In addition to the information about digital platforms on which the participants had completed the study, the experiment also recorded the time each participant spent on the story page without informing them in advance. This allowed me to track how much time the participants were spending on reading the stories before they proceeded to the next page. Descriptive statistics showed that the participants spent 63 seconds on average reading the original stories. For the stories with emotional testimony, participants spent roughly 60 seconds (with a median of 42 seconds) on the military story and 200 seconds (with a median of 126 seconds) on the immigration story. For the stories with localized content, average reading time was 150 seconds (with a median of 120 seconds) for the military story and 180 seconds (with a median of 156 seconds) for the immigration story. For partisan stories, average reading time was 100 seconds (with a median of 88 seconds) for the military

story and only 60 seconds (with a median of 50 seconds) for the immigration story. These numbers revealed that the participants had generally spent longer time reading the personalized versions of the stories and time spent on the immigration story group was slightly longer than that for the military group.

All four versions of the stories in each topic (immigration and military) were evenly distributed to the participants. Since the participants had the choice of selecting one topic to view before they were exposed to the actual story, about 70% of them chose the topic of immigration and 30% chose the topic of military. As shown below, each story in the immigration group had 55 readers on average and the military group had about 24 readers on average for each story. The stronger interest in the topic of immigration – compared to the topic of military – is potentially due to the overall demographic of the participant pool with most people located in a diverse state on the east coast of the U.S., with a good portion being college students and young professionals.

		<b>Article_Selected</b>			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	M1	24	7.1	7.1	7.1
	M2	26	7.7	7.7	14.8
	M3	25	7.4	7.4	22.3
	M4	24	7.1	7.1	29.4
	I1	60	17.8	17.8	47.2
	I2	58	17.2	17.2	64.4
	I3	62	18.4	18.4	82.8
	I4	58	17.2	17.2	100.0
	Total	337	100.0	100.0	

*Table 9: Descriptive Statistics of Article Choice*

The main purpose of this online experiment was to evaluate the effect of different aspects of news articles on sharing decisions of the participants. We were measuring whether exposure to stories with more personalized content would be more likely to motivate people to share them after reading. To complement our findings from the content analysis, the experiment was designed to discover whether content with emotional testimony, localization, and partisan provocation is stickier than a plain news story without any of the personalization elements above. Regardless of which version of the story they were exposed to, all of the participants were asked to indicate how likely they would share what they just read. This allowed us to further test whether the content features identified in previous chapter would be true with other political news topics and randomly selected news audiences without prior knowledge of what they were about to read. This following section addresses the main findings from the experiment.

This chapter employed inferential statistics by importing the experiment and survey data from Qualtrics to SPSS. Findings were separated into five parts: 1) Effect of news personalization on sharing; 2) Effect of individual indicators of news personalization on sharing by story topic; 3) Sharing decisions by story and explanations; 4) Social engagement needs in sharing; and 5) Other associating factors with sharing.

### ***6.1. General Effects of Story Exposure***

To aid in a more in-depth examination of the interactive relationships between the dependent variable (likelihood of sharing) and independent variables (reading emotional testimony, localized, and partisan content), the researcher created

an extra variable in SPSS that grouped the independent variables (emotional testimonial, localization, and partisan provocation) together into an “all manipulated content” variable. This re-coded the response of everyone who was exposed to a personalized version of the story into one value. Therefore, this new variable allowed us to examine the effect of news personalization *as a whole* in addition to the effect of *individual indicators* of news personalization.

Since the recoded variable grouped all participants who read the personalized versions of the original stories together, it resulted in a comparison of uneven samples: the original stories were read by 80 participants ( $N = 80$ ) and about 243 participants ( $N = 243$ ) read the personalized versions. Therefore, here I used the Mann-Whitney test for independent samples, which is an alternative for the independent samples t-test when the assumption of even samples is not met by the data.

The participants were asked – in two separate questions – about whether they would share the news story they just read on social media or via email. Overall, the likelihood of sharing on social media was higher for all personalized stories ( $M = 1.36$ ,  $SD = .482$ ) than it was for the original stories ( $M = 1.55$ ,  $SD = .501$ ). There was a statistically significant relationship between the *likelihood of sharing* on social media and the *stories read* (see Table 11), as determined by a Mann-Whitney test ( $p < .05$ ). The variable of likelihood of sharing was measured through a five-point Likert scale that contains very likely, likely, neutral, unlikely, and very unlikely. This shows that participants who read the three personalized versions of the stories had indicated a stronger likelihood of sharing on social media platforms. It also confirmed a

previous discussion that social media have become one of the major platforms on which people would consume and distribute news.

**Group Statistics**

	All_Plain_Other	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Likelihood_Sharing	Original	80	1.55	.501	.056
	All Other	243	1.36	.482	.031

Table 10: Compare Means of Likelihood of Sharing on Social Media

**Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>**

	Likelihood_Sharing
Mann-Whitney U	7894.000
Wilcoxon W	37540.000
Z	-2.960
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.003

Table 11: Mann-Whitney Test - Likelihood of Sharing on Social Media

On the other hand, it was found that likelihood of sharing on email was not higher for all personalized stories ( $M = 5.67, SD = 1.92$ ) than for the original stories ( $M = 5.41, SD = 1.99$ ). There was also no statistically significant relationship between likelihood of sharing on email and stories read ( $p = .170$ , see Table 13). This shows that the likelihood of sharing indicated by those who read the three personalized versions of the stories was no stronger than those who read the plain original stories. These findings did not discriminate against story topics and they came from a test of all 314 valid responses. Results from each topical group will be unpacked further later. This confirms that news sharing is more likely to take place on social media rather than via email.

	All_Plain_Other	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
How likely are you to share the story you just read with others on the following platforms? - Email	Original	79	5.41	1.990	.224
	All Other	235	5.67	1.915	.125

Table 12: Compare Means of Likelihood of Sharing on Email

### Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>

	How likely are you to share the story you just read with others on the following platforms? - Email
Mann-Whitney U	8409.500
Wilcoxon W	11569.500
Z	-1.371
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.170

Table 13: Mann-Whitney Test - Likelihood of Sharing Through Email

To examine the differences among story topics, I compared the means for the likelihood of sharing of personalized stories and the original stories in each of the story groups separately. Similar to the above, due to the significantly uneven sample presented by the grouping, I used the Mann-Whitney test to address this drawback. For the **immigration** topic group, the likelihood of sharing was higher for all personalized stories ( $M = 1.32$ ,  $SD = .466$ ) than for the original stories ( $M = 1.51$ ,  $SD = .504$ ). The Mann-Whitney test showed that there was a statistically significant relationship between the *likelihood of sharing* on social media and the *stories read in the immigration group* ( $p < .05$ , see Table 15).

**Group Statistics**

	Immigration_Plain_Other	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Likelihood_Sharing	Original	59	1.51	.504	.066
	All Other	171	1.32	.466	.036

*Table 14: Compare Means of Likelihood of Sharing for Immigration Group*

**Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>**

	Likelihood_Sharing
Mann-Whitney U	4072.500
Wilcoxon W	18778.500
Z	-2.645
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.008

*Table 15: Mann-Whitney Test - Likelihood of Sharing on Social Media - Immigration*

For the **military** topic group, likelihood of sharing was also higher for all personalized stories ( $M = 1.48, SD = .503$ ) than for the original stories ( $M = 1.67, SD = .483$ ). However, no significant connection was concluded between *likelihood of sharing* on social media and the *stories read in the military group* ( $p = .132$ , see Table 17). Since it is notably more challenging to generate statistical significance with smaller samples, this could be attributed to the smaller sample group for the military topic, as most participants chose to read stories in the immigration group.

**Group Statistics**

	Military_Plain_Other	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Likelihood_Sharing	Original	21	1.67	.483	.105
	All Other	73	1.48	.503	.059

*Table 16: Compare Means of Likelihood of Sharing for Military Group*



**Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>**

	Likelihood_Sharing
Mann-Whitney U	623.000
Wilcoxon W	3324.000
Z	-1.505
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.132

*Table 17: Mann-Whitney Test - Likelihood of Sharing on Social Media - Military*

Now that we have captured a sketch of the overall effect of news personalization on sharing, it is time to examine the effect of individual indicators of news personalization – emotional testimonial, localization, and partisan content. To accomplish this, the researcher coded new variables that compared each of the indicator against the story with the original content. As a result, six new variables were created as, “emotional testimonial vs. original,” “localization vs. original,” and “partisan vs. original” for both the immigration and military topics. This allowed the researcher to take a closer look at how each indicator of news personalization affected news sharing, and how the strength of such effect from each indicator differed from one another. The analysis is unpacked below.

### ***6.2. Effects of Story Exposure by Content Features – Immigration***

As previously mentioned, the majority (70%) of the participants selected immigration as their topic of interest to proceed with reading the stories, which makes the sample in this group particularly large and significant. Since the experiment was programmed to expose participants to stories randomly and evenly, each story in the immigration group had about 55 readers. Descriptive statistics derived from the new variables of “emotional testimonial vs. original,” “localization vs. original,” and

“partisan vs. original” also confirmed this amount. Since the samples are largely even with a normal distribution in these comparisons, and each new independent variable contains only two groups, independent samples t-tests were used to analyze relationships between the independent variables and dependent variable.

Firstly, the researcher investigated the difference between those who read the *emotional testimonial* story and those who read the *original* story. The former group consisted of 58 readers, and the latter 55 readers. Table 18 below shows that likelihood of sharing was higher for the story with emotional testimony ( $M = 1.33$ ,  $SD = .474$ ) than for the original plain story without personalization features ( $M = 1.52$ ,  $SD = .504$ ).

**Group Statistics**

	Immigration_Plain_Emo	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Likelihood_Sharing	Original	58	1.52	.504	.066
	Emotional Testimonial	55	1.33	.474	.064

Table 18: Compare Means of the Likelihood of Sharing on Social Media – Content Feature (Emotional Testimonial) – Immigration

There was a statistically significant relationship between the *likelihood of sharing* on social media and the *type of stories read*, as determined by an independent samples test ( $F = 7.478$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The difference was slight yet still significant. Per previous introduction, the variable of likelihood of sharing was measured through a five-point Likert scale that contains very likely, likely, neutral, unlikely, and very unlikely. This shows that participants who read the story with emotional testimonial content had indicated stronger likelihood of sharing on social media platforms.

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Likelihood_Sharing	Equal variances assumed	7.478	.007	2.062	111	.042	.190
	Equal variances not assumed			2.066	110.991	.041	.190

Table 19: Independent Samples Test - Likelihood of Sharing on Social Media – Content Feature (Emotional Testimonial) – Immigration

However, Table 20 below shows that there was no statistically significant relationship between the *likelihood of sharing* on email and the *type of stories read*, as determined by an independent samples test ( $F = 2.284, p = .844$ ).

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
How likely are you to share the story you just read with others on the following platforms? - Email	Equal variances assumed	2.284	.134	.198	108	.844	.081
	Equal variances not assumed			.197	105.709		

Table 20: Independent Samples Test - Likelihood of Sharing on Email – Content Feature (Emotional Testimonial) – Immigration

Secondly, there were 61 participants who read the *localized* story. Table 21 below shows that likelihood of sharing was higher for the story with localized content ( $M = 1.26, SD = .444$ ) than for the original plain story without personalization features ( $M = 1.51, SD = .504$ ).

#### Group Statistics

	Immigration_Plain_Localized	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Likelihood_Sharing	Original	59	1.51	.504	.066
	Localized	61	1.26	.444	.057

Table 21: Compare Means of the Likelihood of Sharing on Social Media – Content Feature (Localization) – Immigration

Comparing against the original story group, a statistically significant association between the *likelihood of sharing* on social media and the *type of stories read* was also established, as determined by an independent samples test ( $F = 16.872, p < .05$ , see Table 22). The  $p$  value indicates a particularly strong significance, which

shows that participants who read the story with localized content were far more likely to share the story than those who read the original story. This resonated with the assumption in the study design that the immigration story with more localized content generated more personal relevance to the readers, therefore triggering a more positive response in sharing decisions afterwards.

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Likelihood_Sharing	Equal variances assumed	16.872	.000	2.842	118	.005	.246
	Equal variances not assumed			2.836	115.023	.005	.246

Table 22: Independent Samples Test - Likelihood of Sharing on Social Media – Content Feature (Localization) – Immigration

Similar to what was found about the emotional testimony group, there was no statistically significant association between the *likelihood of sharing* on email and reading the localized story, as determined by an independent samples test ( $F = .001$ ,  $p = .626$ , see Table 23).

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
How likely are you to share the story you just read with others on the following platforms? - Email	Equal variances assumed	.001	.977	-.489	113	.626	-.185
	Equal variances not assumed			-.489	112.999	.626	-.185

Table 23: Independent Samples Test - Likelihood of Sharing on Email – Content Feature (Localization) – Immigration

Last but not least, statistics show that 53 participants were exposed to the story with partisan content. Such stories are identified as content with clear disagreements, arguments, and prejudiced opinions by opposing party members in both the headlines and main story content. Table 24 below shows that likelihood of sharing was higher for all the story with partisan content ( $M = 1.36$ ,  $SD = .484$ ) than for the original plain story without personalization features ( $M = 1.51$ ,  $SD = .504$ ).

#### Group Statistics

	Immigration_Plain_Partisan	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Likelihood_Sharing	Original	59	1.51	.504	.066
	Partisan	53	1.36	.484	.067

Table 24: Compare Means of the Likelihood of Sharing on Social Media – Content Feature (Partisan) – Immigration

Consistent with what previous research (Hassell & Weeks, 2016) found regarding the positive relationship between partisan news use and emotional

responses in political information sharing on social media, there was a statistically significant relationship between likelihood of sharing and partisan news use here, explained by an independent samples test ( $F = 4.988, p = < .05$ , see Table 25). Multiple factors could have contributed to this outcome, including the nature of the story topic about Trump’s DACA announcement, content of the story, participant demographics, and their prior exposure or attitude toward the topic. This also illustrates that in the present study, immigration stories with the emotional testimonial and localized content had posted stronger influence on people’s news sharing decisions than the story with partisan provocation content.

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Likelihood_Sharing	Equal variances assumed	4.988	.028	1.602	110	.112	.150
	Equal variances not assumed			1.605	109.499	.111	.150

Table 25: Independent Samples Test - Likelihood of Sharing on Social Media – Content Feature (Partisan) – Immigration

*Interestingly*, a statistically significant relationship was established between likelihood of sharing on email and the types of stories read in this category ( $F = 23.46, p < .05$ ), as shown in Table 26 below. This is an important finding as it also confirmed the belief that politics are considered sensitive topics and that many people are only comfortable sharing certain topics with others privately (i.e. emails) instead of publishing on social media.

