SOCIAL MEDIA’S INFLUENCE
On Public Discourse in the Pacific Northwest

October 2015 | #insights
“Understanding the nuances of the social media news environment is complicated. The experience is individualized through one’s own choices, through the friends in one’s network and their proclivities, and through algorithms – all of which can change over time. We are only beginning to understand these complex interactions.”

Amy Mitchell
Director of Journalism Research
Pew Charitable Trusts
June 1, 2015
Table of Contents

Executive Summary 4

Introduction 7

SECTION 1: The State of Social Media 11

SECTION 2: The Influence of Social Media 18

SECTION 3: Social Media and “The News” 27

SECTION 4: Social Media and Politics 33

SECTION 5: Diversity and Social Media 39

SECTION 6: Our Insights 44
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the second Insights report released by Quinn Thomas and DHM Research. These reports are part of an ongoing project to examine issues and trends in today’s rapidly changing communications industry.

As with every report, our goal is to provide business leaders, elected officials, non-profits, and communications professionals with insights that can be used to navigate emerging challenges in shaping public opinion.

In early 2015, our teams agreed that the public’s use of social media remains a huge challenge for the Pacific Northwest’s corporate, political, and institutional leaders. In addition to questions about its rise as a major player in the delivery of news and information, many of us struggle to assess and measure its effectiveness.

The more we examined the issue of social media’s influence on everything from corporate reputations to political dialogue in the Pacific Northwest, we concluded that it indeed deserves to be near the top of the list of the most pressing challenges in today’s media landscape. Understanding social media’s influence should be taken seriously by anyone seeking to understand our electorate, public opinions about social and political issues, and how to manage reputational challenges in an increasingly digital era.

This report is the result of nearly a year’s worth of quantitative and qualitative research, interviews, and data analysis – including new polling our teams conducted to help Pacific Northwest leaders better understand social media and the public’s use of it. Throughout, we present our rationale for arriving at several key findings that should help inform how businesses and political influencers use social media to engage the public on complex social and political debates.

Key Findings

- In the major population centers in both Oregon and Washington State, 80% of the public are using social media, with the most frequently used platform among this group being Facebook (90%). This new poll shows that Facebook remains the dominant platform in terms of frequency – and this is most prevalent among older populations over 55 (96%) compared to younger users under 35 (82%). Still, nearly one-third of the social media users in the Pacific Northwest say they rarely or never use their social media accounts.
Among social media users in the major population centers in Oregon and the Puget Sound region, majorities feel that social media has equal or greater value than traditional levers of civic engagement. In our polling, 50% said social media was as or more valuable to enacting change as voting, 65% said it’s as or more effective than traditional journalism, and 57% said it has as much or more impact than donating to a non-profit. This is particularly true of social media’s ability to direct support or opposition for public policy – 58% of users say what they see on social media has “a lot or some” impact on their support for public policy.

Social media users in these two regions of the Pacific Northwest are mixed on whether social media is a valuable platform for sharing opinions about social and political issues. While many view social media as a valuable civic engagement tool, 51% say it only validates people’s existing views on important issues, and 62% say that social media activity on a news story or political debate has never changed their opinion.

Political affiliation is a major determinant in how people view, use, and value social media as an engagement, news, and education tool. Given the Northwest’s left-of-center political establishment, Republicans and independents in the Northwest appear less likely to engage their peers on social media about political issues. Democrats (40%) post more political content than Republicans (25%) and independents (31%). In addition, when compared to Republicans (27%) and independents (29%), Democrats (38%) are more likely to feel that social media helps to educate and challenge people’s views on issues.

Despite rapid growth in usage among almost all demographic groups, most social media users in this region do not view social media as a primary news source or as a go-to platform for political and civic engagement. The vast majority (72%) view social media primarily as a social resource – that is, as a tool for maintaining personal connections with friends and family. Far fewer (8%) say they primarily use social media to get news or engage with their network on current affairs. A majority (56%) disagree that social media is how they get most of their local news.

A person’s race is a major determinant in why they use social media – and both the content they share and what information they consume on these platforms. While platform user rates among white and minority populations are roughly even, non-white social media users place a greater emphasis on these platforms as alternative forms of news and information. This seems to be underscored by national data showing higher levels of distrust of mainstream news among African American, Hispanic, and other minority groups in the U.S. – and a lack of media coverage about issues that affect them. In our polling, 52% of non-white social media users said that platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are how they get most news about what is happening in their communities – compared to 41% of white users.

At a high level, these findings capture the major headlines for readers to digest. That said, there are important nuances underpinning each – details and analysis that we explore more deeply in the following pages.

If we were to add one other major finding to our list, it would be there is still a lot that behavioral science has not explored when it comes to the influence and effectiveness of these “new media” channels. In truth, while we see evidence of growth in social media adoption in the Pacific Northwest, there is a lot we do not yet understand about what impact use has on public perception of complex issues.

This is in part because researchers and behavioral scientists are still limited by our reliance on old definitions of what constituents “news” – and the public’s rapidly shifting perceptions about authenticity, information, and the value of informed public discourse.
“The more people know, the less they trust.”

*Politico* reporter Jack Shafer
INTRODUCTION

What is the real impact of social media on public opinions about current events?

At its core, this question forms the basis of the topics explored in this report. It is important to state our intention to analyze – to the greatest degree possible – the measurable impacts of the public’s use of social media in influencing how they perceive complex, often polarizing socioeconomic and political issues.

Much has been written about the rise of social networking. The rapid ascendance of forums such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter has transformed the communications industry. It has altered how we consume mainstream media. It has certainly created enormous challenges for newsrooms, boardrooms, and politicians on the campaign trail.

Popular narrative often frames social media as “the new media” – a force bringing about the end of traditional forms of news, entertainment, broadcasting, and publishing. Social media is regularly credited with causing the decline of newspaper readership and the increasing irrelevance of evening news programming. We no longer need to wait for editorial boards or the networks to bring us the day’s news when we can receive it and share it in real time.

Many claim the rise of social media means the citizen journalist will replace the mainstream beat reporter. It has certainly transformed the economics of news and information. Smartphones are the new camera crew. Tweets are the modern day press conference.

In short, the national debate over social media seems to land in two camps. One that says social media has opened a door to a more engaged electorate and is creating pathways for greater civic engagement, corporate and political accountability, and journalistic integrity. The other claims that the speed and selectiveness of information shared on social media impedes critical thought and merely closes us off from differing viewpoints.

While we can’t argue with the growth of social media’s use, its influence is far more complex than we tend to acknowledge. While it’s true that social media has changed how we receive and engage with information, questions remain about exactly what role it plays in shaping regional public discourse.

As such, our teams became most interested in exploring social media’s influence, rather than its mere presence, in the regional landscape of communications and journalism. In embarking on this exploration, we were careful to avoid starting with the premise that social media is having any influence over public discourse at all. In fact, questioning that very assumption has been the primary topic that continues to intrigue us the most.
Throughout this report, several questions help anchor our analysis. We’ve attempted to address each by conducting our own research on Pacific Northwest populations and reviewing national data for comparison. Central to this endeavor is a focus on understanding the following questions:

- Do social media posts about current events, news, and sociopolitical debates shape people’s opinions about those issues?
- Is social media merely an echo chamber of likeminded viewpoints – does it lead to the reinforcement of one’s own beliefs about current social and political debates?
- How is social media changing the ways in which people consume news and gain insight into emerging current events?
- What is the public’s perception of social media’s value in public discourse, news, and communication?

These are big, complex questions that few behavioral scientists and researchers have been able to answer with much clarity. That said, this report aims to draw some clear conclusions for each question based on new research we’ve conducted over the last year.

The issue of influence is one of great importance. As we near the 2016 elections, understanding how effective social media is in directing the agenda of public debate remains a crucial field for continued study for anyone in strategic communications.

**Acknowledgements**

Quinn Thomas and DHM Research would like to acknowledge the assistance provided by several regional leaders who have helped shape our approach to this report. While these organizations have not directly funded our research, and thus did not have final authority over its topics or our conclusions, each was instrumental in offering guidance, counsel, and direction throughout its development.