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
How likely are you to share the story you just read with others on the following platforms? - Email	Equal variances assumed	23.460	.000	-3.202	106	.002	-1.055
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.277	96.677	.001	-1.055

Table 26: Independent Samples Test - Likelihood of Sharing on Email – Content Feature (Partisan) – Immigration

The response by participants who read the stories in the immigration topical group further confirmed the conclusions drawn in the earlier section that more personalized stories are more likely to be shared by readers than non-personalized ones. Despite the lack of statistical significance in comparing response from the partisan group with that of the original group, results from the statistical analyses still established a primarily positive relationship between likelihood of sharing and personalized content consumed.

### 6.3. Effects of Story Exposure by Content Features – Military

The researcher repeated the above procedures with the variables presented in the military topical group and ran the same statistical analyses. There were 25 participants on average who were exposed to a story in the military topic, which discussed the transgender ban in the armed forces announced by Trump. The original story was read by 21 participants. This is consistent with the finding that a significantly smaller portion (30%) of the participants selected military as their topic



of interest to proceed with reading the stories. Similar to the tests run on the immigration stories, the new variables of “emotional testimonial vs. original,” “localization vs. original,” and “partisan vs. original” were used here to conduct the analysis of effects on likelihood of news sharing.

Firstly, the *emotional testimonial* story sub-group consisted of 25 readers. Table 27 below shows likelihood of sharing was slightly higher for the story with emotional testimony ( $M = 1.52, SD = .510$ ) than for the original plain story without personalization features ( $M = 1.67, SD = .483$ ). However, there was not a statistically significant relationship between the *likelihood of sharing* on social media and the *type of stories read*, as determined by the independent samples test ( $F = 2.849, p = .099$ , see Table 28). This shows that likelihood of news sharing and one’s exposure to the story with emotional testimonial content here in the military topic was not positively correlated. The lack of statistical significance could also be related to the small sample size, which, to a large extent, burdens the possibility of identifying differences or trends among groups.

**Group Statistics**

	Military_Plain_Emo	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Likelihood_Sharing	Original	21	1.67	.483	.105
	Emotional Testimonial	25	1.52	.510	.102

*Table 27: Compare Means of the Likelihood of Sharing on Social Media – Content Feature (Emotional Testimonial) – Military*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Likelihood _Sharing	Equal variances assumed	2.849	.099	.995	44	.325	.147
	Equal variances not assumed			1.000	43.329	.323	.147

Table 28: Independent Samples Test - Likelihood of Sharing on Social Media – Content Feature (Emotional Testimonial) – Military

In terms of likelihood of sharing on email, a statistically significant relationship could not be established, either, as determined by the independent samples test ( $F = .105$ ,  $p = .748$ , see Table 29). Once again, the lack of statistical significance could also be related to the small sample size that made it relatively more difficult to generate statistical significance.

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
How likely are you to share the story you just read with others on Email	Equal variances assumed	.105	.748	-.201	44	.842	-.110
	Equal variances not assumed			-.200	42.223	.842	-.110

Table 29: Independent Samples Test - Likelihood of Sharing on Email – Content Feature (Emotional Testimonial) – Military

There were 24 participants who read the *localized* story, the second personalization feature. Table 8 below shows likelihood of sharing was also slightly higher for the story with localized content ( $M = 1.38, SD = .495$ ) than for the original plain story without personalization features ( $M = 1.67, SD = .483$ ). Independent samples test shows that there was a statistically significant relationship between the *likelihood of sharing* on social media and the *type of stories read* ( $F = 3.981, p = .052$ , see Table 31) for this group, although very slightly. The  $p$  value was right around the threshold of .05, which barely generated statistical significance. This is particularly interesting because such significance was also reached for the localized story in the immigration group earlier, indicating an overall strong preference for content localization by the readers when it comes to news sharing. Similar to the content manipulation applied in the localized story in the immigration group, the military story also narrowed the content focus down to the most relevant state to the participants and quoted notable local figures who are mostly recognizable or relatable by state residents.

**Group Statistics**

	Military_Plain_ Localized	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Likelihood_Sharing	Original	21	1.67	.483	.105
	Localized	24	1.38	.495	.101

Table 30: Compare Means of the Likelihood of Sharing on Social Media – Content Feature (Localization) – Military

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Likelihood _Sharing	Equal variances assumed	.327	.570	1.995	43	.052	.292
	Equal variances not assumed			1.998	42.455	.052	.292

Table 31: Independent Samples Test - Likelihood of Sharing on Social Media – Content Feature (Localization) – Military

As shown below in Table 32, independent samples test was run and there was no statistically significant relationship between the *likelihood of sharing* on email and the *type of stories read in the localization category* ( $F = .531, p = .441$ ).

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
How likely are you to share the story you just read with others on the following platforms? - Email	Equal variances assumed	.531	.470	.777	43	.441	.464
	Equal variances not assumed			.778	42.999	.441	.464

Table 32: Independent Samples Test - Likelihood of Sharing on Email – Content Feature (Localization) – Military

Lastly, statistics show that another 24 participants were exposed to the story with partisan content. Likelihood of sharing was slightly higher for the story with partisan content ( $M = 1.54, SD = .509$ ) than for the original plain story without

personalization features ( $M = 1.67$ ,  $SD = .483$ ). Similar to the results from the previous section, there was not a statistically significant relationship between likelihood of sharing and partisan news use here, explained by independent samples test ( $F = 2.33$ ,  $p = .134$ , see Table 34), implying that we were unable to conclude that, in the present study, the effect of partisan content on one's likelihood of sharing was particularly stronger than that of the original story.

**Group Statistics**

	Military_Plain_Partisan	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Likelihood_Sharing	Original	21	1.67	.483	.105
	Partisan	24	1.54	.509	.104

Table 33: Compare Means of the Likelihood of Sharing on Social Media – Content Feature (Partisan Provocation) – Military

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Likelihood_Sharing	Equal variances assumed	2.333	.134	.842	43	.405	.125
	Equal variances not assumed			.845	42.696	.403	.125

Table 34: Independent Samples Test - Likelihood of Sharing on Social Media – Content Feature (Partisan Provocation) – Military

Similarly, independent samples t test shows that no statistically significant correlation was established between likelihood of sharing on email and type of stories read in the partisan provocation category (see below Table 35,  $F = 1.175$ ,  $p = .284$ ).

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
How likely are you to share the story on Email	Equal variances assumed	1.175	.284	-.442	44	.661	-.235
	Equal variances not assumed			-.438	41.119	.663	-.235

Table 35: Independent Samples Test - Likelihood of Sharing on Email – Content Feature (Partisan Provocation) – Military

The overall effect of the proposed personalization features in the stories of the military topic was significantly lessened, potentially due to the small sample size, as previously discussed. However, localization stood out as the main personalization feature that was consistently revealed in tests to form a position correlation between reading and likelihood of sharing.

#### 6.4. Breakdown of Descriptive Statistics on Sharing Decisions

To conduct a broader evaluation of the overall likelihood of sharing and its correlation with articles read by participants, the researcher recoded the “likelihood” variable that collapsed the Likert points of “very likely” and “likely” into one “likely” point and combined the “unlikely” and “very unlikely” points into one “unlikely” point. Crosstabulations showed that for the story set in the topic of transgender ban in the military, the majority of readers for each story expressed that it was “likely or neutral” that they would share the story they just read with others on social media.

Particularly, the story with emotional testimonial (M2) and the localized story (M3) showed stronger results, with 48% and 62.5% each. These are slightly more pronounced than the results of the partisan story (46%) and the original story (33%).

Difference for the story set in the topic of DACA policy (immigration) is more significant between the original story and all manipulated versions. The story with emotional testimonial (I2) and localized story (I3) were shown most likely to be shared, with 67.3% and 73.8% of the participants, respectively, selecting “likely or neutral” to share. For the partisan story (I4), 64.8% of participants selected “likely or neutral” to share after reading. A little less than half of the participants (49%) who read the original story (I1) indicated that it was “likely or neutral” that they would share the story on social media.

The descriptive statistics here were consistent with the previous findings on how likely each indicator of news personalization had influenced the likelihood of sharing by the participants in the post-consumption stage. For both the military and immigration groups, emotional testimonial and localization are the two features especially pronounced in the establishment of a positive correlation with one’s likelihood of sharing.

			Likelihood_Sharing * Article_Selected Crosstabulation								
			Article_Selected								
			M1	M2	M3	M4	I1	I2	I3	I4	Total
Likelihood_Sharing	Likely or Neutral	Count	7	12	15	11	29	37	45	35	191
		% within Likelihood_Sharing	3.7%	6.3%	7.9%	5.8%	15.2%	19.4%	23.6%	18.3%	100.0%
	% within Article_Selected	33.3%	48.0%	62.5%	45.8%	49.2%	67.3%	73.8%	64.8%	59.1%	
	% of Total	2.2%	3.7%	4.6%	3.4%	9.0%	11.5%	13.9%	10.8%	59.1%	
Unlikely		Count	14	13	9	13	30	18	16	19	132
		% within Likelihood_Sharing	10.6%	9.8%	6.8%	9.8%	22.7%	13.6%	12.1%	14.4%	100.0%
	% within Article_Selected	66.7%	52.0%	37.5%	54.2%	50.8%	32.7%	26.2%	35.2%	40.9%	
	% of Total	4.3%	4.0%	2.8%	4.0%	9.3%	5.6%	5.0%	5.9%	40.9%	
Total		Count	21	25	24	24	59	55	61	54	323
		% within Likelihood_Sharing	6.5%	7.7%	7.4%	7.4%	18.3%	17.0%	18.9%	16.7%	100.0%
	% within Article_Selected	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	% of Total	6.5%	7.7%	7.4%	7.4%	18.3%	17.0%	18.9%	16.7%	100.0%	

Table 36: Comparing Articles Read and Likelihood of Sharing

Additionally, of all platforms, people are more likely to share the selected stories on social media such as Facebook and Twitter, than on email. Together, about 50% of the participants selected “very likely” and “somewhat likely” toward social media news sharing, whereas these indications in the email context were selected by only 18% of the participants.



**Social Media Share**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very likely	26	7.7	8.0	8.0
	Somewhat likely	111	32.9	34.4	42.4
	Neither likely nor unlikely	54	16.0	16.7	59.1
	Somewhat unlikely	41	12.2	12.7	71.8
	Very unlikely	91	27.0	28.2	100.0
	Total	323	95.8	100.0	
Missing	System	14	4.2		
Total		337	100.0		

*Table 37: Likelihood of Sharing on Social Media*

**Email Share**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very likely	10	3.0	3.2	3.2
	Somewhat likely	39	11.6	12.4	15.6
	Neither likely nor unlikely	44	13.1	14.0	29.6
	Somewhat unlikely	51	15.1	16.2	45.9
	Very unlikely	170	50.4	54.1	100.0
	Total	314	93.2	100.0	
Missing	System	23	6.8		
Total		337	100.0		

*Table 38: Likelihood of Sharing on Email*

**6.5. News Sharing Decision Explanations**

For people who selected “somewhat unlikely” or “unlikely” in their sharing decisions, they were presented with an additional question asking them to further explain. This was an important design as it allowed us to understand with more precision why the personalization features were not enough motivations for them to share the story. It confirmed the theory that sharing is a social process and that

through sharing, people are looking to engage with others rather than only engaging with, the content itself. Based on the given choices, the following rationales summarized the main reasons as to why someone did not feel like sharing the story they just read.

Results from the explanations illustrate that people share information in order to interact, socialize, and engage with others. As shown in the tables below, one of the major reasons for the participants to not feel like sharing after reading was that **“none of my friends would be interested in this article,”** which takes about 18%. This tells us that if a story or the information is not considered as interesting by one’s friends or social connections, they are less likely to exert the effort with sharing. Following this category was the statement that **“I don’t care, or it is not worth my effort to share.”** About 13% of participants selected this choice, which helped to confirm the theoretical discussion on the positive effect of individual interest on learning. Two other choices were relevant to the notion of “interest” and both constituted about 8% of the participant response. These were “the topic does not pertain to my interest” and “the article is too long.” The final two categories that dominated a much smaller portion of the participant response were “the topic makes me upset/emotional/angry” (6.2%) and “the article is not informative or useful” (2.7%).

In addition to the theories of socializing and individual interest as key motivators for sharing, it is also interesting to note that when someone is pre-conditioned with existing attitudes and opinion toward the story topic – in our case the DACA policy change and transgender ban in the military – they could potentially

be reading an article with a certain level of emotional bias. Similarly, if someone is opinionated toward a politician in central discussion (e.g. Trump), such attitudes may also affect how likely they would decide to share the story after reading. These explanations could all have played important roles in the emotional response toward political news sharing on social media.

**Please explain (if selected "somewhat unlikely" or "very unlikely"): - Selected Choice None of my friends would be interested in this article**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	None of my friends would be interested in this article	62	18.4	100.0	100.0
Missing	System	275	81.6		
Total		337	100.0		

*Table 39: Explanation for "Unlikely" Responses – Social*

**Please explain (if selected "somewhat unlikely" or "very unlikely"): - Selected Choice I don't care/not worth my effort to share**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	I don't care/not worth my effort to share	45	13.4	100.0	100.0
Missing	System	292	86.6		
Total		337	100.0		

*Table 40: Explanation for "Unlikely" Responses – Interest*

## ***6.6. Social Engagement Needs in Sharing***

In answering the second research question regarding how likely the social engagement appeal of news would motivate the audience to share news online, we need to identify the five indicators of social engagement needs presented in previous chapters: reciprocal value, individual interest, information utility, persuasion potential, and bandwagon effect. These indicators were surveyed by a post-study questionnaire that expanded on the main discussion of personalized content and its influence on news sharing, after having the participants read the articles and indicate how likely they were to share the story they just read. The participants were asked, more broadly, about the circumstances under which they are mostly likely going to share a news story after reading. In order to be more forgiving for those who might not hold a strong opinion in this issue, the question was presented with eight choices with each scaled in a five-point Likert design again. The points ranged from “definitely” to “not at all.”

Of all social engagement appeals that motivate news sharing, information utility, reciprocal value, and individual interest made up the top “needs” that people want to meet through the process of news sharing. To break it down further, the following reasons stood out in terms of percentage points that indicate those who selected “definitely” in the Likert scale. Very much consistent with the previous discussion on social engagement as a motivator for sharing, close to 30% of the participants selected that **“The news story is about something one or more of my friends would enjoy or care about,”** which made it one of the top criteria for news sharing. However, contrary to what we have found earlier, most of the participants

(35%) mentioned that “**The news story contains useful information that other people should know about**” as the main contributor for news sharing decisions. These were followed by 26% for “**The news story pertains to my personal interest**” and another 25% that selected “The news story has the potential to influence people’s opinion.”

Two other choices in the question also fell under the categories of “individual interest” and “reciprocal value.” About 21% of the participants marked that “The news story helps reinforce an existing personal belief that I would like to advertise” and roughly another 21% of them indicated that “The news story will generate a discussion or response from my social connections.” Personal identity and bandwagon effect were indicated by the smallest portion of participants, with “The news story resonates with who I am” at 18% and “The news story contains a popular or majority opinion that I want to echo” at 17%. Although the percentage points of all eight choices presented in the questions were on par with one another, it can be concluded that a story’s reciprocal value, relevance to individual interest, and its information utility were the more important social engagement needs that the audience seek to satisfy when deciding whether the story is worth sharing or not.

### ***6.7. Other Influencing Factors for Sharing Decisions***

In addition to the most relevant queries on content appeal and social engagement appeal that help answer the research questions, the post-experiment questionnaire also surveyed the participants on behavioral questions and demographic information. This included one’s general news consumption habits, social media use, political ideology, and political news consumption habit. These factors were crucial

in the development of the understanding of motivations for news sharing, as they serve as covariate variables that frequently interact with the goal and questions of this research.

### **6.7.1. Political Ideology and Identity**

One of the main covariates that could potentially influence one's sharing decision was political ideology, which signifies certain ethical principles, doctrines, and symbols of a political institution, movement or cultural blueprint to which an individual subscribes. In the context of the present study, as discussed previously, one's pre-existing attitude might create a significant effect on the evaluation of a subject or person, regardless of how the story is framed. As shown in Table 42, there was a strong significant correlation between political ideology and the likelihood of sharing in the present study ( $p = .000$ ).

The political ideology variable was constructed into seven distinct categories: strong democrat, weak democrat, leans democrat, independent, leans republican, weak republican, and strong republican. The majority of the participants (28%) had reported as "strong democrat" (low end of scoring) with the second largest group being "independent" (24%). These were followed by a smaller percentage of people identified as "weak democrat" (15%) and "leans democrat" (17%). The republican categories were the least selected. Correlation results showed that the more democrat one identifies themselves to be, the more likely they are going to share the story.

**Which best describes your political ideology?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strong Democrat	86	25.5	27.7	27.7
	Weak Democrat	48	14.2	15.4	43.1
	Leans Democrat	53	15.7	17.0	60.1
	Independent	75	22.3	24.1	84.2
	Leans Republican	24	7.1	7.7	92.0
	Weak Republican	12	3.6	3.9	95.8
	Strong Republican	13	3.9	4.2	100.0
	Total	311	92.3	100.0	
Total		337	100.0		

Table 41: Political Ideology Breakdown

*Correlations*

		Which best describes your political ideology?	Likelihood_Sharing
Which best describes your political ideology?	Pearson Correlation	1	.229**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	311	307
Likelihood_Sharing	Pearson Correlation	.229**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	307	323

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 42: Correlation between Political Ideology and Sharing

As one of the mediating factors, political ideology is considered a covariate in this present study. An interactive effect was found between one's political ideology

and exposure to personalization features. Together, an ANCOVA test shows that there was a statistically significant relationship between the joint effect of the two variables and the likelihood of sharing ( $p < .05$ ).

### Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	5.029 <sup>a</sup>	2	2.514	11.161	.000
Intercept	102.390	1	102.390	454.474	.000
Political_ideology	3.576	1	3.576	15.874	.000
All_Plain_Other	1.164	1	1.164	5.168	.024
Error	68.489	304	.225		
Total	673.000	307			
Corrected Total	73.518	306			

Table 43: Results of ANCOVA - Political Ideology and Sharing

In addition to one's political views, it would also be useful to identify if the participants were interested in political news in general and how much they were interested in it. As discussed in earlier sections, individual interest is often associated with one's motivation for acquiring information. It would be logical to assume that people who share political news a lot are, by and large, equipped with vested interest in political news to begin with. Results from the questionnaire indicated that the participants in this study were predominantly "very interested" (36%) or "somewhat interested" (37%) in political news. A Chi-square test (see Table 44) found that there was a statistically significant relationship between political news interest and likelihood of sharing, which explains that the more interested one is in political news, the more likely they are to share the news.



### Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	11.622 <sup>a</sup>	4	.020
Likelihood Ratio	11.571	4	.021
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.866	1	.015
N of Valid Cases	311		

*Table 44: Correlation between Political News Interest and Sharing*

Similarly, political news interest is considered as another covariate in this present study. An interactive effect was found between one’s interest in political news and exposure to personalization features. Together, an ANCOVA test shows that there was a statistically significant relationship between the joint effect of the two variables and the likelihood of sharing ( $p < .05$ ).

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	3.223 <sup>a</sup>	2	1.611	6.919	.001
Intercept	120.113	1	120.113	515.756	.000
Interest_level	1.408	1	1.408	6.045	.014
All_Plain_Other	1.804	1	1.804	7.747	.006
Error	71.729	308	.233		
Total	689.000	311			
Corrected Total	74.952	310			

*Table 45: Results of ANCOVA - Political News Interest and Sharing*

Lastly, the present study queried how much the participants usually discuss political news topics with their connections. Discussing news could be interpreted as a form of sharing, and it is a step further beyond individual political views and political news interest. Having views and interest are “internal” human cognitive functions, while discussing and sharing are essentially “externalizing” such views and interest.

Through a five-point Likert scale ranging from “a great deal” to “none at all,” the vast majority of the participants selected “a moderate amount” (28%) and “a little” (30%) in answering the question of “how much do you usually discuss political news topics with other people?” This group was followed by those who selected “a lot” (18%) and “a great deal” (16%). Only 7% of the participants marked “none at all.” Given the participant demographics in this study, these results were slightly different from what the study had anticipated; however, it is not completely abnormal as political news can be sensitive topics that many do not feel comfortable or appropriate engaging in such discussion in social settings.

The present study hypothesized that people who frequently share news online tend to be active participants in news discussion either in real life or online. Statistical tests confirmed this hypothesis and showed that the amount of political news discussion people normally engage with is positively correlated with the likelihood of sharing in the study context ( $p < .05$ , see Table 46).

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	14.946 <sup>a</sup>	4	.005
Likelihood Ratio	14.945	4	.005
Linear-by-Linear Association	11.949	1	.001
N of Valid Cases	310		

*Table 46: Correlation between Political News Discussion and Sharing*

Once again, as a mediating factor, political news discussion is also considered as a covariate in this present study. An interactive effect was found between one’s engaged level of political news discussion and exposure to personalization features.

An ANCOVA test shows that there was a statistically significant relationship between the joint effect of the two variables and the likelihood of sharing ( $p < .05$ ).

### Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	4.414 <sup>a</sup>	2	2.207	9.654	.000
Intercept	59.033	1	59.033	258.230	.000
Politics_discussion	2.739	1	2.739	11.983	.001
All_Plain_Other	1.530	1	1.530	6.691	.010
Error	70.183	307	.229		
Total	685.000	310			
Corrected Total	74.597	309			

*Table 47: Results of ANCOVA - Political News Discussion and Sharing*

To summarize, the overarching covariate of political identity was constructed as political ideology, political news interest, and political discussion in the present study. Statistical tests revealed that all three factors were positively associated with the likelihood of sharing, confirming that in the context of news sharing, one's existing views, interest, and general engagement habit surrounding the news topic are important influencers. This conclusion also adds to the main findings that news sharing is a behavioral product at the intersection of personalized content and sufficient social engagement needs. To expand further, another layer of influencing factors for news sharing lies within the audience's news consumption habit, as literature shows that opinion leaders who actively pursue and share information are routinely big news consumers in the first place. In the questionnaire of the present study, news consumption habit is unpacked into two parts: sharing frequencies and the overall understanding of current news events.

### **6.7.2. News Consumption Habit**

1) *Frequency of News Sharing*. Since the present research is interested in the motivating factors that contribute to political news sharing behaviors, the study did not survey news consumption related to news reading or commenting. It would be interesting to investigate how much and how often the participants consume news on a daily basis yet reading does not always lead to sharing. Questionnaire results showed that the majority of the participants were weekly news sharers (26%), with about 18% self-identified as sharing “at least once a month” and 24% who share “less than once a month.” Interestingly, there were 21% of the participants who claimed to “never” share news online, while on the other end of the spectrum nearly 10% share “daily.”

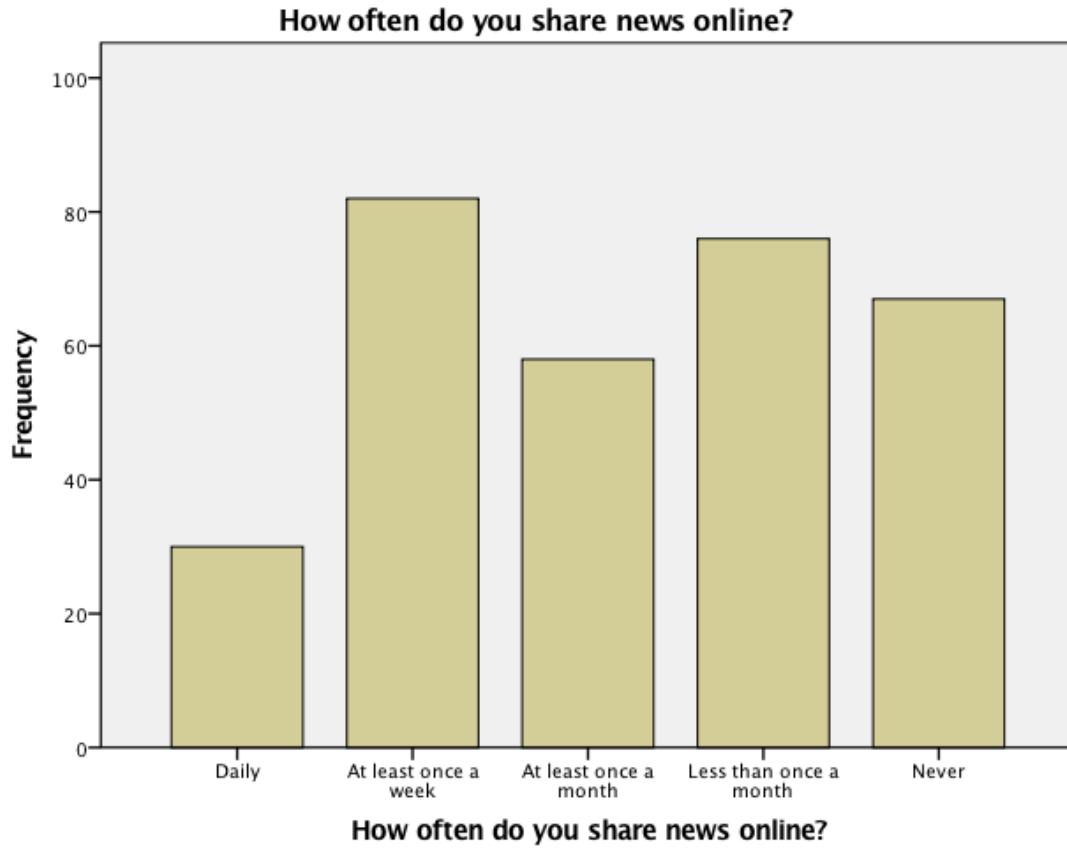


Figure 9: News Sharing Frequency

There was also a statistically significant correlation between the frequency and likelihood of news sharing, indicating that the more frequently one shares news online, the more likely they are to share the story they read in the study.

#### Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	31.438 <sup>a</sup>	4	.000
Likelihood Ratio	32.074	4	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	29.771	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	309		

Table 48: Correlation between Frequency of News Sharing and Likelihood of News Sharing

In line with this consideration, frequency of news sharing was also proven to be a covariate in this present study interacting with the main independent variable. An

ANCOVA test reveals that the frequency of news sharing was a significant contributing factor to how likely one was to share the news story exposed. There was a statistically significant relationship between the joint effect of the two variables and the likelihood of sharing ( $p < .05$ ).

### Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	8.643 <sup>a</sup>	2	4.322	20.101	.000
Intercept	45.793	1	45.793	212.991	.000
Sharing_frequency	7.000	1	7.000	32.559	.000
All_Plain_Other	1.449	1	1.449	6.737	.010
Error	65.790	306	.215		
Total	684.000	309			
Corrected Total	74.434	308			

Table 49: Results of ANCOVA – Frequency of News Sharing and Likelihood of News Sharing

2) *Current Event Knowledge and Technology Proficiency.* The knowledge level of current event and news was evaluated in the ratings of “I am confident in my understanding of various news sharing features (e.g. "like" and "comment" buttons) on news websites and social media” and “I believe I have a good grasp on current political events and what is in the news” on a scale from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” This category gathered some strong opinions in the participant response. About 53% of the participants pointed out that they would “strongly agree” with the statement regarding their understanding of news sharing features online, and 30% of them would “agree” that they had a good grasp on current events and political news. Only less than 10% of the participants had selected the “disagree” points with both statements.

Correlation tests were not able to establish a statistically significant relationship between the understanding of news events and likelihood of sharing,

showing that there was no position correlation that advises that the better grasp on current events, the more likely one is to share news.

### Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	8.040 <sup>a</sup>	6	.235
Likelihood Ratio	7.967	6	.241
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.399	1	.237
N of Valid Cases	309		

Table 50: Correlation between Knowledge of Current Events and Likelihood of News Sharing

Although knowledge of current events alone was not a significant factor for sharing, it was established to be a covariate in this present study interacting with the main independent variable. An ANCOVA test reveals that one's perceived knowledge level of current events was a contributing factor to how likely one was to share the news story exposed. There was a statistically significant relationship between the joint effect of the two variables and the likelihood of sharing ( $p < .05$ ).

### Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	2.056 <sup>a</sup>	2	1.028	4.346	.014
Intercept	119.637	1	119.637	505.801	.000
Rating_grasp	.413	1	.413	1.745	.187
All_Plain_Other	1.718	1	1.718	7.262	.007
Error	72.378	306	.237		
Total	684.000	309			
Corrected Total	74.434	308			

Table 51: Results of ANCOVA – Knowledge of Current Events and Likelihood of News Sharing

In terms of other demographic information such as race, gender, and age, there was a statistically significant relationship ( $p = .05$ ) between each demographic

factor and the likelihood of news sharing; however, since the present study's participant sample was overall skewed in demographic makeup (predominantly white, between the age of 18 and 22, and female), these correlations may not be entirely statistically sound and reliable in predicting that certain demographics would be more or less likely to share news stories.

### ***6.8. Open-ended Comments in Questionnaire***

The last question in the post-experiment questionnaire was an open-ended text-entry box that allowed the participants to further elaborate on their motivations for news sharing online. This was an important final step in the experiment because it makes room for the respondents to include more information in case there were items omitted from the previous multiple-choice questions. An open-ended question, for this study in particular, was also helpful to better gauge the participants in terms of feelings, attitudes, practices, and understanding of the subject of news sharing. After all, emotions and perceptions are central to human behavior in social psychology. It was also hoped that it would serve (to a degree) the function of in-person interviews that typically encourage a full, meaningful answer, instead of a short or single-word answer to closed-ended questions.