Thank you to Cambia Health Solutions, the City Club of Portland, Greater Portland Inc., the Portland Business Alliance, Oregon Health & Science University, the Oregon Community Foundation, Knowledge Universe, NW Natural, the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission, Charter Schools Capital, and Puget Sound Energy.

Many others have contributed thoughts, ideas, and guidance throughout this process. We are grateful to each of them for their partnership in our work.
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

It will be helpful for the reader to have a primer both on the population centers in our analysis and the research methods used to analyze public attitudes related to social media. This ensures that one can understand the context in which our conclusions have been drawn given the specific geographic and demographic profiles of the populations included in our study.

There are limitations with any endeavor to analyze public sentiment. As such, we encourage readers to understand our approach and consider how differences in methodology would surely lead others to form more specific, or even altogether unique, conclusions.

There are a multitude of ways to dissect measurable influences that social media may have over the public’s shared discourse. Currently, there is a wide body of literature that provides a sound analytical baseline on everything from social media’s use in mobilizing social movements to its influence on the mainstream news cycle. In addition to our own polling, we’ve used this library of material to draw some of our conclusions about social media’s specific influence in the Pacific Northwest.

LEADERSHIP FORUM. We began our analysis by interviewing Pacific Northwest communications professionals and business leaders about the social media challenges they feel require more exploration. In early 2015, we organized a forum to gather input from a panel of communications professionals and social media practitioners to construct an analytical approach. This guidance helped identify the questions about social media use that many local leaders felt were unanswered, or at least unclear, based on existing data.

ONLINE POLLING. In April 2015, we conducted an online poll (n = 1,041) in the major population centers within Oregon and the Puget Sound region – focusing on the heavily populated I-5 corridor between Seattle and Eugene. Our data has a margin of error of +/- 3%. This poll focused on establishing a baseline of the public’s perceptions of social media, how it’s used (both by the participant and by others), and how they feel it shapes everything from the news cycle to popular debate. Conducting our quantitative research online helped establish that participants had some form of access to the Internet – a key variable in surveying a population’s use of digital platforms.

The graphics at right break down our survey populations for both Oregon and Washington states. It is also important to note that while we oversampled responses in the six Oregon counties (n = 648) in the polling, our totals have been weighted. When combined, the two markets remain proportional to their relative sizes, with the Seattle metro counties weighted to 65% and Oregon to 35%. These demographics of our sample provide needed context to the findings we use throughout this report.
FOCUS GROUPS. Our quantitative polling was followed by qualitative research (focus groups) with social media users in the core metropolitan areas around Portland and Seattle. These forums enabled our team to test some conclusions gleaned from the polling data. These focus groups were conducted in May and June of 2015.

Accepting Some Limitations

Throughout our work, several challenges became apparent that would limit anyone from offering error-proof conclusions on this subject matter. We identify them here to help the reader acknowledge and accept the limitations placed on any researcher when trying to establish concrete answers to complex questions.

The first is the variant uses and definitions of terms like “news,” “the media,” “journalism,” “politics,” and even “social media” or “social network.” While it’s assumed that in our quantitative polling there are differing perspectives on what these terms mean, these variations were most evident in our qualitative (focus group) research.

While people clearly arrive at this discussion with their own definitions of these terms, we strived to establish clarity and focus wherever possible. Nevertheless, we have to acknowledge there are degrees of terminology bias and assumptions made among the participants in our research methods.

Other challenges we confronted are worth highlighting. Why people use social media is one. In our first focus group, many participants struggled to think of social media as a vehicle for substantive communication about public policy or social and political discourse. This, in turn, drew our attention to the social, political, and economic variations that seem to alter one’s expectations of what social media can do.

Moreover, it’s clear from our data that one’s racial and ethnic background is a factor in how one uses and views social media as a communications tool. That said, our polling is limited to merely cross-tabbing these populations as a general “Non-White” category – one that comprises roughly 17% of the total survey population. This, however, opens a clear door for further exploration of social media among the region’s African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian and Pacific Islander, and Native American populations.

Lastly, as you are reading this report, remember that everyone will look at our analysis based on their own unique interest in understanding our answers to these questions.

Everyone’s objectives in better understanding social media’s influence among a diverse population will vary. We encourage readers to see this as just one approach and one set of conclusions, and invite others to build upon this work through further exploration, data collection, and critical thought.
SECTION 1
The State of Social Media

“I think social media is an ideal location where you can plant a seed and expose people to new information. It’s a great place to be exposed to new information, but not necessarily form new opinions. It plants a seed. Then you can go from there.”

Kenny, 27 years old
King County, Washington
To understand social media’s influence on public discourse in the Pacific Northwest, we must first assess the current state of social media users in our region. This allows us to establish a better picture of regional social media users by age, gender, and other demographic factors.

In our polling, we asked a series of questions that give us a view into some trends in these two metro areas. Collectively, 80% of respondents said they currently use some form of social media – a figure that was fairly consistent across both states. Another 19% claimed they do not use social media. The other 1% say they “don’t know.”

Nationally, roughly 73% of the adult U.S. population uses some kind of social media. This places Oregon and the Puget Sound slightly above average in use and adoption of these media channels.

Breaking down local usage into demographic groups presents us with a better picture of who’s using social media in the Northwest. Of those who answered affirmatively to this question, we can see some trends (see chart at right).

At a glance, we can see several areas for further exploration. While indicating high usage rates across most demographic groups, we begin to see some standout groups – particularly women, Democrats, younger people, and registered voters. Why these subgroups may use social media more (and how they may view its value differently) is an important question – and one we attempt to explore further.

If we isolate respondents who do use social media, we can establish some perspectives on how and why these networks are used.

### What is your Most Important Reason for using social media?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONSES</th>
<th>OREGON</th>
<th>PUGET SOUND</th>
<th>TOTAL (BOTH MARKETS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal connections with family and friends</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News, current affairs</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional connections / networking</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment / popular culture</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping / product reviews</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### By Voter Registration

- Registered to Vote: 81%
- Not Registered to Vote: 72%

### By Education

- High School or Less: 73%
- Some College: 82%
- College or Grad. Degree: 81%
Other reasons such as supporting a cause or social advocacy barely registered as a motivator for using social media. These and other reasons received less than 1% among active users.

As a starting point, this first set of data tell us that social media remains just that – social. However, while the gap is substantial, the next biggest reason given was as a resource for news and information about current events. This was fairly even across all age, gender, and political groups.

In our polling, we asked respondents if they agreed with the statement that “social media is how I get most news about what’s going on in the community.” This localizes the question and thus allows us to determine if it’s a resource for news about regional and local communities, rather than global or national events.

Surprisingly, there was some disagreement with that claim:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONSES</th>
<th>OREGON</th>
<th>PUGET SOUND</th>
<th>TOTAL (BOTH MARKETS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly / Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly / Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What’s notable is the intensity in those who disagree with that statement – with a combined 32% saying they “strongly disagree” compared with just 11% who strongly agree.

The public’s ranking of social media as a predominantly social forum does not allow us to overlook the 2015 report from the Pew Research Center that found sharp increases among the American public in their use of social media as a source of news. That national study found that majorities of both Facebook and Twitter users say the platform serves “as a source for news about events and issues outside the realm of friends and family.”

Interestingly, our polling found the majority of 18-34 year olds (55%) and nearly half of women (49%) agreed that social media is how they get news. Education is also a dominant factor in whether you view social media as a news resource; 50% of those we polled with a high school diploma or less said social networks are their primary news resource compared to 36% of those with a college degree or more.

We should be careful here to distinguish between social networking companies’ increasing push into news aggregation versus the “social sharing of news.” We have to question how respondents classify “news” as it pertains to what they are seeing. This remains a challenge for behavioral scientists.

Clearly, there are trends in play that merit continued analysis of social media’s evolving – and perhaps blended – role as a social connection and news source. This begs the question of whether people recognize the influence of what they are seeing on social media as “news” – a topic we go into in more detail in Section 3: Social Media and “The News” on page 29.