Since the open-ended question was designed to be optional, participants had the freedom to opt out of answering and to proceed to exit the questionnaire if they did not want to add anything further. Out of 314 valid responses in the entire experiment, 212 participants answered the final open-ended question, with some entries rather brief while others were written with great details. All of the answers were downloaded and read in their entirety. In order to ensure anonymity, the



research did not make the attempt to link textual entries with the responses made earlier in the experiment.

Several themes emerged from these textual responses. Categorization of the themes showed that the greatest number of people share news and information in order to engage with others and if the news contains information that is particularly relevant to their personal interests. This aligns well with the findings from the quantitative analysis in the previous section, which also further confirmed the effect of social engagement needs in news sharing. However, there were also camps of online users who only share news privately with others or do not share at all. The results also uncovered some individual concerns about online news sharing and what motivates them to refrain from sharing.

The responses below in quotations reflect the exact words as the participants have written in the questionnaire. Language and style were not revised or edited so that opinions cited here would remain true and original in this summary.

### **6.8.1. Social Connections as a Major Source of Motivation for Sharing**

The desire to maintain a positive relationship with friends and family stood out as the most prominent motivation for news sharing that the participants identified. Responses showed that when it comes to sharing, a large number of people have the target audience in mind and ponder over how the information may be perceived by those on the receiving end of sharing. Particularly, there were three main categories embedded in this theme: interest level among friends, usefulness to friends, and the information's persuasion potential.

First of all, in consideration to the effect of news sharing on relationship maintenance, many participants wrote that “I will share if it’s of interest to a good chunk of my friends on social media,” “if it generates an emotional response directly affects me or someone I am close with,” “I generally share stories that I think someone I know will find interesting,” “when it’s relevant to my friends and family,” and “if something directly affects me, my family, or friends, then I would be more inclined to post about the news.”

Some elaborated a bit further and mentioned that “The survey was pretty much spot on with why I share content. I want to share news that is important to not only me but everyone that follows me” and “If it’s something that I feel a great majority of my friends/family can relate to.”

Secondly, participants were also drawn to information that might be useful to others. This was illustrated in comments such as “if they will impact someone else in a helpful manner. I’m not one to share political news that will upset someone else, but if anything, I will share helpful news that is very meaningful to me through a personal level” and “News that I find could progress a narrative or reverse an incorrect/negative narrative. Also, to spark discussion.”

Last but not least, it has been indicated that many participants were concerned about the persuasion value of the content and how likely it is going to initiate important discussions among people. Some answers that fell into this category include, “I usually decide to share news that is credible, reflects my views, conveys a message respectful of all races/ethnicities/genders/etc., and that I want other people to know,” “I like to spread news that I think others might not have on their radar screen.

But I am also aware of the fact that those in my network usually share my political views. I also like to share unusual and humorous stories, just to serve as counter balance” and “if I get excited or upset about a topic, I want to share and possibly start a discussion with others to work through it.” Comments like these reflect that considerations of how a story might affect one’s social connections carries significant weight in making sharing decisions.

### **6.8.2. Importance Level**

Similar to the consideration for information’s persuasion potential, to a certain degree, many participants pointed out that the importance level of the message that a news story carries could also potentially motivate them to share. This is not entirely the same as the previous discussion regarding whether the story could spark a discussion; this category particularly concerns one’s perceived content value of the story and whether it contains information that the public should know about. This appears to be one of the most relevant factors for news sharing in the current political climate, as many participants referenced the spread of misinformation and biased news coverage.

Responses in this category mainly cited “The level of influence of the news; the novelty” as the key ingredient for news sharing motivation because of a self-perceived sense of responsibility. For example, some mentioned that “I am motivated to share news that is important. I want more people to become less ignorant to the issues our country is dealing with today, and unfortunately it feels that the only way to do so is to get as many people to share a story as possible,” “if the article shares all angles of the issue based on facts,” and “stuff that I feel is not too biased or annoying

for others to read. If it has new facts people need to see or if I find it important.”

Some noted that the content value is the only source of motivation because “I feel sort of self-conscious about what I share for fear of what others may comment. Therefore, I will only share if I feel it is extremely important.”

### **6.8.3. Reinforcing Personal Beliefs and Interest**

Aside from the interest level of one’s social connections, news stories that resonated with the audience’s own identity and interest were also considered to be worth sharing. This category predominantly touched on sharing motivations directly related to issues, causes, and events that one may feel strongly about on a personal level. For example, one participant wrote that, “I am more likely to share news stories related to social issues that I feel strongly about. If I feel there is some sort of social justice being done, I will usually share that news online.” Someone also mentioned, “Sharing something that ties in my faith commitments to my political commitments is important,” and “I tend to share news that is obscure, but relevant to my interests. As someone who enjoys political discussion and debate, but is conflict averse, I tend to avoid posting political articles on social media channels.”

In addition to topics that pertain to one’s personal interest, some responses simply stated that “I usually share engaging/sad/funny stories/news.” More specifically, these comments were more in touch with how relevant a potential topic is to oneself: “I will share if it relates to something in recent news or events or if it is related to something I am currently interested in or involved with,” “I usually share the news online when it’s something that affects me directly or I feel as though not enough people know about the topic and should.” Some described their intentions in

more value-laden terms: “I love being the first one to share something relevant on my timeline on Facebook, or capturing the latest updates,” and “I am frustrated with the negative light that is always shed onto President Trump, and I try to share articles to share my support for the current President.”

#### **6.8.4. Sharing Only One-On-One**

While most of the participants discussed their general news sharing practice on social media, some of the other participants brought an interesting observation to the attention of this dissertation: news sharing can also be done privately. Many people commented that news sharing can be rather sensitive, especially when the topic of interest is controversial or when you cannot predict how the information may be received by others. Due to this concern, there was a group of participants who expressed that they were only interested in sharing directly with specific people. This could be completed through direct email or private messaging on social media platforms. Such responses verified the assumption that news sharing is a communicative process: “I share news directly to individuals online only to generate discussion or in response to things that we have previously discussed,” “I will have discussions with other individuals directly, but I don't share things publicly,” “I tend to share health/nutrition or financial news with my immediate family members to encourage them to make wise decisions. That's about it, and I usually do it via email.”

Comments in this category generally revealed that news sharing is definitely not a universal habit of the public and that many people proceed with caution when considering the spread of information. Some were not interested in sharing on a grander social scale: “I usually don't share stuff, but if it is helpful information or

something funny I might. I usually send direct messages” and “Besides sending local news articles to my husband via text or Facebook message (things that we should attend, crime nearby or local personal interest I think he would be interested in), I really do not share news online.”

#### **6.8.5. Those who Resist Sharing**

A final sizable group of response to the open-ended question belonged to those who do not typically share news online with others, particularly strangers. The most prevalent explanation for this behavior concerned the controversial nature of some political news stories. Many also cited that some issues have become even more sensitive with the current administration in office: “I do not share political news online because I don't think using social media as a platform for political conversation is helpful” and “I usually don't share news online unless it really sticks out to me or is important for the people I'm connected with to know. Political news and controversial news I tend not to share because it causes conflict.” This also relates to when people do not believe that sharing is useful in persuading others: “I try not to share my views: no one cares. No one changes their politics cause of your 4 sentence Buzzfeed article or blatantly biased Fox News / CNN 'groundbreaking' article.”

Contrary to those who were fervently passionate about engaging in discussions with others or holding a position of opinion leadership, some others did not feel the necessity or willingness to sway public opinion: “I try to refrain from sharing my opinions online because I feel like it's not my place to influence others' opinions, most people aren't open minded.” Similarly, some commented that, “More or less it's to add my voice to an issue. I don't expect to influence anyone online and I

reserve those opportunities for face to face discussions.” This could also be related to privacy concerns: “I am not one to share news online. I believe that my views should not be broadcasted online for everyone to see,” or “I personally do not share any news online, as I do not like the attention/publicity.”

Finally, some participants cited moral obligation that prevents them from sharing political news. For example, someone mentioned that “As a Federal employee, it is not good to share negative stories about an Administration under which I work” and “I try to stay away because people get really angry about it.”

Results from the open-ended questions disclosed an interesting trend that parallels much of the findings in the statistical analysis. Relationship building and the desire for social connections have been found to be the key motivation behind sharing behaviors. When the audience decides to share information online, people usually expect a certain level of reciprocity from those who are on the receiving end of the sharing; otherwise, the effort may not be considered worthwhile. Additionally, the elaborated responses helped, to a certain degree, to lend some explanations to the question of why some audience would *not* want to share news online. It was found that in addition to the lack of interest or potential reciprocity, many considered the need to avoid conflict as a substantial justification for disengaging with news sharing activities. The interesting responses to the open-ended text question at the end of the experiment demonstrate that qualitative research can bring interesting insights to survey results.

## **6.9. Final Remarks**

This chapter discussed the quantitative results gathered from the online experiment of the present research. It helped to answer the second research question: To what extent does a story's social engagement appeal affect whether individuals are motivated to share a story? Specifically, the social engagement appeal is made up of five elements that help explain sharing behavior: Reciprocal value, individual interest, information utility, persuasion potential, and bandwagon effect. Results summarized from the online experiment were rich and these findings are an important step forward on our quest for the understanding of new stickiness.

First of all, the study found that all stories with personalization factors were more likely to be shared than the original plain stories, regardless of story topics. However, the individual effect of the dependent variables (news personalization) on the independent variable (likelihood of sharing) varied across topical groups. The experiment confirmed that a news story's content appeal – personalization and episodic framing – are strong factors that influence individual sharing behaviors. Such effect was particularly strong for the immigration story group; however, for the military group, only localization identification was found to have a marginally positive influence over sharing.



Hypotheses/Story Topics	Immigration	Military
H1a: Individuals exposed to content with <b>emotional testimony</b> are more likely to share the story after reading.	CONFIRMED √	REJECTED ×
H1b: Individuals exposed to content with <b>localization identification</b> are more likely to share the story after reading.	CONFIRMED √	CONFIRMED √
H1c: Individuals exposed to content with <b>partisan provocation</b> are more likely to share the story after reading.	CONFIRMED √	REJECTED ×

Table 52: Results of Hypothesis Support

Secondly, it was found that social engagement appeal presented in a news story is positively correlated with how likely one would share said story. In particular, the reciprocal value, individual interest and information utility of a news story are especially relevant to the likelihood of its sharing. These findings are exemplified in the following hypotheses, with H2a, H2b, and H2c well-supported, while H2d and H2e less so.

H2a: News stories of higher **reciprocal value** are more likely to motivate individuals to share after reading. √

H2b: News stories of high **personal interest** are more likely to motivate individuals to share after reading. √

H2c: News stories of **information utility** are more likely to motivate individuals to share after reading. √

H2d: News stories of **persuasion potential** are more likely to motivate individuals to share after reading.

H2e: News stories of high **bandwagon influence** are more likely to motivate individuals to share after reading.

The post-experiment questionnaire also presented some interesting and relevant findings on the additional factors that influence news sharing decisions. Results showed that in the context of political news sharing, our political ideology, general interest in political news, and how much we engage in political discussion with others are all significant contributors to how likely we are to share a political news story. There was also a positive link between how likely one is to share news stories (regardless of topic) online in general and the likelihood of political news sharing. However, this link was not successfully established with one's knowledge and understanding of news events, as no level of current event knowledge was found to be predictors of likelihood of political news sharing. These findings are exemplified in the following supported hypotheses:

H3a: Audience's political ideology is positively associated with the likelihood of political news sharing. ✓

H3b: Audience's political news interest is positively associated with the likelihood of political news sharing. ✓

H3c: Audience's frequency of political news discussion is positively associated with the likelihood of political news sharing. ✓

H4a: Audience's general frequency of news sharing is positively associated with the likelihood of political news sharing. ✓

H4b: Audience's knowledge of current events is positively associated with the likelihood of political news sharing. ✓

Along with the findings from the content analysis, the present experiment confirmed that a news story's content value and the audience's social engagement needs work collaboratively to affect how likely news stories are shared. These two elements are crucial factors used in this study to understand news stickiness, and further echo the perspective that sharing behavior is considered a joint product of informational and personal factors. Specifically, localized identification features were found to be a strong indicator of content appeal that drives sharing behavior across both story groups. Emotional testimony and partisan content were positively correlated with the likelihood of sharing for the story group in the topic of immigration. This correlation, however, was not established for military policy stories. Moreover, through an analysis of the responses of the participants in the post-experiment questionnaire, the study also found support for various social engagement needs as key driving forces of sharing behaviors. Three of these engagement needs were especially pronounced in the findings: reciprocal value, personal interest, and information utility. Last but not least, correlation tests confirmed that the audience's general news consumption and online sharing behaviors also contribute to the likelihood of news sharing. Detailed conclusions and contribution to existing literature will be fully discussed in the following chapter.

## Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

This dissertation set out to investigate the concept of news stickiness and factors that drive the audience to share political news online. It touches on a subject that has been of immense interest to me in my entire doctoral studies: the evaluation of audience psychology and its influence on content strategy. It centers around the audience behavior of news sharing and argues that the combination of the story's content appeal and audience's social engagement needs is the key to understanding why certain news stories are shared more than others in the same topic. This dissertation looks at news sharing as a motivated behavioral *process* rather than a singular act; audiences are first stimulated by certain types of content and then, triggered by cognitive incentives, eventually reach the decision of sharing. During such process, both the exposure of stimulating content and the need for satisfying one's social engagement goals must be present in order for sharing to occur. Therefore, this research examined what motivates the audience to share at the intersection of content and human factors.

As noted in the introduction, this dissertation is a timely research project as it took place in the first two years of the Trump administration. As series of breaking news and political event coverage pour into the news media at a historic rate, alongside the President's frequent verbal attack on the news media, the status of journalism as well as the amount of discussion on current events have garnered unprecedented attention. In an era when news credibility is often challenged and misinformation is easily spread, what types of news stories are shared and why people choose to share them become a topic of huge relevance. In this spirit, this dissertation

also indirectly addresses the understanding of political news distribution and offers some insights on the phenomenon of fake news, especially why it gets shared.

This final chapter will examine insights and explanations relevant to the study findings and discuss what the research results might mean for journalists, news organizations, and even technology product developers and designers. The project performed a mixed-method study that employed a content analysis of 323 most-shared articles on the *New York Times* website, followed by a experiment based on the findings of the content analysis. The results were promising, and overall offered a way to advance discussions related to news content sharing and the understanding of audience psychology. The chapter will also discuss limitations surrounding the present research and recommendations for future research in this area.