**PLATFORM USE: Who’s Using What?**

One of the challenges of examining general social media use is the diversity of platforms that fall into such a broad category. As such, it’s helpful to have a sense of which social platforms current users in the Pacific Northwest are on.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Which SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM do you use most frequently?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RESPONSES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pinterest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One is tempted to make some assumptions about which demographic groups are using each – believing that a user’s age, gender, and other factors will create unique clusters of usership by platform. Interestingly, we saw very little distinction among usership when isolating key demographic subgroups. However, we did identify some variances in who is using what. Here we can look at how these platforms break down among the demographic groups surveyed:

Facebook Users

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-34</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-54</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55+</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School or Less</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or Grad. Degree</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Twitter Users

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-34</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-54</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55+</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School or Less</td>
<td>35-54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or Grad. Degree</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

YouTube Users

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-34</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-54</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55+</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School or Less</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or Grad. Degree</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LinkedIn Users

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-34</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-54</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55+</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The education differences are worth noting. We can only offer some behavioral assumptions that may be driving the spread here. A variety of factors such as employment, income, and cultural interests are likely causal elements in these differences. We caution readers from drawing any correlations between these data points – meaning they should not infer that more men are Republicans or more Republicans have less education.

If we probe these two data sets, we can offer two insights into who uses Facebook locally. Increasingly, more users are older – a trend that matches national data that show the younger generation is dropping off Facebook while older generations adopt it. In addition, we can see evidence that a greater number of Facebook users in these markets have less education.

That said, Facebook still remains the dominant platform for most users in this area. In fact, when we asked people in our focus groups what first came to mind when we said “social media,” most participants listed Facebook as their answer.

This provides some interesting perspective to examine further. Our data suggest that regionally men are heavier users of YouTube, as are Republicans and independents. On the gender scale, national usership figures show that men are in fact bigger users of YouTube – with 68 million more men actively using YouTube each month compared to women.

In 2015, there were approximately 52 million Twitter users nationally. Here we see continued mirrors of national trends with Twitter usership among young people – likely part of the above-mentioned trend away from Facebook as the older generation’s use grows exponentially. Other variances such as Twitter’s use for real-time news may be factors in this – although we did not explore user rationale.

Among the users under 35 years old, Twitter adoption fairly closely matches the 22% usership nationally among that age group.
LinkedIn usage is probably the least surprising, as it tends to be used by an older, more educated demographic given its focus on professional networking and the white-collar sector. But the notable gender difference highlights that LinkedIn is used among men more than women.

It’s important to counsel here that we don’t draw too many conclusions about platform use. This is largely because our data didn’t ask why various subgroups are using each platform – or for what purposes. We share its usership to help create a clearer picture of what forums the local population is using, and to introduce the reality that each demographic will have unique attitudes about different channels for sharing social content.

**SOCIAL MEDIA BEHAVIORS**

We were highly interested in taking stock of how much users posted, commented, and interacted through social media. Such data are important as they help us analyze if, for example, infrequent users have different biases towards posts compared to regular users. (It also allows us to control for absentee users – those who self-identify as social media users but rarely or never use it.)

As a first step, we wanted to establish a baseline of population usership. We looked at how frequently users shared, posted, or commented on various social media channels.

**HOW MUCH TIME do you spend on social media each day?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONSES</th>
<th>OREGON</th>
<th>PUGET SOUND</th>
<th>TOTAL (BOTH MARKETS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 15 minutes</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 to 30 minutes</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 minutes to 1 hour</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One to two hours</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two to three hours</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than three hours</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DO YOU SPEND MORE or LESS TIME using social media compared to OTHER INFORMATION SOURCES, such as TV news, newspapers, etc.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONSES</th>
<th>OREGON</th>
<th>PUGET SOUND</th>
<th>TOTAL (BOTH MARKETS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More time</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less time</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the same</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**HOW OFTEN do you share, post, or comment on social media?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONSES</th>
<th>OREGON</th>
<th>PUGET SOUND</th>
<th>TOTAL (BOTH MARKETS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Once a day</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several times a week</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several times a month</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely or never</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**COMPARSED TO OTHERS you know, do you spend more time on social media, less time, or about the same?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONSES</th>
<th>OREGON</th>
<th>PUGET SOUND</th>
<th>TOTAL (BOTH MARKETS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More time</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less time</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the same</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
First, readers should make note that among the 80% of the population using social media, a third of those say they rarely use it. This is important to consider as we analyze these findings further.

Not surprisingly, we saw some usership habits that fell into some assumed age demographics. The 18-34 year old demographic uses social media more frequently (30% say they use it once or more a day compared to just 12% of 55+). Women (26%) were more likely than men (15%) to use social media one or more times a day. And those with less education (24%) were more frequent users compared to those with a college degree or more (17%).

Of course, locally we see that younger users say they spend more time using social media for news and information compared to TV news or newspapers. According to our polling, 45% of 18-34 year olds use social media compared to 27% of 35-54 year olds and just 14% of those 55 years and older. This matches closely to national trends.

That said, these data point to a major finding in our polling: 51% of social media users in these population centers say they are using social media as much or more compared to traditional information sources. At face value, this provides evidence of a local shift in consumption behaviors for news and current events. But it doesn’t tell us why this is happening – a question we probe further in Section 3.

We also tried to assess how people are using social media to share information, news, and their opinions about current events. In one question, we asked people if they have used social media to share content about “politics” – a term we did not define for participants.

By far the most (14%) said their post was related to “a political figure,” although we did not classify if these posts were of a positive or negative nature. The next most cited topics were “ideological/party differences” (12%), “healthcare” (9%), “local or regional politics” (9%), and “gun control” (7%).

When it comes to those who say they’ve posted something related to politics, we see an intriguing separation into demographic camps. While age group doesn’t seem to be a driving factor in the behavior, one’s gender, political affiliation, and education are clear factors:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In the past year, have you posted anything related to POLITICS on social media?</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GENDER</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POLITICAL AFFILIATION</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent / Other</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDUCATION</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school or less</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College degree +</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIME ON SOCIAL MEDIA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 - 30 minutes</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 min - 1 hour</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 - 2 hours</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On this question, we received a series of open-ended responses as to the nature and topics of their posts.

If we probe deeper into the topics of these posts, we see further delineations along some clear demographic lines. Whereas the 55+ group was most likely to have posted about political figures (17%), younger people were most likely to post on topics related to social issues such as gender politics (11%), LGBTQ equality (10%), or gun control (9%).
Men (18%) were more likely to post about ideological or party differences compared to women (7%). Women (12%) were more likely to post about healthcare compared to men (6%).

Interestingly, those not registered to vote, while a small percentage of our survey sample, held some of the most outsized groupings into specific topic categories. Non-registered voters were the most likely to have posted or commented on party differences (36%), government waste (36%), gun control (19%), or healthcare (17%).

**SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS**

This section serves as a snapshot of who is using social media in the major population centers of the Pacific Northwest. In addition to establishing a baseline of social media usership these population centers, it provides evidence that the Pacific Northwest region fairly closely mirrors national usage trends in platform use, behaviors, and demographic influences.

Our data point to some key conclusions that are useful as you read the following sections.

It’s important that we note that Pacific Northwest social media users are predominantly using these platforms for personal connections with friends, family, and their peer groups. While it can be used to engage those peer groups in discussions about political issues and current events, that is not viewed as a primary function of these media. As such, institutional users should be careful to avoid homogenizing social platforms and treating them as news vehicles.

Moreover, as you continue reading it’s important to remain aware that one’s education, gender, age, and political affiliation seem to have determining effects on how social media is viewed – and used.

- Women (87%) are bigger users of social media compared to men (74%).
- While Facebook remains the dominant platform in the area (90% of social media users report using it), it is falling in usage among younger people while rising among those over 55.

- Young populations under 35 (45%) are using social media more than traditional news sources such as TV news and newspapers – and this mirrors national trends.
- The majority of social media users (61%) in Oregon and the Puget Sound area have not used social media to post political news or content – although men (36%) are slightly more likely than women (29%) to have done so in the past year.
- Nearly one-third of all social media users in these areas say they rarely use it – an important reminder to look deeper at reports of rising usership.

Also, when it comes to political posts, older social media users are talking about party leaders, elected officials, and the overall political system. Younger users are communicating about sociopolitical issues such as civil rights, gender politics, gun control, and economic disparities.
SECTION 2
The Influence of Social Media

“I kind of take social media with a grain of salt. It is like the writing on a bathroom wall. It is not necessarily information, but it is not necessarily misinformation. It is opinions. It is social before it is media.”

Chase, 22 years old
Multnomah County, Oregon
Having taken stock of baseline habits among the region’s social media users, we can better explore a far more complex subject – the influence those habits have on one’s opinions and perceptions.

The journal *Science* recently released a study suggesting that popular fears that social platforms allow us to create our own polarized view of the world may be less significant than first assumed. This research, in which Facebook was heavily involved, relied on users who had self-identified their political views – leading many behavioral scientists to question its findings. Still, there is surprisingly little data in current literature that offers sound, empirical evidence that activity on social media may alter our views on a political or social issue. Even the recent *Science* report recognizes “attempts to examine these questions have been limited by difficulties in measuring news stories’ ideological leanings and measuring exposure,” leaving us with only behavioral or qualitative analysis to draw conclusions as to its impact.

We’ve attempted to close that gap in our research – at least locally. We asked our sample of Northwest social media users if what others share on their social networks had ever changed their opinion on a political issue. Not surprisingly, most respondents were reluctant to admit social media has influenced them.

### Has social media activity on a topic or news story ever changed your opinion on a political issue?

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These findings were the same in both Oregon and the Puget Sound region. However, we do see important nuances among different groups that feel that social media has, in fact, altered their viewpoints on a hypothetical political debate.

Age is a big factor, with 37% of 18-34 year olds saying it had influenced them, versus those 35-54 (25%) and 55+ (16%). Women (30%) were more likely than men (22%) to say it had, and Democrats (31%) more likely than Republicans (22%) or independents (23%).

One might infer from these data that younger people are simply more susceptible to influence since they’re less informed and don’t have as many fixed views. While that may be a factor in their willingness to shift their opinions, it doesn’t address the likeliness that they use social media with much different expectations of the give-and-take of viewpoints and opinions expressed by their peers and social networks.

Two other categories caught our attention – and they begin to shed some light on how a user’s own social media behavior may be one of the defining variables on whether it’s a persuasive medium or not:

**Sharing political content.** Of those users who have posted or shared content on a political topic in the last year, 40% said other people’s posts had helped change their own views. Only 24% of those who had not shared political content agreed that others’ posts had influenced them personally. In fact, 67% of those non-sharers said that social media has never changed their opinion on a political issue.

**Time spent on social media.** Perhaps most interesting is that the amount of time a user spends on social media correlates with the likelihood that other users’ content activity has changed their opinions on a political topic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TIME SPENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA PER DAY</th>
<th>YES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 15 minutes</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 - 30 minutes</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 minutes to 1 hour</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 - 2 hours</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 2 hours</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clearly, spending more time engaging with content through a social media platform improves the odds that it will inform your opinions on a variety of political debates.
So what are the forces at work here?

One may easily conclude that a user’s general attitude towards sharing content is a key indicator of their willingness to read and consider other people’s perspectives. Moreover, the amount of time users spend on social media has some causal connection to a willingness to change their views based on what others share or post.

On the surface, one is tempted to draw two conclusions from these data: Those users who more openly engage on social media through sharing content are also more open to adapting or changing their perspectives on issues – if differing perspectives are offered from their peers. And, the more time one spends on social media the more likely they are to see and be exposed to multiple perspectives, and thus may be more likely to soften their viewpoint.

**IMPACT ON PUBLIC POLICY**

Next, it’s worth examining whether social media actually can influence support and opposition to public policy itself. We looked at this from two perspectives: whether people feel that what they see on social media has played a role in their support for public policy and whether they feel that social media chatter drives elected officials to take certain positions on policy debates.

What our findings indicate is that the public can be swayed to a certain degree by what they see on social media. Moreover, they feel that elected officials in Oregon and Washington are also swayed to a large extent by what constituents, advocacy groups, and others may post and share about public policy debates on social media.

Interestingly, there weren’t many discerning variations in this by age, political affiliation, or ethnicity. Where we do see some distinctions are in who is most influenced by others to support public policy. Women (13%) were almost twice as likely as men (7%) to say social media influenced their support “a lot,” and those with a college and/or graduate degrees (13%) almost twice as likely to say the same compared to those with a high school education (7%).

Once again, we see the starkest differences among those who share content on social media about political topics and those who spend more time using social media. Among those who post content on political issues, 71% say that what others share on social media shapes their views on public policy (versus 56% among those who do not post political content). For those who spend more than 2 hours per day using social media, 71% say what others share or post influences their policy views; that is compared to 54% among those who spend 15 minutes or less per day.
INFLUENCE COMPARISONS: Social Media vs. Civic Engagement

It’s important that we try to rank social media’s influence in the context of other democratic levers. Let's look at the public’s responses to several questions about the impact they believe social media has when compared to other mechanisms of social or political change in our society.

Perhaps most telling from these data are indications that 50% or more of social media users in these markets feel digital sharing has the same or more influence over social and political outcomes as voting, volunteering, and directly supporting a cause. On key behaviors such as voting, this “same impact” perception was greatest among 18-34 year olds, Republicans, minority groups, and those with less education.

This suggests a shift in both people’s acceptance of social media as a viable tool for enacting societal reforms and, most likely, their attitudes about the effectiveness of electoral outcomes in the Pacific Northwest’s current political climate.

We also explored the question of ideological polarization, or “the echo effect” that social media may have on users’ viewpoints based on the ability to self-select both one’s social contacts and shared content.

While we couldn’t utilize the user data or behavioral methodology of the Facebook study, we were interested in understanding if people felt that what they and others see on social media offered only a limited perspective on social and political debate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BEHAVIORS</th>
<th>GREATER IMPACT</th>
<th>SAME IMPACT</th>
<th>LESS IMPACT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voting</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donating to a cause / non-profit</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working for a political campaign</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clearly, the majority of this region’s users feel that social media is, in fact, merely an echo chamber of similar opinions and viewpoints. So, regardless of Facebook’s attempt to empirically analyze users’ exposure to varying perspectives, it would appear that more than half of our users still feel it’s not exactly a stimulating give-and-take debate.

We should question whether that means the activity users are exposed to does, in fact, do more than validate their beliefs – as seen in some of our other data. But we must give credence to the effects that this perception surely has. Clearly users feel that what they and others are exposed to on social media doesn’t challenge their viewpoints – or contribute much meaningful discourse.

“I am pretty sure the approval rating of Congress now is much the same as it was four years ago. Yet we all voted. ... Voting somebody else in to fill somebody’s else’s spot isn’t going to provide any greater outcome than what something on social media might. ... When it comes to certain social issues, we look more at our social group as opposed to the legislative process.”

Leslie, 58 years old; Clark County, Washington
If we break these data down by demographics, we can dissect where these beliefs lie – and draw some conclusions as to what may be causing this view to take hold.

What is interesting is that we again noted a stark contrast between those who say they had posted something on a political issue on social media in the last year, as well as those who say someone else’s social media activity has changed their opinion on an issue or debate.

Of those who say they posted political content, 45% said that they feel social media helps educate and challenge people’s views – compared to 36% who hadn’t posted such content. And, among those who said someone’s social media post or activity changed their opinions, 61% agreed it can influence people’s views compared with 22% who agreed but said it hadn’t necessarily changed their own personal viewpoints.

### The Issues of Authenticity and Trust

In order to diagnose why certain content may be influential, we need to understand how users view the credibility and legitimacy of both social content and its sources.

Let’s consider a popular narrative: that people tend to present idealized and carefully constructed images of themselves online. In 2014, researchers from the University of California in Berkeley published a study about what drives people to “self-present” their lifestyle, values, or affiliations that aren’t entirely accurate.