### ***7.1. Theoretical Contributions***

This dissertation's main contribution to the theoretical discussion on the motivations related to news sharing is recognizing that sharing is the joint product of relevant content materials and the goal of meeting social and psychological needs. It considers news sharing as a part of an information engagement process led by necessary content incentives and ends with individual needs for distribution. Each link in this process is important in order to make sharing happen. Previous research in the investigation of sharing motivations were usually one-sided, focusing on one particular attribute that contributes to the behavior; however, this dissertation argues the two key factors that drive news sharing each play a role in moving the audiences from content "internalizing" to content "externalizing."

*Reading vs. Sharing.* First of all, research in this dissertation emphasizes the difference between news reading and news sharing. There has been a significant degree of similarity among research findings on what makes news stories worth reading. However, news reading and sharing are two different processes, and it is important to differentiate engagement from exposure, though the two are related. What would be considered a worthy story to *read* may not have much to do with whether it is a worthy story to *share*. It is possible that a news consumer may click on and read a story but refrain from sharing it or taking any further actions. In other words, stories can be newsworthy but not necessarily “sticky.”

Early studies and research have confirmed multiple standards of newsworthiness (Tukachinsky, 2013; Shoemaker et al., 1991; Druckman, 2001; Snider & Theriault, 2004), with news personalization being one of the key characteristics. Findings in this field are well established. While the above-mentioned studies have all concluded that personalization, as a deviance-focused approach of newsworthiness, is a key contributor of quality news and significant events that receive greater coverage, it has rarely been discussed as a powerful force that drives sharing behaviors. This dissertation found that personalization is a strong motivating factor for sharing due to its ability to enhance issue proximity and allow the audience to associate with the characters portrayed in the stories. This motivation also comes from the perceived likelihood of relevance to one’s social connections. If one perceives that the issue proximity and character association also apply to one’s friends and family, that someone in the connection circle would find the information useful or interesting, the likelihood for one to share the stories increases.

*Gratifications for media use vs. media sharing.* The discussion and exploration of all kinds of audience behaviors are nothing new. Media scholars have long examined ways for the audience to engage with content and with each other. In terms of motivations for such behaviors, the iconic work of uses and gratifications identified habit, companionship, passing time, and entertainment as main motivations for media content consumption (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Taking this a step further, other research focused on gratifications behind the audience's interaction with social media in the form of status sharing, tweeting, and commenting (Khan, 2017; Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Mitchelstein, 2011). Sharing as a part of social media engagement behavior has only been mentioned and not investigated fully until recent work by Lee (2012) and Choi (2016). While previous studies have confirmed that there is a strong correlation between posting information and a sense of social connection, this dissertation built on such findings and found that social-based motivations are also considered the most outstanding factor that triggers sharing behavior. Achieving social connection in the context of news sharing provides the pleasure of forging and reinforcing social ties among users as a crucial gratification people obtain from using the internet (LaRose & Eastin, 2004). In this sense, the connectedness that people feel is a force that drives both media use and media sharing.

In addition to social-based motivations, this dissertation also studied research in education psychology and postulated that individual interest affects not only one's ability for information learning but also news sharing. Interest, along with the relationship-related social motivations, serve as two psychological vehicles that drive

the audiences toward the decision of sharing. Although unlike content features, the audience’s psychological needs are difficult to manipulate, this finding is useful to the understanding of audience traffic online and adds human factor insights into various data on content performance.

**7.2. Research Question 1 – Content Appeal**

The first research question of this dissertation seeks to unpack the first factor in the news sharing behavioral process, which is a story’s content appeal. The question asks: *To what extent does a story’s content appeal affect whether individuals are motivated to share a story?* It is hypothesized that individuals are more likely to share a news story if the story’s content appeal is high. Here, content appeal is divided into two elements: human interest personalization and episodic framing. More specifically, personalization framing refers to the presence of emotional testimony, localization, and partisan provocation in the news content. General findings in terms of the presence of the three features of personalization are summarized as follows:

<b>Human Interest Personalization</b>	<b>Number of Cases</b>	<b>Valid Percentage</b>
Emotional Testimony	155	48%
Localization	210	65%
Partisan Provocation	165	51%

*Table 53: Comparison of Personalization Features in Sample (N = 323)*

First of all, results from the content analysis showed that localization content was the most prominent feature in the articles coded, while emotional testimony and



partisan provocation were not as pronounced. The table above highlights this finding, that about 65% of the sample were written in localized context, with emotional testimony and partisan content each observed in roughly half of the sample. Usually framed episodically, localized content here was often adapted from a broader context (e.g. tax reform) to a new target audience (e.g. how tax reform would affect certain geographical areas or population).

A general theme that stood out was that localized content is easily identifiable in the headlines, which is the first thing that the audience would notice and read. It typically identifies a particular U.S. state, geographical location, group, or population. The article sample was retrieved in July and August of 2017, which witnessed a time of heavy media coverage on immigration policy changes; Hurricane Harvey in Texas; health care reform; the riot in Charlottesville, Virginia; and racial tensions across the country. For international affairs news, the focus was the ongoing North Korea nuclear crisis and Trump's scandalous relationship with Russia and Putin. Even among the small amount of soft news stories, the content mainly surrounded a specific individual, city, or issues that only affect certain areas. The clear localized identification, therefore, automatically connects with the audience's vested interest in events and locations relevant to self or others. It potentially primes the audience to read further and possibly share depending on the level of topical relevance.

Localized identification usually signals a sense of issue proximity, which has been reviewed earlier as one of the key ingredients of newsworthiness. Issue proximity often plays a role as a news feature that heavily resonates with audiences. It is often related to how certain topics are processed by the audiences cognitively. The

more relevant the information is associated with one's geographical location and personal interests, the more likely such stories are assigned more attention by individuals (Fournier et al., 2003). Localized content in media messages with proximity is also considered as one of the categories of information features that are expected to attract attention (Hjavar, 2000).

On the other hand, emotional testimony and partisan provocation were found to play a smaller role in driving sharing decisions. These features were predominantly visible in the actual content of the story but not necessarily in the headlines, which means that the audience would have to read the stories somewhat carefully in order to realize the presence of such features. Although the two features were found to be less visible than localization, their importance should not be ignored. The content analysis learned that emotional quotes and partisan content were strong features to drive news consumption. This is in line with some of the findings from previous studies that confirmed that emotionally evocative content such as empathy-inducing testimony and partisan attacks might be viral due to its potential to pass on positive or negative reactions (Berger & Milkman, 2011; Hasell & Weeks, 2016) and its ability to provoke attentions or arousal responses in viewers (Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001).

Lastly, a few other themes emerged from the article sample. The content analysis showed that the majority of the articles were opinion pieces written about national politics. Every article was presented with multimedia elements such as photos, videos, and social media links, which have increasingly become the standard format of news writing today. This also implies that if multimedia usage is now the universal practice of content strategy, journalists and content marketing professionals

should shift the focus toward other areas to boost audience traffic and news recyclability.

In summary, the three personalization features have been sustained consistently through the experiment of audience's news selection. Between the immigration and military story groups, results from the experiment found that all three hypotheses for the immigration story group were confirmed true; however, only H1b was confirmed for the military story group while H1a and H1c failed to gain support:

*H1a: Individuals exposed to content with **emotional testimony** are more likely to share the story after reading.*

*H1b: Individuals exposed to content with **localization identification** are more likely to share the story after reading.*

*H1c: Individuals exposed to content with **partisan provocation** are more likely to share the story after reading.*

As noted previously, the lack of support for two hypotheses for the military story group could be due to the group's smaller sample size. Results from the test of hypotheses in the experiment were significant because they were very much consistent with the main findings from the content analysis and further illustrated that localization was the key player in driving shareable content. Even with a smaller sample size in the case of the military story group, the experiment concluded that those who were exposed to the localized story had indicated stronger likelihood of sharing after reading. It is unknown, though, whether the exact placement of localized content in the story would have an effect on how likely it will be shared.

The exploration of news sharing motivation does not end at the understanding of content features. As this dissertation has consistently emphasized, reading and sharing are two different processes. Emotionalized content may be key to attracting the audience to read news, but it may not be enough to drive them to share. Content features must be coupled with sufficient need for psychological gratifications in order to make sharing happen.

### ***7.2. Research Question 2 – Social Engagement Appeal***

The second research question of the dissertation asks: To what extent does a story's social engagement appeal affect whether individuals are motivated to share a story? Specifically, the social engagement appeal is made up of five elements that help explain sharing behavior: Reciprocal value, individual interest, information utility, persuasion potential, and bandwagon effect. Based on the response to the questionnaire, reciprocal value, individual interest, and information utility were the three elements found to be the most significant contributors of political news sharing. These findings revealed three major themes.

First and foremost, relationship building and the desire for social connections have been found to be the key motivation behind sharing behaviors. When asked to explain when they usually do not feel like sharing an article after reading, most of the participants indicated that they would not consider sharing if they did not feel that their friends or social connections would find the article interesting. This shows that when the audience decides to share information online, they usually expect a certain level of reciprocity from those who are on the receiving end of the sharing; otherwise, the effort may not be considered worthwhile. Broadly speaking, this summarizes two

main motivations for news sharing: First, social connection can be enhanced through news sharing, that one's social status is associated with how well informed and intelligent one may appear from passing on useful news. Second, social validation and relationship development (Bazarova & Choi, 2014) pose a strong influence on information disclosure on the internet (Krasnova et al., 2010). These conclusions add to what past research has pointed out and recognize that social relationship building serves as the main motivation for not only news reading, but also news sharing.

The evaluation of the audience's social engagement needs presents some logistical challenges to the journalists and news organizations, which will be discussed in more depth later in the implications section of this chapter. When producing news content, journalists may find it difficult or even almost impossible to gauge whether a news story may trigger any emotional desire in the audience to engage in social relationships with others through sharing. However, news organizations should keep this in mind as they create and market news content, because catering to the emotional needs of the audience – especially if they have a general idea of a specific group of audience that they would like the content to target – may significantly help widen the reach and individual resonance with the news products.

Second of all, the present research linked a widely understood concept, interest, from the field of educational psychology, with the discussion of news sharing. As a cognitive phenomenon that intertwines with behavioral effect, the concept of individual interest is appropriate and valuable to the process of news engagement and dissemination. Not having enough interest in the story topic was

found, in the experiment, to be the second most significant reason for not wanting to share the news. This mentality could be affected by the desire for social connections, which means that one may share a story that is of interest to others simply due to intentions of maintaining a personal relationship. However, this type of sharing without any personal interest in the topic on the initiator's part may only occur privately through direct messages or emails, rather than a public posting such as a Facebook link share. Interest in a given issue influences how people process related news messages (Krosnick & Brannon, 1993). Politically interested individuals are more likely to select news content that shares their point of view (Choi & Lee, 2015). While the relationship between individual interests and news consumption is well established, this dissertation extended such relationship to news sharing.

Finally, following the factors of reciprocal value and individual interest, participants identified information utility as another major reason for sharing news stories online. The concept of information utility is nothing new, as it has been included numerous times in the literature of newsworthiness studies, as discussed previously in this dissertation. In the context of audience psychology in the present research, though, it was introduced more as a type of engagement need rather than a content feature. Specifically, it is also related to one's motivation for status seeking if an individual is going to be perceived as a reputable source of information when sharing high utility news. The present findings are consistent with previous studies in that information utility is often subject to the audience's appraisal and evaluation, making it relevant to one's psychological needs. A news story about President Trump's new immigration policy may be framed and understood as an important

update and having major consequences on the current immigration climate (great magnitude), quick to take effect (imminent), and likely to affect many people and carry substantial outcomes (likelihood of materialization).

Finally, it is important to note that although the three most pronounced psychological motivations here related to one's social engagement needs span across seemingly different cognitive functions, one common characteristic that all of them share is the consideration of potential social interactions when it comes to sharing. These interactions include the events of reciprocal discussion and strengthened social connections; personal relationship maintenance with others; and one's perceived status and reputation evaluated by others. It shows that when we share news, we are concerned about whether or not the behavior would stimulate a social conversation, bring us closer to our friends and connections online, as well as make others see us in positive light as knowledgeable and resourceful individuals. This also further confirms that sharing is a socially- and psychologically-motivated process during which the audience seeks to partake in a group activity where others are deeply involved. Without the possibility of a reciprocal interaction, the audience's pursuit of information may be stalled at mere consumption and not driven toward distribution. Under this circumstance, no amount of personalized content could have pushed news reading to news sharing, either. What makes a news story sticky is ultimately the *joint* effort of both content and social appeals.

### ***7.3. What Does This Mean for Journalism?***

The central thesis of this dissertation is an intriguing question for all news organizations today because it tackles the key issues of how to create 'sticky' content

that people wish to share. Many news outlets are now equipped with audience metric monitoring software such as Chartbeat, Parse.ly, Tableau, and Google Analytics, which provide real-time data of audience traffic and content performance. While metrics are helpful, news organizations need a deeper understanding of what drives sharing behavior. Research for this dissertation provides a starting point for consideration of news personalization alongside individual psychological motivations. Specifically, what the findings mean for journalism lies within two major parts: recognizing that sharing reflects audience's social needs and leveraging social media as useful tools for content distribution.

Findings from the present study have confirmed that a combination of a story's content appeal with the audience's social engagement needs can significantly help us to understand why certain news stories achieve sustained popularity (or 'stickiness') in the news cycle, while other important breaking news is far less read or shared. This calls for a reevaluation of news content design and distribution management by news organizations. These are important questions to consider as sticky news indicates both appealing content and psychological motivations that trigger the need to share such content.

Based on recent reports by the Pew Research Center (2018), key changes in media practices are defined as follows: production technologies; changing audience tastes and expectations; distribution technologies; and economic restraints. News consumers are able to create media content, share information, and collaborate through texts, images, and videos instantly and simultaneously. Professional and citizen journalists alike are now forced to work in a more "live" environment (Alysen,



2009). It has been discussed that such changes in audience behaviors have more to do with the increasingly more convenient and flexible ways to access information and less so with the changing needs for any specific type of content (Schroder, 2015). The audience's sharing behavior is largely afforded possibility due to the technological and situational factors that motivate users to spread information for the purpose of maintaining relationships and maximizing the advantage of instant communication via the internet and mobile phones. If one is an active participant online in terms of sharing news stories, one is more likely to be equipped with the necessary knowledge and information to maintain social circles and personal connections.

Elaborating on the process of news distribution in the form of sharing, it is also important to, once again, emphasize the need for news organizations to recognize sharing as an information externalizing process with the goal of engaging others. This is a point made by Dr. Jihyang Choi (2016) as reviewed earlier in this dissertation. Sharing suggests an innately human trait that arises from our ability to understand “we,” based on evolutionary biology (Grassmuck, 2012). It is a communal activity that signify the view of “self” and one's social connections as “extended self,” where sharing among friends and family is equal to sharing with oneself (Belt, 1988). In the sense of communion, some scholars have explored the historical connotations of sharing as a form of social bonds in a communicative dimension, such as sharing emotions to increase intimacy, sharing gifts to enhance relationship, or sharing by dividing up an object and taking a portion (e.g. food, house) (John, 2013). Other scholars have evaluated sharing as a form of distribution where the role of social media is associated with sharing as a distributive and mediating platform, which

focuses on the dissemination of media content (Grassmuck, 2012). While sharing as a communal form of material exchange is social by nature, the emergence of social media has created a shift in understanding larger scale sharing with the goal of strengthening bonds (Wittel, 2011). This indicates that the digital form of distributive communication today has fundamentally altered how sharing may be understood.