This behavior has, of course, spilled over into the public’s perceptions about how corporations, political leaders, and civic organizations are presenting themselves on social media. This led us to ask a series of questions testing people’s perceptions of authenticity on what they see on social media.
We contrast that with people’s perceptions of their own authenticity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How AUTHENTIC do you believe COMPANIES and BUSINESS are on social media?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very authentic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat authentic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very authentic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all authentic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We contrast that with people’s perceptions of their own authenticity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How AUTHENTIC are YOU personally on social media?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very authentic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat authentic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very authentic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all authentic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Obviously, people seem to question the authenticity of what others are saying and doing on social media, but feel they themselves are pretty genuine in their own self-presentation. Interestingly, the only major variable in this data was by age group – with far more 18 – 34 year olds admitting they are sometimes “less authentic” in how they present themselves online.

Our exploration of authenticity on social media elevated another fundamental question – the increasing debate over digital self-censorship.

In 2014, the Pew Research Center published an extensive assessment of people’s tendency not to express their opinions about policy issues if they feel their viewpoint is not widely shared among their peers. They dubbed this behavior “the spiral of silence,” and its effects are widely correlated to specific platforms. Facebook tends to be a safer environment with a larger number of ideologically and socially homogenous contacts. Twitter, by contrast, is more open source and anyone can openly challenge your beliefs.

We looked at this behavior in our polling:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you agree with the following statement: “I am likely to CENSOR my PERSONAL OPINIONS on social media.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you agree with the following statement: “I have shared things on social media that I later WISHED I HADN’T.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A full 67% of social media users in our sample said that they censor their opinions in what they post. At face value, one could conclude that there are competing forces at work in the value of social media in allowing more open, public discourse. While it provides a new toolbox for galvanizing people around social and political issues, we struggle to engage in that debate in a truly open, authentic manner.
Millennials (46%) are the most likely to wish they hadn’t shared something on social media compared to those over 55 (17%). Non-white users (47%) are more likely to regret a post compared with white users (30%).

Nearly half (47%) of those who post content about a political issue say they have regretted a post on social media — compared to only 25% of those who don’t share political news and opinions. This may suggest that such political content isn’t well received by peers.

As one might expect, the user’s age, education, and ethnicity are primary drivers — with most other demographic groups having even patterns of this censorship. Older people are slightly more likely to censor themselves — perhaps because they have the experience to understand the potential repercussions of saying something unpopular with their peers. Whites (69%) are more likely than non-whites (56%) to say they have moderated their views in what they post.

So why is the discussion over authenticity relevant to how social media influences public discourse? It gets to the issue of trust — and therein lies one of the keys to analyzing how effective we can be with using social media to shape public attitudes and perceptions.

When asked which two institutions they trust most on social media, 56% said their family and friends, 31% said media outlets, 20% said universities and colleges, and a full 19% said they didn’t know.

**THE PACE OF INFLUENCE: The Speed of Sharing vs. Changing Our Views**

It is often said that one of the many dangers of our digital media revolution is the pace at which information, commentary, and opinions are now shared. Many theorize that social media drives us to skim the surface of complex social and political debate rather than carefully analyze the complexities of causes and effects driving major societal challenges.

There are numerous case studies on how the speed and reach of our commentary can be damaging — both to the broader public discourse and to personal reputations. Whether it’s the voracity of the pile on when we see something others deem offensive, or the degradation of party politics into a digital “trolling match,” there are plenty of arguments to support such a conclusion.

“Political discourse rarely benefits from templates and routines. It becomes most valuable when it involves careful deliberation, an attention to detail and subtle and open-ended critical thought – the kinds of things that social media tends to frustrate rather than promote.”

Nicholas Carr
*How Social Media Is Ruining Politics*
August 2015

One would assume that this rapidity would transfer itself into the speed of digital influence — the pace at which we make decisions or form opinions. If we have immediate access to everyone’s perspectives through digital media, wouldn’t we arrive at our conclusions faster?

This became a bit of an unexpected area of exploration during the course of our work on this project. Once we set aside the quantitative data and began testing our theories in focus groups, we saw that the speed at which social media changes perspectives has many nuances. We have tried to peel back those layers.

This was most evident when testing social media’s role in influencing major social issues such as marriage equality, racism, wage equality, and gender discrimination.

In our focus groups, we witnessed evidence that the rapid expansion of social media use hasn’t necessary transformed people’s views on social issues at the same pace. Instead, it has played a fairly significant role in
allowing people to evolve their beliefs slowly. This seems to happen in large part because users are suddenly able to see things about their peers – personal values, ideas, and opinions – that were not previously evident to them.

One particular moment stands out that illuminates how this effect occurs. In one focus group, a self-identified conservative woman from the Portland area said this about her shifting views on the legalization of gay marriage:

“I think it is who I am seeing it from. I come from a very conservative background, but I have friends who are gay who have gotten married. While I may not fully agree with it, they have that freedom. It is because I know them and I’ve known them for so long. Seeing it from [their] point of view is what softened it for me.”

We saw similar testimonials of this shift in perspective on social media’s impact on the issue of police brutality and racial profiling. In Seattle, many white participants in one of our focus group agreed that social media was a determining factor in bringing to light the reality of law enforcement discrimination – an issue that many said they hadn’t really seen before it was recorded and distributed online.

One participant summarized this by stating: “[Social media] sheds light on things that otherwise people wouldn’t see.”

We are left with a juxtaposition between the speed at which information can be shared through social media and the speed at which it has substantive influence over creating informed public discourse.

For all that is said about the damaging pace at which we can disseminate our views online, the lasting influence of our shared content occurs over many years. Perhaps we are truly evolving our perspectives as we are able to see more debates through the eyes of people who are, in many ways, not like us.
SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

In this section, we can summarize a core set of conclusions that illustrate several important takeaways about social media’s influence. While we lack empirical data that proves social media polarizes people’s views on political or social issues, there is a clear perception that what one sees on social media tends to offer a limited perspective.

- Social media users in the Pacific Northwest feel constrained in voicing their true opinions or beliefs online – and feel that others, such as corporations and elected officials, are using social media to project a controlled image or message.
- The truest impact of social media discourse on social and political topics is much more gradual than the speed at which one’s opinions can be shared. Seeing opposing viewpoints through the eyes of one’s digital social network may be the greatest value in altering their viewpoint over time.
- Younger users are more likely to see social media as an effective way to educate others and challenge viewpoints – with 37% of 18-34 year olds saying it had changed their opinion of an issue or debate.
- Social media activity strongly influences local support for public policy in the Northwest – with 58% of users saying that what others say or post impact their views. And this is most prominent among women and those with a college education.

In addition, it is clear that younger people’s opinions on political issues are more likely to change based on the activities, commentary, and posts from within their social networks. This should not infer ignorance or a shallow understanding of the debates, but rather acceptance of these media as reputable sources of shared content that allow them to access multiple viewpoints and evolve their thinking.

We can make this connection in part based on the fact that younger people are most likely to view social media as a way to help educate and challenge people’s views – including their own.

In short, it appears that millennials view social media as part of a broad mix of information sources that influence their views. Older generations are more likely to discount such discourse in deference to more traditional news forums.

This is a topic we explore further in the next section.
SECTION 3
Social Media and “The News”

“I wouldn’t say I’m better informed. I would say I just have more information – a wider variety of it.”

Andrea
30 years old
Clackamas County, Oregon
No question, social media has dramatically reshaped the landscape of the American news media. The social media industry has given every individual, political figure, and civic institution the power to build its own network of targeted communications channels. It has exerted enormous pressure on news outlets, reporters, editors, and publishers to adapt to an era where everyone can report.

There is certainly evidence that more of us are relying on our social media feeds to keep up with daily coverage on everything from politics to popular culture. There is the previously mentioned report on the year-to-year increases in people’s use of Facebook and Twitter as their primary news channels. There is a 2014 study from the Pew Research Center that made headlines for its findings that approximately one-third of Americans now use Facebook as a news source.

Nationally, numerous studies cite evidence that social media is a force in the delivery of information. The dissemination of “the news” is no exception.