Digitalization affords the transformation of our media experience by us actively constructing and engaging the content ourselves (Sundar, 2008). This modifies and expands the gratifications and interactions users used to achieve by consuming media information. For example, some newer media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) are combining traditionally significant gratifications such as entertainment and pastime with social connection maintenance and information acquisition (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2011). Additionally, mobility and interactivity are also highly desirable new affordances that are associated with one's heightened needs for sharing and information distributing. The ability to access information remotely without restrictions of physical locations has modified how audience process and perceive content because of the advanced affordance of virtual connection and "realism" novelty (Springer et al., 2015).

### **7.3.1. Challenges to Internet Audience Management**

As we have established that news sharing provides significant influence over news content production, it is time to consider a few further implications for media management as a business practice. After all, news media are still a profit-driven capitalistic entity in the United States in particular (Benson, 2006). A big area for concern here is how to lessen the negative effects of social media sharing and

maximize the positive.

The benefit of social media sharing for news organizations reaches beyond simply increasing the visibility of its content. While some argue that the editorial agenda-setting power of news organizations has been on a decline (Goode, 2009), research has also shown that social media as a presentation tool of news is, in fact, strengthening this agenda-setting power by the news editors (Bright, 2016). Social media have become a space where sharing happens very rapidly following publication of stories, and news may have different effects on different platforms (Bright, 2016). More and more journalists have realized that some news stories are more popular for reading and not for sharing, which in turn, shifts where news organizations would like to invest the cost and labor of reporting, based on audience metrics.

The present research highlights a significant yet somewhat overlooked update on the uses and gratifications paradigm. By identifying strongly with a particular political ideology, individuals are more driven to consume media messages that support self-relevant social identities. Research has shown that different types of information exposure may lead to attitude and behavior changes in the long term (Boulianne, 2011). Therefore, selective exposure to messages that conform to one's existing beliefs becomes a self-affirming way to mitigate the growing threat of counter-attitudinal information. To a degree, the concerns for political identities under threat also contribute to the phenomena of "slacktivism" and "clicktivism" in the digital era. The motivation to seek information consistent with one's existing attitudes and participate in a cause relevant to one's political identity serves to bolster one's

self-image and desire to join community efforts (Slater, 2007). A better understanding of the audience's news consumption behavior online should help to unearth some of the underlying gratifications surrounding these various political expressions.

Finally, this research has important implications for the understanding of selective exposure of information in the context of a highly fragmented political environment. With the spread of misinformation online, individual opinions on political issues have become increasingly divisive. The results of the present study illustrate that certain information may be widely shared due to the appealing content presentation and various psychological motivations of the audience, while the truthfulness of said information may be completely irrelevant. This suggests that the internet, particularly the personalizability or customizability technology, poses the strong potential to undermine one's ability to seek out balanced and unbiased information. This aligns well with previous findings on how increased political selective exposure has a strong potential to create echo-chambers (Sunstein, 2002). Content personalization might be especially effective at encouraging the public to avoid challenging information based on one's personal attitudes and preferences, hence promoting disagreements in an ever-divisive political landscape. On the other hand, media outlets could use a deeper understanding of how specific features may engage the reader to try to overcome those barriers, i.e. by using personalization of issues or localization, to try to increase knowledge or empathy in issues that readers might otherwise avoid or ignore.

#### ***7.4. Limitations and Future Research***

The scope of the method design of this dissertation was limited by the availability of resources and this section provides some final suggestions and recommendations for future research.

This dissertation employed a mixed-method design of content analysis and quantitative experiment. Future research should consider the addition of in-depth user interviews that triangulates with the content analysis and experiment. Triangulation refers to the use of multiple research methods or sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena, primarily in qualitative research (Patton, 1999).

Triangulation typically adds value to a research study by confirming findings and different perspectives as well as adding breadth to a topic of interest (Denzin, 1978).

The application of user interviews or focus groups would supplement the findings of a content analysis and experiment by allowing the participants to further elaborate on their thought process and ideas. Considerations for enhancing the content analysis and experiment individually are discussed below.

##### **7.4.1. Content Analysis Sample and Design**

First of all, the choice of the *New York Times* as the only sample source of articles selected for the content analysis provides a very limited scope of views on the coverage of Trump's immigration and military policies. As a liberal, New York-based print publication that has been in constant clash with President Trump since before his inauguration, the viewpoints expressed by the writers may not be entirely in favor of the present administration. Moreover, most of the article samples were editorial and opinion pieces, written by columnists in long form journalism. This style is

dramatically different than what one would read in short pieces of breaking news published in other sources. It also makes the news taste of readers who are loyal subscribers of the paper relatively unique, which represents only a fragment of what the general audience may typically be interested in.

It has been explained in the methods chapter that the *New York Times* was selected because of its long-standing reputation as a leading national media outlet as well as the fact that it was the only available national news source with a clearly identified “most shared articles of the day” section. This data would not be readily accessible with other news outlets; in fact, most news outlets are not willing to share this data with external parties. Future research should consider expanding the sample selection to more than one news sources, as well as selecting sources that provide a balance in terms of political viewpoints and reporting style.

Additionally, it is important to consider that the most shared articles on the *New York Times* are likely influenced by algorithms employed by the publication and how it promotes the stories. Selective articles could gain prominence due to the confounding factors of editorial decisions as well as social signals. Therefore, there is a certain likelihood that some articles measured in the present research reach the most shared list through reasons other than the sole interest of the audience.

Regarding the sampling procedure, this dissertation monitored the “most shared articles of the day” sections on every weekday for two consecutive months. The time frame may be on the narrow side because two months’ worth of data could be rather limited in terms of the breadth of story topics. For data collection of once per day, an expansion of the sampling time frame may be necessary. Additionally, if

time is limited, one could consider scraping data through available software or automated tools that track and download changes in the “most shared articles” lists every minute, which would significantly boost the volume and efficiency of data collection. Such tools would allow real-time recordings of article data without losing potentially useful sources in the mix.

#### **7.4.2. Experiment Design**

This dissertation’s experiment design consisted of four main parts: content analysis, article manipulation, participant recruiting, and questionnaire design. It identified two political news topics as the key stimuli: immigration and military, due to prominence of the topics at the time. As with any controversial political topic, these two subjects could be framed in a variety of perspectives, which makes them useful choices for content manipulation. However, political news offers a wide range of topics that some additional areas (such as health care, racial diversity, etc.) are also worth adding into the testing.

For article manipulation, the visual presentation of the articles plays an important part in engaging the participants. The present research focused the content features in the texts only and did not include multimedia elements, which may have resulted a higher participant dropout rate or less-than-ideal engagement time due to content boredom. It was found that the participants had spent about an average of 120 seconds on reading the article when prompted. The dropout rate and engagement time could be better controlled and improved by presenting the articles as they normally look on the news website, instead of in plain text blocks.

Secondly, the demographics of the participants for the experiment heavily skewed toward white young liberal females. Most of the participants in this experiment were college students and young professionals located in a diverse metropolitan area on the East Coast of the U.S. The gender distribution was nowhere near equal either; over half of the participants were female while male participants only represented 37% of the sample. It is highly likely that these factors may have played a strong role in the preference made for the topic of immigration and possibly minimal enthusiasm toward Trump-related news stories. Invitation to participate in the online experiment was sent out via social media with an incentive of being entered to win an Amazon gift card; however, actual participation could not be guaranteed and the researcher had no control over the demographics of the participants except the two criteria established prior to starting the experiment: 1) Must be a U.S. resident; and 2) Must have read and shared news online at least once in lifetime. Future research should enlarge and diversify the pool of participants if access to a broader population is available. In addition, if a research grant is available, greater participatory incentives or compensation could be added. Similarly, online platforms such as Qualtrics, SurveyMonkey, and Amazon also offer paid services that provide a guaranteed number of survey participants in desired demographics.

Lastly, since the goal of this dissertation is to understand the factors that motivate the audience to share political news online, it would be helpful to have a basic understanding of the audience's existing attitudes and views toward the subject through a pre-test in the experiment. For example, in the context of the present research, since all of the articles are related to the latest announcement by President



Trump, gathering information regarding how Trump is viewed by the participants would potentially be helpful in explaining – partially – how likely they would share the articles. The individual perceptions about Trump would be an important covariate variable for the present study. One would assume that for those who are either Trump fans or Trump haters, such attitude and political preference associated with a politician are very much relevant to how they may perceive the content of the articles, therefore affect whether the articles would be shared or not.

### **7.4.3. Concerns for Research Questions**

There are so many researchable questions surrounding the audience's news sharing behavior besides why such behaviors would occur. Two additional areas of research that future studies should consider. First, *how* and *where* do audiences share news. This dissertation noted that the participants are far more likely to share news on social media than via email but did not further investigate other channels that the audience may use to spread information. Secondly, this presentation of news on mobile apps should play an important part in improving audience engagement. News sharing has become increasingly an act of the “moment” driven by convenience. As more audiences start to consume news on mobile phones via news or social media apps, the convenient availability of sharing features on the screen would potentially affect the likelihood of sharing simply because the reader has only limited amount of free time and that the share button is highly visible. All of this should be brought to the attention of journalists, news engagement scholars and user experience designers. Ultimately, in the digital age where news is accessible on various types of devices,

sharing is a form of audience engagement enabled by a pleasant and superior user experience.

### ***7.5. Final Conclusion***

This dissertation is a small step forward toward better understanding of how to make news sticky, in a sense that the news will not only be read but will also be shared extensively. My research combined theories in mass communication with cognitive psychology as well as behavioral science. Through a mixed-method design, the study found that news sharing is a motivation-driven process completed by the interactive effect of a story's content appeal and audience's social engagement needs.

For the evaluation of content factors, the study built on existing research on news quality and standard of newsworthiness and established the news reading and news sharing are two distinct processes motivated by different factors. What makes a story worth reading may not make it worth sharing as well. Personalization features, especially content localization, has been found to be the most salient framing technique that affect news sharing. Along with emotional testimony and partisan content, content creators should consider incorporating these strategies wherever possible, especially when a target audience is identifiable.

The present research results further contributed to the theoretical frameworks in audience engagement and uses and gratifications research by associating human psychology with news sharing. While content design could vary, our human urge to engage with others will always stay. This dissertation emphasizes that social engagement needs, as a part of the most essential emotional needs for people, play an important role in influencing human behavior. It argues that relationship maintenance

is a strong motivation for not only news consumption but for news sharing as well. In addition to the need for social connection, one's personal or individual interest in the topic has been revealed as another key driver for news sharing, which goes beyond the conclusions of educational literature on the positive relationship between interest and learning. So far, in actual journalism practice, the social engagement needs variable has been largely ignored by news organizations who are unwilling or unable to invest time, manpower, or monetary resources in the evaluation of audience preferences. The present research hopefully signals that although psychological factors can be difficult to identify and predict, they deserve considerable attention and should not be overlooked.

Results from this study will hopefully be of assistance as a potential recommendation for news organizations and journalists out there who are struggling to analyze and understand web traffic data and produce content that deeply resonates with their audiences. At the same time, these findings could also be useful and relevant to web designers, product developers and technology companies who share a vested interest in user experience research and consumer insights analysis. Although the present study's context is set in the news environment related to news audiences, the results could be applicable to the understanding of mobile, online, electronics, and other digital service product users. What ultimately drives this study and my passion in this field is the goal of better user-centered design and a tremendous fascination for human behavior and psychology – a field that all media studies scholars should be more aware of. I hope this dissertation serves a small role in setting scholarship further in that direction.

## Appendices

### **APPENDIX A – CONTENT ANALYSIS CODING PROTOCOL**

**A. Coder ID:**

1. Boya Xu;
2. Pranshanth Bhat

**B. Story ID:** Numbered list of articles coded; beginning with 1

**C. Date:** Day and time the article appeared

**D. Title**

**E. Article URL**

**F. Article Type** (Content feature of the article:

<https://www.nytimes.com/content/help/site/readerguide/guide.html>):

1. News
2. Man or Woman in the News (Portrayal of a central figure in a news situation);
3. Reporter's Notebook (A writer's collection of anecdotes or brief reports);
4. Memo (A reflective article often with an informal or conversational tone);
5. Journal (A closely observed and stylishly written feature article giving the readers a vivid sense of place and time);
6. News Analysis (A close examination of a news situation);
7. Appraisal (A broad evaluation of a major figure who has died) ;
8. Review (A specialized critic's appraisal of movies, books, etc.);
9. News-Page Column (A writer's unique and original insights and perspectives on a news situation;
10. Editorial (A nicely written and brief article about any topic of public interest);
11. Editorial Observer (A more personal, distinct, signed article by an editorial board member);
12. Op-Ed Column (An essay by a columnist);
13. Op-Ed Contribution (An essay written by non-Times staff members to reflect on a topic in which he or she is an expert)
14. Letters

**G. Section** (Categories in which the article fits):

1. World;
2. U.S.;

3. Politics;
4. Business;
5. Opinion;
6. Technology;
7. Science;
8. Health/Well;
9. Sports;
10. Arts;
11. Style;
12. Food;
13. Travel;
14. Magazine/Books;
15. T Magazine;
16. Real Estate;
17. New York;
18. Obituaries;
19. Video;
20. The Upshot;
21. Conferences
22. Sunday Review

**H. Breaking news:**

1. Breaking news (news presented as a newest occurrence or development);
2. Not breaking news (e.g. editorial, opinion, feature)

**I. Political Story Type** (<http://www.pewresearch.org/topics/>)

1. Election
2. World Politics/International Affairs
3. National politics/Domestic policy
4. Local politics: stories about other local- or state-level political news that do that center around national politics;
5. Crime/Security: stories about specific incidents of crime/crime trends that do not center upon sentencing/court verdicts;
6. Courts: stories about federal- or state-level judicial decisions;
7. Business: stories about local industry health or personal finance that do not center upon urban development;
8. Education: stories about education policies or figures centering around pre-k schools and colleges and universities;
9. Economy (including trade, transportation, infrastructure, agriculture, etc.)
10. Environment/nature: stories about long-term climate in the state;

11. Science and technology: stories about science and technology research that do not center upon business or higher education;
12. Health, fitness and medicine: Stories about state-level medical issues that do not center upon business or higher education;
13. Race/gender: Stories about demographics and issues of race/gender;
14. Life/Entertainment/Recreation;
15. Religion;
16. People/event Memorial;
17. Other: Write-in;
18. Unrelated

**J. Recurrence:** The amount of times an article has been in the “most shared” lists on multiple dates

**K. Video Presence:**

1. Yes
2. No

**L. Photo/image Presence:**

1. Yes
2. No

**M. Social Media and HyperLink Presence:**

1. Yes
2. No

**N. Interactivity:** Presence of interactive features (e.g. slide bar, graphs, games, quizzes)

1. Yes
2. No

**O. Human Interest Personalization (Boukes et al., 2015):**

**Emotional testimony** (inclusions of comments and interview with laypersons that increases the vividness of news through emotional response) (Bas & Grabe, 2015);

1. Yes
2. No

**Group Identification** (content mentioning specific geographic locations and group identity that temporarily adopts the perspectives of media characters) (Cohen, 2001);

1. Yes
2. No

**Partisan provocation** (pro-attitudinal and partisan information that elicits emotional responses from partisan news users) (Arpan & Nabi, 2011; Hasell & Weeks, 2016);

1. Yes
2. No

**P. News Framing (Iyengar, 1991):**

1. **Thematic Framing** (Extended connections made to a broader issue beyond the main topic in discussion - e.g. discussing terrorism in historical and religious terms; magnitude - news with broader political impact) (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001)
2. **Episodic Framing** (News that focuses on individuals who illustrate and exemplify an issue)
3. Both
4. Neither

## **APPENDIX B – COMPLETE EXPERIMENT DESIGN**

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### **Start of Block: Consent block**

#### **Q1**

THANK YOU for your interest in this brief online study and the option to win one of ten \$10 Amazon gift cards. This anonymous survey study is open to anyone 18 YEARS OF AGE OR OLDER WHO CURRENTLY RESIDES IN THE UNITED STATES.