Yet these same studies also illuminate weaknesses in the theory that social media is a go-to news channel. Among Facebook users, only 22% of them feel it’s “a useful way to get news,” and a full 73% said they only encountered a news report “while using it for other purposes” (Pew 2014). This begins to highlight an incidental, if not entirely accidental, consumption of news and reporting through social media.

As we mentioned previously, our polling sample offers a mixed view of whether social media is viewed as a news source in the Pacific Northwest. In our polling in both Oregon and the Puget Sound region, 43% of social media users agreed that it is where they get “most news about what’s going on” locally, and 56% said it was not.

In our minds, at issue isn’t whether people get news from social media; it’s how do they value the news and information that they are exposed to on those platforms? While we don’t dispute this sea change in our ability to access news, we remain curious as to what effects all these shifts are having on everything from the quality of modern journalism to the integration of social media into the editorial process itself.

Is the rise of social media improving news coverage and reporting? How much does social media activity drive the editorial agenda across the Fourth Estate? Are we better informed as a result of citizen journalism expanding our view of underreported issues?

These are difficult questions that many thought leaders have attempted to answer in recent years. Our focus here is to augment those insights with some localized analysis.


We mentioned in our introduction that there are difficulties in conducting research of this nature given the elasticity of how the public defines “news,” “the news media,” and all of the jargon now used to identify social content. Add to this the complexity of defining the lines between peer-to-peer news and mainstream media using social platforms to publish their reporting. Today, news organizations, reporters, editorial commentators, and media personalities are all using social channels to share content — including their own personal commentary.

But how much of it is news from a reputable source, how much is a person’s first hand account, and what is merely the normalization of sharing our opinions? Even the existing national data face conflicts with whether people distinguish between someone’s personal commentary on social media and journalistic use of social platforms to disseminate news.

At its heart, this appears to be the major flaw in most of the literature we hear about regarding social media as an emerging news platform. The Pew Center’s Amy Mitchell, the researcher behind much of the recent data on this topic, recently commented that “the proliferation in the number of news providers and options for ways to connect to them has also meant a proliferation in ways to think about and define news.”

In our view, there are several layers to this expanding definition of what constitutes news in the era of social media that merit careful consideration.
The first is how an individual’s (or an organization’s) routine social media activity itself becomes news. One can think of myriad examples of this in the political context. But perhaps a salient example of this is the recent story of Justine Sacco, whose social media comments about AIDS ended up being reported on everything from CNN to editorials in The New York Times. Another is comedian Trevor Noah’s posts about gender and religion on social media. Both cases raised the specter of how quickly social media activity itself becomes the focus of news coverage in the mainstream. (Both were later the subject of analyses of how critiques of racial privilege and differing cultural perspectives about racial narratives can breakdown quickly on social media.)

The second is how the public’s discourse about topics, events, and issues on social media begins to shape how the mainstream news media covers them. This particular debate is timely given the measurable effects of cell phone video, which can become the catalyst for news coverage itself. Pew’s previously cited 2014 study found that “14% of social media users posted their own photos of news events to a social networking site, while 12% had posted videos.”

Obviously, this has remained a critical factor in mainstream news outlets’ recent coverage of both police shootings and the civic unrest that resulted. (Note: We go into this particular topic in greater depth in Section 5: Diversity and Social Media on page 42).

There are a number of ways to explore social media’s influence on editorial decision-making in today’s newsrooms. That said, we are most interested in offering some insight into how the public perceives that influence is steering the mainstream news agenda.

### Influencing The Fourth Estate: How Social Media Shapes What Is Reported

First, we need to establish whether the public feels that social media activity at the local level is somehow influencing what media outlets in the Pacific Northwest are reporting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In the Pacific Northwest, how much impact does what people say or post on social media have on what’s REPORTED in the news?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you believe social media has a greater impact, the same, or less impact on BRINGING ABOUT CHANGE than “traditional journalism” (TV, print, etc.)?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greater impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What’s interesting is that the public has mixed emotions about what the impacts are that social media has had on the Fourth Estate.

Surprisingly, this doesn’t seem to be affected by age, gender, political affiliation, education or one’s ethnicity. One may assume that younger populations would weigh social media’s influence much more heavily, yet 62% of 18-34 year olds feel that social media impacts what’s reported in the news media – which matches the 62% of 35-54 year olds and 59% of those 55 years old or more.

We were curious to test if the recent events around police shootings and race relations in the U.S. had created a difference of opinion around the effectiveness of social media in bringing about social and political change. On the question of social media’s influence when compared to traditional news media, we found that whites (65%) and non-whites (70%) were fairly close in their belief that it has the same or greater impact on advancing needed societal changes compared to traditional forms of journalism.
We were also interested in understanding if people felt that social media was improving the integrity of what’s being reported by today’s news media.

Here our data seems to validate the national data, which indicate public reservations about how much social media is influencing today’s mainstream media narrative. Whereas some demographic groups have mixed views on this, many lean more heavily on the view that it’s having negative effects on news organizations.

Here is a look at the demographic groups who feel that social media makes journalism better:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social media makes journalism BETTER</th>
<th>18-34 yrs. old</th>
<th>35-54 yrs. old</th>
<th>55+ yrs old</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEMOCRAT</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REPUBLICAN</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDEPENDENT/OTHER</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEN</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOMEN</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This particular question was a frequent discussion in our focus groups, with mixed feelings about the influence of popular social media activity on journalism. As one participant put it: “Everyone is still trying to be first. And social media has just made that desire even more sensational.”

This closely mirrors recent Gallup data that show the public’s faith in the U.S. news media has steadily declined since the early 1990s. Their polling from September 2015 show that trust in the mass media has fallen to 40% from a high of 55% in 1999. Interestingly, this trust is lowest among the younger generation. While 45% of those over 50 said they trust the U.S. news media “a great deal or fair amount,” only 36% of 18 to 49 year olds did so.

**Millennials vs. Traditional News**

In 2014 we released a similar report exploring the influence of Generation Y – the so-called “millennial” generation – on politics in the Pacific Northwest. We’d be remiss if we didn’t address one of the great questions many people have about this increasingly large and influential population – do they even read the news?

There’s some data that help us draw a correlation between what’s occurring among the general population and how this rising generation is both accessing and processing news about current events.
Why are we interested in understanding intergenerational differences of social media use? It remains of vital importance. One can logically predict that the existing patterns of media consumption among the younger population will dramatically alter effective methods of information and communications for the next several decades.

The problem is that we often approach this question by looking at how millennials get their information. While this allows us to understand the shift occurring in media platform preferences, it doesn’t address a fundamental question: does the accessibility and visibility of “news” on social media somehow increase news consumption among younger generations?

Historically, younger adults have always followed national news less closely than older adults. If we look back at annual news consumption rates from 1996 – 2012, national data show us that people under 30 are far less likely to closely follow news about politics and events in the nation’s capital.

A better question would be does the accessibility and visibility of “news” on social media somehow increase millennial readership? There’s no empirical data that suggest that is the case.

In our polling we can only show this is still a bit of a grey area. Only 7% of millennials in our polling said that “news” was the most important reason for using social media. But this was the identical response rate as Gen X (9%) and Boomers (6%).

But it’s also not the least relevant reason for using social media. Only 7% of millennials said getting or following news on social media was the least important to them. That was reserved for “gaming” (40%) and “shopping” (19%).

When asked if social media is how they get most of their news about what’s happening in the community, 55% of millennials agreed and 43% disagreed. This highlights some differences with older generations. Not surprisingly, 52% of Boomers in our survey “strongly disagreed” with that statement.

Nationally, there are recent reports that elevate the intergenerational differences in how we consume news – and specifically political news. A 2015 online survey of Internet users conducted by the Pew Research Center found that 61% of millennials say they get “political news” from Facebook. This is contrasted with 37% who rely on local TV. These two numbers are precisely the opposite among Baby Boomers.

“...I can’t really remember a time before the Internet. You have to wade through the information, and yes, you’re bombarded with a lot. You could make the argument that we’re having to assert our voices more to find what you really believe in. I would say those of us that grew up with [social media] are better at swimming through lots of information. We’re just not as good at paying attention to one single topic.”