#### **ABOUT US**

The lead investigator of this study is Ph.D. candidate Boya Xu in the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland. The purpose of this study is to better understand how people process news online.

#### **WHAT YOU WILL DO**

You will be prompted to read one news article in a political topic of your choice and answer two questions afterwards, followed by a final 12-question questionnaire. The average time to complete this survey is 15 minutes. You can now choose to either proceed to the next page for details OR close this window to exit if you do not wish to participate.

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Page Break

## Q2 CONSENT FORM

### **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

There are no known risks associated with participating in this project. You are asked to read the news story in the same way you would any news online. However, there may be some discomfort when reading a story of a certain political topic that may be personally sensitive in nature. It is important to know that all responses will not be linked to any identifying information, and you may choose to terminate participation at any time.

### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS**

There are no direct benefits from participating in this research. However, possible benefits include improved knowledge of current political events. This research is not designed to help you personally, but the results may help us to learn more about the consumption online news. We hope that, in the future, others may benefit from this study through improved understanding of these effects.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Your provided data will be kept completely confidential. To help protect your confidentiality, data collected through the survey will remain anonymous and will not contain information that may personally identify you. Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by storing data in a password-protected computer. Only the principal investigator and the faculty advisor will share the password. If you enter the chance to win the Amazon gift card, your email address will be used only to notify you. Your name and email will remain separate from the data collected and NOT shared with any other third party. Names and emails entered into the raffle will be destroyed as soon as all ten winners of the gift cards are drawn and successfully contacted. Survey data will be stored until August 2018 for research completion and revision purposes only and will be destroyed afterwards.

Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.

### **RIGHT TO TERMINATE AT ANY TIME**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate, you may stop at any time. Although incomplete sessions will NOT be eligible for the chance to win the Amazon gift card, you will not be otherwise penalized or lose any other benefits to which you otherwise qualify. If you are a faculty member, staff, or student at the University, your participation or non-participation will not negatively or positively affect your academic standing, employment, or relationship with the university.

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury



related to the research, please contact the investigator:

Boya Xu  
University of Maryland  
Philip Merrill College of Journalism  
2100N Knight Hall  
College Park, MD 20742  
Email: boyaxu@umd.edu  
Office: 301-405-2399

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:

University of Maryland College Park  
Institutional Review Board Office  
1204 Marie Mount Hall  
College Park, Maryland, 20742  
E-mail: irb@umd.edu  
Telephone: 301-405-0678

This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects. By continuing to the survey in the following page, you indicate that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. Please copy and print this consent form for your record, or you may contact the Principal Investigator for a copy of the consent form. If you agree to participate, please click the "Continue" button.

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#### Q3 Browser Meta Info

Browser (1)  
Version (2)  
Operating System (3)  
Screen Resolution (4)  
Flash Version (5)  
Java Support (6)  
User Agent (7)

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Page Break

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End of Block: Consent block

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Start of Block: Prompter

Q4 You will now be prompted to read a news article in the following page. Given the following two political topics, which one would you be more interested in reading?

- Immigration (1)
- Military Policy (2)

End of Block: Prompter

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Start of Block: M1

M1

### **New Policy Says Transgender People Will Not Be Allowed in the Military**

WASHINGTON — President Trump abruptly announced a ban on transgender people serving in the military on Wednesday, blindsiding his defense secretary and Republican congressional leaders with a snap decision that reversed a year-old policy reviled by social conservatives.

It was June 30, 2016, and Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter had just announced an end to the United States military's ban on transgender service. Mr. Trump reversed this decision on Twitter, saying that he had consulted generals and military experts, but Jim Mattis, the defense secretary, was given only a day's notice about the decision.

The ban would reverse the gradual transformation of the military under President Barack Obama, whose administration announced last year that transgender people could serve openly in the military. Mr. Obama's defense secretary, Ashton B. Carter, also opened all combat roles to women and appointed the first openly gay Army secretary.

Trump also directed the departments of Defense and Homeland Security "to determine how to address transgender individuals currently serving based on military effectiveness and lethality, unitary cohesion, budgetary constraints, applicable law, and all factors that may be relevant," the White House official said.

Trump's decision was announced with such haste that the White House could not answer basic inquiries about how it would be carried out, including what would happen to openly transgender people on active duty. Of eight defense officials interviewed, none could say. And it represented a stark turnabout for Mr. Trump, who billed himself during the campaign as an ally of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people.

Last week, Mr. Trump signed the directive precluding transgender individuals from serving, but gave Mr. Mattis wide discretion in determining whether those already in the armed forces can continue to serve. By putting the onus on Mr. Mattis, the president appeared to open the door to allowing at least some transgender service members to remain in the military, contrary to his initial tweet that all would be disallowed.

A report by the RAND Corporation, released in May 2016 found that allowing transgender people to serve would cost little and have no significant impact on unit readiness. The study estimated that 2,450 active-duty members were transgender, predicted that around 65 would seek to transition each year, and estimated that the cost to the Pentagon would be \$2.9 million to \$4.2 million a year.

The White House has still not put forward a serving general or military adviser to publicly back Mr. Trump's assertion. Mr. Trump elected to announce the ban in order to resolve a quietly brewing fight on Capitol Hill over whether taxpayer money should pay for gender transition and hormone therapy for transgender service members. The dispute had threatened to kill a \$790 billion defense and security spending package scheduled for a vote this week.

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#### M1 Timing

- First Click (1)
- Last Click (2)
- Page Submit (3)
- Click Count (4)

End of Block: M1

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Start of Block: M2

#### M2

### **“I Will Forever Be an American Soldier,” Transgender Service Members Respond to Trump’s Ban**

HOHENFELS, Germany — President Trump abruptly announced a ban on transgender people serving in the military on Wednesday, blindsiding Jennifer Sims, who is a United States Army captain and a transgender woman has served her country with distinction for more than six years is deeply disappointed by the announcement.

It was June 30, 2016, and Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter had just announced an end to the United States military’s ban on transgender service. “My eyes welled with tears of happiness, and I cried as I had never cried before,” said Sims. “For 20 years, I

fought against who I am. But that day was the closest I ever felt to freedom.”

Mr. Obama’s defense secretary, Ashton B. Carter, also opened all combat roles to women and appointed the first openly gay Army secretary. Sims said, “My choices were simple, yet complex: serve the nation or serve myself. On the one hand, I no longer felt the need to act supermasculine in my life, and I saw a path forward. On the other, I saw a nation at war and I wanted to help.”

Former Army Secretary Eric Fanning noted, “I prioritized guaranteeing that every American who could meet the Army’s high standards had the opportunity to serve. This included acknowledging the existence of transgender service members in the ranks and establishing a framework for their open service.”

Trump’s decision was announced with such haste that the White House could not answer basic inquiries about how it would be carried out, including what would happen to openly transgender people on active duty. According to Sims, “I’m pleased that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is seeking to clarify President Trump’s announcement on Wednesday about barring transgender people from serving in the military. But I won’t feed the expected narrative about the commander in chief ending my dreams of a military career.”

Last week, Mr. Trump signed the directive precluding transgender individuals from serving, but gave Mr. Mattis wide discretion in determining whether those already in the armed forces can continue to serve. “I’m ready for civilian life when my commitment is up,” said Sims. “I will simply say that, from what I have experienced, open transgender service strengthens our military. Enabling soldiers to pursue their gender identity empowers them to be all they can be.”

A report by the RAND Corporation, released in May 2016, which found that allowing transgender people to serve would cost little and have no significant impact on unit readiness. “Based on our findings, we were able to report to Secretary Carter that permitting transgender people to serve openly in the U.S. military would not pose any significant costs or risks to readiness, unit cohesion, morale or good order and discipline,” Fanning said.

The White House has still not put forward a serving general or military adviser to publicly back Mr. Trump’s assertion. “The last two years, the years I’ve been transitioning, have been the most productive so far of my eight-year commitment to the Army, and I can only imagine what else I could have accomplished if I had felt unencumbered during those first four years,” said Sims. “Despite everything I’ve been through, I will continue contributing everything I can in service of the nation.”

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M2 Timing  
First Click (1)  
Last Click (2)  
Page Submit (3)  
Click Count (4)

End of Block: M2

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Start of Block: M3

M3

**For Maryland Transgender Service Members, a Mix of Sadness, Anger and Fear**

WASHINGTON — President Trump abruptly announced a ban on transgender people serving in the military on Wednesday. As legislative and court battles rage over the question of whether transgender people are fit to serve in the military, two service members with ties to Maryland are at the heart of the fight.

It was June 30, 2016, and Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter had just announced an end to the United States military's ban on transgender service. Brock Stone, a resident of Anne Arundel County in Maryland, is the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit filed against Trump. Stone has served in the Navy for 11 years, including deployment to Afghanistan. He began to receive medical care for his gender transition in 2016 after the announcement of open transgender service.

The ban would reverse the gradual transformation of the military under President Barack Obama, whose administration announced last year that transgender people could serve openly in the military. Regan Kibby, a student at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, and Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Brock Stone, stationed at the U.S. Army's Fort George G. Meade in Maryland, are plaintiffs in two of the cases working their way through federal court.

Some transgender troops were left to wonder if they would face a quick discharge from the military or if scheduled medical appointments would be canceled. And nearly all expressed dismay at what they saw as a misguided action that could purge the military of many highly skilled and dedicated service members, bringing back an era when many troops lived in secrecy and shame.

Trump's decision was announced with such haste that the White House could not answer basic inquiries about how it would be carried out, including what would happen to openly transgender people on active duty. "When I came out as transgender I was relying on formal policies by the Navy and the secretary of defense that service members could no longer be separated or dismissed for being transgender," Kibby said in a declaration filed in *Doe v. Trump* in Washington, D.C., against the ban.

Kibby, 19, is a student double-majoring in English and history at the Naval Academy

and one of several plaintiffs involved in the suit. His goal upon graduation and receipt of his commission is to serve as a surface warfare officer on a naval ship.

A report by the RAND Corporation, released in May 2016, which found that allowing transgender people to serve would cost little and have no significant impact on unit readiness. After the 2015 announcement by the Department of Defense that soldiers could no longer be discharged based on gender identity, Kibby began to allow himself to explore his own identity. With the support of commanding officers, Kibby came out as transgender. "The entire future I had planned for myself was crumbling around me," said Kibby. "To be told that you are less than, that you are not worthy, is a terrible feeling."

The White House has still not put forward a serving general or military adviser to publicly back Mr. Trump's assertion. Maryland joined 14 other states and the District of Columbia last week to file a joint amicus brief in support of Kibby and the plaintiffs involved in *Doe v. Trump*. It is one of three cases filed around the country seeking to block the implementation of the ban. The ACLU of Maryland filed a separate lawsuit, *Stone v. Trump*, on behalf of six transgender service members in the United States District Court of Maryland on Aug. 28.

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### M3 Timing

- First Click (1)
- Last Click (2)
- Page Submit (3)
- Click Count (4)

End of Block: M3

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Start of Block: M4

### M4

#### **Some Republicans Welcome Military Transgender Ban; Most Democrats Don't**

WASHINGTON — President Trump abruptly announced a ban on transgender people serving in the military on Wednesday. Senate Democrats are gearing up to fight President Trump's ban on transgender individuals serving in the military -- and they could have a key opportunity to do so as early as next week.

It was June 30, 2016, and Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter had just announced an end to the United States military's ban on transgender service. "It is unconscionable that the commander in chief would take aim at his own troops for political reasons," said Aaron Belkin, the director of the Palm Center, a research institute that worked with the military to devise its policy on transgender service members.

The ban would reverse the gradual transformation of the military under President Barack Obama, whose administration announced last year that transgender people could serve openly in the military. President Trump's decision was roundly denounced by members of both parties, many of whom argued that anyone willing and able to fight for their country should be welcomed into the military.

Some Republicans showed support. "Military service is a privilege, not a right," said Rep. Vicky Hartzler, a Missouri Republican who lobbied the White House to stop paying for transgender-related medical expenses before Trump announced the ban. "I'm pleased to see the president putting military readiness first and making sure our defense dollars are spent keeping us safe."

Trump's decision was announced with such haste that the White House could not answer basic inquiries about how it would be carried out, including what would happen to openly transgender people on active duty. Several Democratic military veterans also lambasted Trump's decision. Rep. Ruben Gallego (Ariz.), a Marine veteran of the Iraq War, accused Trump of "using fear of Trans community to score political points."

Last week, Mr. Trump signed the directive precluding transgender individuals from serving, but gave Mr. Mattis wide discretion in determining whether those already in the armed forces can continue to serve. Democrats are working on crafting an amendment to a bill that could reverse Trump's directive barring transgender individuals from serving in the military, or at least protect transgender individuals currently serving, according to aides and advocates.

A report by the RAND Corporation, released in May 2016, which found that allowing transgender people to serve would cost little and have no significant impact on unit readiness. Capitol Hill's most prominent Republican voice on national security matters, Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain (R-Ariz.), also criticized Trump's announcement, calling it "unclear" and "yet another example of why major policy announcements should not be made via Twitter."

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#### M4 Timing

- First Click (1)
- Last Click (2)
- Page Submit (3)
- Click Count (4)

End of Block: M4

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Start of Block: I1

11

## Trump Moves to End DACA and No New Applications Accepted

WASHINGTON — President Trump on Tuesday ordered an end to the Obama-era program that shields young undocumented immigrants from deportation, calling it an “amnesty-first approach” and urging Congress to pass a replacement before he begins phasing out its protections in six months.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced the decision. Protests broke out in front of the White House and the Justice Department and in cities across the country soon after Mr. Sessions’ announcement. As early as March, some of the 800,000 young adults brought to the United States illegally as children who qualify for the program, will become eligible for deportation.

Losing the ability to work legally would mean, for an estimated 450,000 people, forfeiting the health insurance and other benefits offered through employers, according to the National Immigration Law Center. Individuals are able to request DACA status if they were under the age of 31 on June 15, 2012, came to the U.S. before turning 16 and have continuously lived in the country since June 15, 2007.

Mr. Trump’s frenzied weekend search for an alternative to abruptly ending the program was a fitting finale to his anguished deliberations over DACA since he took office. He said in a statement that he was driven by a concern for the millions of Americans victimized by this unfair system.

But despite broad and longstanding bipartisan support for measures to legalize unauthorized immigrants brought to the United States as children, the odds of a sweeping immigration deal in a deeply divided Congress appeared long. The temporary solution has been the subject of quiet negotiations between Mr. Trump’s legislative staff and members of Speaker Paul Ryan’s staff, according to an administration official familiar with the talks.

The President has sent wildly divergent signals about the DACA program for months. One official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said that Mr. Trump was sympathetic to the plight of the young immigrants, known as Dreamers — many have known life only in the United States and have few connections to the countries of their birth.

In New York, during a protest march down Fifth Avenue, some stopped and watched on their smartphones as Mr. Sessions made the news official. In addition to the public statement from Mr. Sessions and a White House question-and-answer session, the president was ready on Tuesday with the lengthy written statement, and officials at the Justice and Homeland Security Departments provided detailed briefings and distributed information to reporters in advance.



Immigration advocacy groups have said that ending the program would be a coldhearted step that would yield no benefit to the nation while endangering large numbers of young people raised in the United States who are seeking to work and pay taxes. But ultimately, the president followed through on his campaign pledge at the urging of Mr. Sessions and other hard-line members inside his White House, including Stephen Miller, his top domestic policy adviser. The announcement started the clock on revoking legal status from those protected under the program. If Congress fails to act, immigrants who were brought to the United States illegally as children could face deportation as early as March 6, 2018.

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## I1 Timing

First Click (1)

Last Click (2)

Page Submit (3)

Click Count (4)

End of Block: I1

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Start of Block: I2

I2

### **For some DACA Recipients, Losing Work Permits and Protection is Just the Start**

LOS ANGELES — Safir Wazed, a graduate student born in Bangladesh and raised in California, struggled to focus on his studies. Evelin Salgado, born in Mexico and raised in Tennessee, was ending plans to buy a house and wondering what would happen to her teaching job.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced the decision. Protests broke out in front of the White House and the Justice Department and in cities across the country soon after Mr. Sessions' announcement. And Basilisa Alonso did what thousands of other so-called Dreamers did on Tuesday: She marched in the streets to make her plight known.

Losing the ability to work legally would mean, for an estimated 450,000 people, forfeiting the health insurance and other benefits offered through employers, according to the National Immigration Law Center. "I'm willing to take the risk for my family and for all the other DACA people out there," Ms. Alonso said, "We are not bad people. We just want a better future."

Marielena Hincapié, the executive director of the National Immigration Law Center,

called Mr. Trump’s decision “nothing short of hypocrisy, cruelty and cowardice.” Maria Praeli, a recipient of protection under the program, criticized Mr. Sessions and Mr. Trump for talking “about us as if we don’t matter and as if this isn’t our home.”

But despite broad and longstanding bipartisan support for measures to legalize unauthorized immigrants brought to the United States as children, the odds of a sweeping immigration deal in a deeply divided Congress appeared long. “I have been blessed with all the opportunities that DACA brought to my life,” said Ms. Salgado, 23, who is now a teacher and was the first person in her family to graduate from college.

One official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations, said that Mr. Trump was sympathetic to the plight of the young immigrants, known as Dreamers. Since receiving DACA status, Mr. Wazed, 27, has held a job and bought a car and a condominium. He is now a graduate student at the University of Southern California. “Am I supposed to plan to reset my life in six months?” he asked.

In New York, during the march down Fifth Avenue, some stopped and watched on their smartphones as Mr. Sessions made the news official. “We pay our taxes, follow the laws,” said Dayana Arrue, 22, as she sobbed beneath her Ray-Ban sunglasses. She came from El Salvador when she was 6, is now a senior at Rutgers University, and was planning to go to graduate school for geoscience engineering. “All that talent that the U.S. is missing out on, it’s unbelievable,” she said. “It kind of all ends.”

Immigration advocacy groups have said that ending the program would be a coldhearted step that would yield no benefit to the nation while endangering large numbers of young people raised in the United States who are seeking to work and pay taxes. “They grew up here, they work at nearly every major company in America, serve in the military and many are working on recovery efforts in Texas,” said Todd Schulte, president of FWD.us, a progressive immigration reform group. “If DACA is repealed and no permanent legislation passed, they will all be fired and our government will begin the large-scale deportation of people raised in the United States”

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## I2 Timing

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I3

### **DACA Beneficiaries in Maryland Face Challenges Ahead**

President Trump on Tuesday ordered an end to the Obama-era program that shields young undocumented immigrants from deportation. For many recipients, the shutdown of the program could topple state-sponsored health coverage, financial aid, driver's licenses and professional credentials. Such consequences vary across different states.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced the decision. Protests broke out in front of the White House and the Justice Department and in cities across the country soon after Mr. Sessions' announcement. The extent of the impact will depend largely on where recipients live. Many of their rights and privileges are regulated at the state level. Some state governments may pass new laws or interpret existing law in ways that allow benefits to continue; others may not.

Losing the ability to work legally would mean, for an estimated 450,000 people, forfeiting the health insurance and other benefits offered through employers, according to the National Immigration Law Center. Another 290,000 recipients, the center said, may lose their eligibility for state-subsidized health coverage when their protection expires.

In Maryland, they would no longer be eligible for state-funded grants and student loans, and would no longer be able to drive legally. That may have a limited impact on immigrants in the transit-rich Washington D.C. area. But it could be debilitating for those who work on farms or construction sites in the suburbs, which can be far from their homes in areas where public transportation options are limited.

One official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations, said that Mr. Trump was sympathetic to the plight of the young immigrants, known as Dreamers. Some 10,000 DACA recipients live in Maryland, and business owners who hire many of these workers are worried about the impact. Some local companies worry because as many as half of their workers are DACA recipients, meaning their businesses will struggle to find new workers.

Monica Camacho Perez, a research assistant at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, was one of dozens of DREAMers from Maryland who rallied near the White House on Tuesday to protest the decision. As a result of DACA elimination, Maryland is likely to be one of the biggest losers with about half a billion at risk annually.

Immigration advocacy groups have said that ending the program would be a coldhearted step that would yield no benefit to the nation while endangering large numbers of young people raised in the United States who are seeking to work and pay taxes. Many companies in Maryland voiced their support for DACA recipients. CEO

of Baltimore-based Under Armour Kevin Plank posted on Twitter that his company “stands with America and the DREAMers.” Several Maryland universities also weighed in. Wallace D. Loh, president of the University of Maryland at College Park, said the university had about 100 DACA students on campus, and called the decision “antithetical to the core values” of higher education.

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### I3 Timing

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Start of Block: I4

I4

### **Right and Left React to a Prospective DACA Deal**

WASHINGTON — President Trump on Tuesday ordered an end to the Obama-era program that shields young undocumented immigrants from deportation. His effort to strike an immigration deal with Democrats attracted cautious support from lawmakers of both parties Thursday. But some Democrats are threatening a government shutdown after December if a deal on DACA cannot be reached.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced the decision. Protests broke out in front of the White House and the Justice Department and in cities across the country soon after Mr. Sessions’ announcement. “Most Americans know how heartless the DACA decision is, telling people who have worked hard to become Americans for years that they have to leave the country,” said Chuck Schumer, a New York Democrat, in a statement that the decision to end DACA will rip apart families.

Losing the ability to work legally would mean, for an estimated 450,000 people, forfeiting the health insurance and other benefits offered through employers, according to the National Immigration Law Center. Democratic Sen. Elizabeth Warren said in a statement that the government “promised” DACA recipients they wouldn’t be deported and now President Trump is breaking that promise.

“What the White House put forward is a complete non-starter,” House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) said in an interview, blaming Trump’s senior policy

aides for advancing “un-American” ideas on how to deal with immigration. “There is nothing in it to negotiate because it does not have shared values of who we are as Americans,” she added.

But despite broad and longstanding bipartisan support for measures to legalize unauthorized immigrants brought to the United States as children, the odds of a sweeping immigration deal in a deeply divided Congress appeared long. Some liberals expressed concern about reaching a deal with President Trump and took to Twitter to share their thoughts. “If Trump decides to end DACA, it will be one of the ugliest and cruelest decisions ever made by a president in our modern history,” tweeted Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt.

One official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations, said that Mr. Trump was sympathetic to the plight of the young immigrants, known as Dreamers. However, the decision quickly sparked backlashes from Democratic senators across the country. “Young people affected by DACA are American in every way except immigration status,” tweeted Minnesota senator Al Franken. “Ending the program is not who we should be as a nation.”

In New York, during the march down Fifth Avenue, some stopped and watched on their smartphones as Mr. Sessions made the news official. Democrats condemned the move. “It’s cruel,” said Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, a Baltimore Democrat. “I think it’s very, very unfair, and very, very unfortunate. DACA children who I have met usually come to me with tears because America is all they’ve known.”

Immigration advocacy groups have said that ending the program would be a coldhearted step that would yield no benefit to the nation while endangering large numbers of young people raised in the United States who are seeking to work and pay taxes. Discussing the exact same group of people — undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as minors — Sen. Jon Tester (D-Mont.) said yesterday: “America’s immigration system is badly broken and needs fixing, but breaking a promise to these children — who are here through no fault of their own — is not the solution. “Over 90 percent of them are in school or working and many have proudly served our country in uniform.”

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#### I4 Timing

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End of Block: I4

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Start of Block: Share or Not?

Q5 How likely are you to share the story you just read with others on the following platforms?

	Very likely (1)	Somewhat likely (2)	Neither likely nor unlikely (4)	Somewhat unlikely (6)	Very unlikely (7)
Social media such as Facebook or Twitter (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Email (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*Display This Question:*

*If How likely are you to share the story you just read with others on the following platforms? = Somewhat unlikely*

*Or How likely are you to share the story you just read with others on the following platforms? = Very unlikely*

Q54 Please explain (if selected "somewhat unlikely" or "very unlikely"):

- The topic is boring (1)
  - The topic does not pertain to my interest (2)
  - The article is too long (3)
  - The article is not informative or useful (4)
  - None of my friends would be interested in this article (5)
  - The topic makes me upset/emotional/angry (6)
  - I don't care/not worth my effort to share (7)
  - Other (please specify) (8)
- 

End of Block: Share or Not?

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Start of Block: Post-Test Questionnaire

Q6 In general, how likely are you to share a news story due to the following reasons?

	Definitely (1)	Somewhat likely (2)	Neither likely nor unlikely (4)	Somewhat unlikely (6)	Not at all (7)
The news story pertains to my personal interest (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The news story resonates with who I am (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The news story helps reinforce an existing personal belief that I would like to advertise (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The news story contains a popular or majority opinion that I want to echo (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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Page Break

Q7 In general, how likely are you share a news story due to the following reasons?

	Definitely (1)	Somewhat likely (2)	Neither likely nor unlikely (4)	Somewhat unlikely (6)	Not at all (7)
The news story is about something one or more of my friends would enjoy or care about (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The news story will generate a discussion or response from my social connections (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The news story contains useful information that other people should know about (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The news story has the potential to influence people's opinion (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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Page Break



Q8 How often do you share news online?

- Daily (1)
  - At least once a week (2)
  - At least once a month (3)
  - Less than once a month (4)
  - Never (5)
- 

Page Break

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Q9 How much do you usually discuss political news topics with other people?

- A great deal (1)
  - A lot (2)
  - A moderate amount (3)
  - A little (4)
  - None at all (5)
- 

Page Break

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Q10 How interested are you in political news in general?

- Very interested (1)
  - Somewhat interested (2)
  - Neither uninterested nor interested (3)
  - Somewhat uninterested (4)
  - Not at all interested (5)
- 

Page Break

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Q11 How do you rate yourself in the following statements?

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Somewhat agree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat disagree (5)	Disagree (6)	Strongly Disagree (7)
I believe I have a good grasp on current political events and what is in the news (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am confident in my understanding of various news sharing features (e.g. "like" and "comment" buttons) on news websites and social media (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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Page Break 

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Q12 Please rank the following platforms in order of your preferences for news sharing (most preferred item at the top):

To rank the options, drag and drop each bar within the frame.

- My own Facebook/Twitter/LinkedIn timeline/feed (1)
- My own website or blog (9)
- Someone else's Facebook "wall"/timeline (3)
- Particular groups on social media or email listserv (7)
- Direct/private message through social media (4)
- Direct email (5)
- Tagging specific people while posting on my own timeline/feed (6)
- Cell phone text message (8)
- Discussion in person (17)
- Other (please specify) (2)

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Page Break

Q13

Finally, we would like a little information about you.

What is your age?

- 18-29 years old (1)
- 30-49 years old (2)
- 50-64 years old (3)
- 65 years or older (4)

---

Q14 To which gender identity do you most identify with?

- Male (1)
  - Female (2)
  - Prefer not to say (3)
  - Other (please specify) (4)
-

Q15 Which best describes your highest education level?

- High school or less (1)
  - Some college, no degree (2)
  - Currently attending college (3)
  - Bachelor's degree earned (4)
  - Master's degree or higher (5)
- 

Q16 Which best describes your political ideology?

- Strong Democrat (1)
  - Weak Democrat (2)
  - Leans Democrat (3)
  - Independent (4)
  - Leans Republican (5)
  - Weak Republican (6)
  - Strong Republican (7)
-

Q55 My race and/or ethnicity is (Select all that apply):

- White or Caucasian (1)
  - Black or African-American (2)
  - Asian or Pacific Islander (3)
  - Hispanic or Latino (4)
  - American Indian or Native American (5)
  - European (6)
  - Middle Eastern (7)
  - Other (please describe) (8)
- 

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Page Break

Q17 Please describe further what usually motivate you to share news online.

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Page Break

Q56 If you wish to be eligible for the drawing of the randomly awarded \$10 Amazon gift cards, please enter your email address below so you can be notified if you are the winner!

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**End of Block: Post-Test Questionnaire**

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