Josh, 25 years old
Multnomah County, Oregon
Add to this our previous profile of this generation's migration off of Facebook and the data begin to elevate more questions about the long-term viability of the platform as a political news source.

The millennials in our survey didn’t show an outsized difference in their feelings that social media was somehow a more effective vehicle for driving people to action compared to traditional forms of journalism such as TV and newspapers. Across all age demographics, roughly a third of participants felt that social media was having a “greater” or “the same” impact as traditional news.

If we set aside the fact that millennials see more political news on social media than they do on TV or in newspapers, it begins to feel futile to draw any hard conclusions about whether social media is really changing this generation’s news consumption.

Simply put, the population under 35 has always had lower news consumption rates; the data don’t seem to suggest that is changing simply because what they do see they see on a social channel.

**SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS**

We can offer several key findings about how the public views social media’s influence on mainstream news – and how today’s news is being consumed. Overall, the social media users we polled feel that the activity on these networks has a high degree of influence over the public’s discourse about current events – in some cases, as much as or more than traditional news outlets’ reporting.

However, the public feels that social media “chatter” has clear sway over what gets reported on TV, newspapers, and in the mainstream media.

People feel conflicted over whether social media improves the quality and integrity of journalism. That said, a full 40% feel that social media is making journalism today worse. This may explain the data published by Pew in the run up to the 2014 mid-term elections that found 26% of voters say that the information they get directly from a political figure’s social networking site is more reliable than what they get from traditional news organizations.

Lastly, it’s true that millennials and younger generations will continue to see more political and current events news on social media compared to traditional media. This does not, however, mean that their consumption of news is itself changing as a result of having these platforms available for discourse and debate.
SECTION 4

Social Media and Politics

“You’re never going to change anybody’s mind by posting your opinions. But it does help to get to know them better as a person, to know where they are coming from.”

Louis, 46 years old
Pierce County, Washington
In an August 2015 essay published in *Politico*, author Nicholas Carr delivered a scathing assessment of social media’s detrimental influence on American political discourse. His thesis was simple: Social media is ruining politics in the United States.

When applied to political discourse, he claims, social media is “inspiring superficiality rather than depth.”

Carr even claims that companies such as Facebook and Twitter are in many ways corporate media giants themselves, and increasingly more totalitarian than old school “big media.” Now, he claims, they can both regulate what we see, but also regulate our responses through algorithms and carefully mined real-time data that filters everything we don’t want to see.

These questions offer us a good place to start a dissection of social media’s influence over politics today. Does social media improve our participation in electoral politics? Or is it leading to the illusion that we are more engaged when in fact public political discourse is more polarized than ever?

While we can’t prove or disprove Carr’s qualitative arguments, his thesis isn’t intended to offer empirical evidence of cause and effect. We can, however, analyze his rebuke of social media’s negative influence by looking back at several previously examined questions – and doing so by political affiliation.

This allows us to create a profile of specific voter views on the role social media plays in both our discourse and the political process in their communities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How much influence does social media have over your support for PUBLIC POLICY?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEMOCRATS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not much / none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REPUBLICANS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not much / none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDEPENDENTS / OTHERS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not much / none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have you POSTED anything related to POLITICS on social media in the last year?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEMOCRATS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REPUBLICANS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDEPENDENTS / OTHERS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All this does is provide a bit of a political view on our data. There are clearly some variations in how politically affiliated groups view social media in terms of influence and utility.

At face value, Democrats express more willingness to change their views on issues based on what they see on social media. Republicans seem less likely to engage by posting on political issues or expressing their political opinions. Independents and non-affiliated voters appear less convinced that engaging on social media is more effective than direct activism through a campaign.
Across the board, however, these groups feel that what elected officials hear about or see on social media from constituents has influence over the positions they take on certain policy debates.

This may be in part the general impression that social media has become a place where political interest groups share their views and urge voters to take action in support of policy agendas. Or it could simply be that they feel politicians are using social media more to engage with the electorate through Facebook town halls and other digital forums.

Locally, Democrats and Republicans may feel that social media activity has a greater influence over political leaders compared to independents in part because their parties control the political debate in Oregon and Washington.

Let’s also look at a key question from our polling: How much impact does what people say or post on social media in the Pacific Northwest have on political movements and advocacy groups?

Among those who use social media, 60% said that it has influence over the local political movements and the groups engaged in advancing a political agenda. Locally, Democrats (66%) hold this view more than Republicans (58%) and independents (57%). People with at least a college education (67%) hold this view more than those with some college (56%) and even more than those with only a high school education or less (50%).

All of this forces us to return to the question of “the echo effect,” the theory that what we encounter in our self-selected, personalized social media worlds only reinforces our own beliefs.

So why might these differences exist along political lines? We first need to accept the realities of the Northwest political landscape. Part of the reasons many Republican and conservative-minded social media users may attribute less value to social media at the local level is that they are outnumbered. For example, with only 22% of voters in the tri-county Portland metro area registered as Republicans, they are likely to feel that their peer group doesn’t have as much sway.

Of course, a competing argument can be made that social media has actually improved American politics.

According to data gathered by the Pew Research Center (2012), 66% of U.S. social media users have used it for civic or politically related activity. In addition, this national data tells us that 35% have used social networking sites to encourage others to vote, 34% have posted their own thoughts on political and social issues, 31% have encouraged others to take action on a political or social issue, and 21% belong to a social media group directly involved in a political or social issue.

Around the world, one can’t argue that social media has been at the center of major events in recent years. The “Arab Spring” stands out as the foremost case study in how geopolitical instability and revolution both begin and are managed through digital platforms such as Twitter. This claim does, however, have challenges and raises questions about how much social media contributes to political uprising and pro-democracy demonstrations.

In American politics, social media is often relegated to an accountability platform. Social media use has ensnared politicians in career-ending situations (see Anthony Weiner). But it has also become widely used to build
relationships directly with voters. Recently, Twitter has created ways for voters to donate money directly to political candidates.

None of this necessarily refutes Carr’s claims of the decline of American politics. But it offers some insights into how social media users in this region view its effectiveness in the political process.

ACTIVISM ON SOCIAL MEDIA:
The Issue of Political ‘Slacktivism’

One of the surprising findings in our research was the degree to which social media users feel that their activity has as much or a greater impact as voting, volunteering, or supporting a cause or campaign. How is it that we’ve come to feel that a “Like” or a “Tweet” equates to casting a ballot, walking a precinct for a candidate, or marching in support of a social or political cause?

Our findings on this topic raise several important questions:

Does what we post on social media actually advance sociopolitical causes? Can we influence our elected officials and party leaders to address challenges by sharing our opinions on a social platform? Does a groundswell of social activism on Facebook or Twitter directly translate into action in our legislatures or in Congress?

Based on our data one would deduce that, at least locally, social media users do feel they are making a difference by advocating through their networks. In reality, there is little evidence to suggest that this is true. In fact, it may be where the public’s perception of the value of social media diverges from its actual effectiveness.

Interestingly, the timing of the U.S. Supreme Court’s recent ruling on the constitutionality of same-sex marriage coincided with our examination of this topic. It therefore offered us a unique opportunity to examine the participation in political activism on social media.

You may recall there was much attention given to Facebook’s rainbow flag icons that became visible on user profiles after the ruling was announced. What caught our attention was that, while well intentioned as a sign of support for friends and family, most social media activity seemed to occur long after the public’s ability to make much of a difference in the debate.

So, we are forced to look at this in two ways: Does so-called digital tokenism create a kind of “normalization” effect around issues such as gay marriage, gender equality, and climate change? That may be its lasting influence, which can, in turn, lead others to assume that popular opinion has settled a debate. The counter to this is that it may also lead to false perceptions that this normalization of support means the issue requires little proactive contributions to the cause or campaign.

In 2013, a group of researchers published the findings of a behavioral study on this question in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. By testing people’s willingness to take measurable action towards a political or social cause, they were able to identify a conundrum linked back to one of the cognitive effects of social media activity.

In short, they found that public displays of “digital tokenism” — what they deem as slacktivism — actually
reduces our willingness to change behavior, donate, volunteer, or make other tangible contributions to ensure a political outcome.

The researchers point to a key determinant in this trend. Social media posts provide a socially visible forum for us to demonstrate action. As such, that act of digital tokenism satisfies our motives for engagement — and leads to further inaction. In fact, their behavioral studies found that minimizing your displays of support through forums like social media actually increases your civic actions through meaningful contributions towards a concrete outcome.

This gets to a key question that we explored in our focus groups. We wanted to understand for those people who say they post their opinions online, what they are expecting to happen as a result. Do they think it has some effect? Is it done to align themselves with a popular movement or cause?

We heard a variety of mixed perspectives on this behavior. One participant said that she felt that showing her support for issues gave her “a sense of belonging.” Another participant said that he thinks it’s empowering for people to think that they are somehow getting people to see something they haven’t previously seen — although he questioned how often what people think is new is actually new.

**SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS**

Despite Carr’s sobering assessment of social media’s eroding effect on politics in America, the question of its influence requires a more thoughtful assessment of its pros and its cons.

True, popular perception creates the impression that our new social media culture makes politicians and elected officials pander to the sensational. But in our view, this seems to be relegated to the national stage. In the Northwest, things look different — and we should be careful to avoid injecting what happens on the presidential campaign trail as being a reflection of what’s occurring in Oregon and Washington.

- The political party you identify with makes a difference in how you view the “echo effect” of social media. Democrats feel that social media is a forum for give and take, while Republicans and independent voters feel more that it’s an echo chamber of likeminded opinions.
- Users feel that voter activity and commentary on social media has a fairly sizable influence on the positions our local political leaders take on specific policies.
- Roughly a quarter of users feel that social media has at some point changed their views on a political debate — and this appears less likely if you’re a Republican or independent voter living in the major population areas in Oregon and the Puget Sound.
- Still, behavioral science tells us that showing support for a policy or aligning yourself with a political cause on social media dramatically alters the likelihood that you will take additional steps to advance it. In truth, we tend to share our political views with our friends in lieu of real grassroots advocacy, donating, or volunteering to help change the current political system.

The issue of politics and social media is one that requires us to address the context of one’s geography. In the U.S., the use of social media as a political engagement tool is very different than if you live in Iran or China. We can dispute Carr’s thesis outside the confines of American politics. It’s influence and role in challenging authoritarian regimes and driving pro-democracy movements around the world is worth remembering.

Regardless, this remains a critical topic for further study. If social media actually steers us away from civic engagement behaviors, as behavioral research suggests, then Carr’s thesis may raise the specter of an erosion in American political discourse as a result of our increasingly individualized preferences for passive digital advocacy.
“I see a lot of the police stuff lately. I’ve just been blown away. Are you kidding? Just being able to see that stuff. It has changed my perspective. I’ve had friends that are different races tell me their own personal experiences, but then I’ll think ‘yeah, ok.’ ... I never would have imaged that, but it’s true.”

Jill, 50 years old
Snohomish County, Washington
As with any media, who you are influences how and why you use social media.

Communications professionals and others interested in social media behaviors should be careful not to apply a broad brush to the public’s use of social media. Indeed, social media is not one size fits all – and this is increasingly evident in the divergent uses among different racial and ethnic groups in the Pacific Northwest.

A recent survey conducted by the National Journal found sizable differences in the issues discussed on social media by white vs. non-white users. Their data found that in addition to the fact that most users’ activity is with people who live in their own communities, non-white users were significantly more likely to post about issues related to education, crime, and public safety compared to whites.

A person’s race remains a critical factor in how social media may or may not influence perceptions of current events. People from different racial groups will have unique expectations about how information is portrayed – both in the social and mainstream media contexts.

How does race impact one’s use of social media? How do different racial groups perceive public discourse about social and political issues on social media? This is an enormously under-studied and unexplored subject. It requires further investment for researchers to examine it more closely.

We counsel our readers away from drawing conclusive answers about social media use among specific racial and ethnic groups based on our polling. As previously mentioned, we faced limitations in this area. The parameters of our analysis constrain the discussion of diversity and offer a “white” and “non-white” survey sample.

While this is limiting, we still were able to glean some insights worth pointing out. Doing so helps to elevate critical areas for further examination and analysis.

Race and Digital Accessibility

The topic of race and social media use requires us to address three critical topics: the accessibility of technology among the non-white population; the prevalence of social media as a tool among different racial and ethnic groups; and the reasons why social media is or is not used by these groups.

Recently, there have been reports published on the use of social media by specific demographic groups, particularly Hispanics and African Americans. This is an important topic of study, as it informs how one should approach social media engagement with the two largest minority populations in the U.S.

First, we need to address the question of accessibility. For the last decade, there have been questions raised about “the digital divide” between white and non-white populations. The assumption has always been that social and economic disparities among non-white populations grant less access to technology such as smartphones, tablets, computers, and general Internet devices.

In 2014, The Media Insight Project released a study that found the digital divide among minority groups requires a more sophisticated level of analysis than one might assume.

On the surface, it would appear that the digital divide has closed among several minority groups. Nationally, 70% of African Americans and 65% of Hispanics own a smartphone in the United States. Among these owners, 85% of African Americans and 78% of Hispanics use a smartphone to access news.

It’s important, however, to look further at the diversity of one’s accessibility to the Internet itself. Many minority groups have higher than average dependence on a single device such as a smartphone for web and social media accessibility.

Recent Pew data show that 12% of African Americans and 13% of Hispanics are “smartphone-dependent” – meaning they don’t have alternative devices such as laptops, home computers, or tablets to use for multi-modal accessibility. Just 4% of whites face such circumstances.
Moreover, research shows that smartphone-dependent users are less likely to have a bank account, less likely to have health insurance, and more likely to rent or to live with a friend or family member rather than own their own home.

So while the digital divide may appear to have closed, the socioeconomic conditions underpinning white versus non-white accessibility paints a stark portrait of the gaps that still remain.

Social Media Use by Non-White Racial Groups

In late 2014, Pew collected some of the most telling data on social media use among Hispanic and African American populations in the U.S. That data tell us that there is great variation among social media usership based on race.

Instagram, for example, is used more heavily by Latinos (34%) while Pinterest is used more by whites (32%). While 71% of the white population uses Facebook, only 67% of African Americans do — although it still remains the most widely used social media platform among black users.

Interestingly, whites (21%) use Twitter less than Hispanics (25%) and African Americans (27%).

Locally, we can provide a degree of insight into how this plays out among non-white populations in the Pacific Northwest.

Locally, we see a few variances in use by race — most notably the slight decrease in Facebook use and a statistically relevant increase in the use of Instagram among non-white social media users. Still, these data underscore the importance of race in the context of everything discussed in this report. While platform use between white and non-white users is largely similar, one must realize that race can be a factor in social media users perceptions of content and platform behaviors.

This is particularly important as we examine the use of social media for “news.”

The Media Insight Project’s 2014 report made two important claims: First, that use of digital technologies by the two largest U.S. minority groups (Hispanics and African Americans) is roughly the same as the overall population — indicating a lessening in the perceived digital divide. (We see this locally in our polling.)
Secondly, their study pointed to the perception among these groups that social media has not increased reporting on the issues facing their community. Only 21% of Hispanics and 23% of African Americans say the issues confronting their communities regularly receive mainstream news coverage.

If we use these national data as a starting point, we can look back at our polling to glean some insights at the local level. In fact, even with the generalization of racial groups as a singular category, we begin to see evidence of why these discrepancies may exist in the Pacific Northwest.

So, what is the collective value of social media for the “non-white” population?

These data may underscore an emerging trend that social media in minority communities is seen as allowing users to bypass the filter of traditional media outlets. For underserved and under-represented populations, social media helps build communities where issues about race and ethnicity are discussed openly.

While these findings require more study, it’s worth noting the sizable differences among minority populations in their view of social media and how it is used.

**Race, Citizen Journalism, and News**

In the last few years, we have witnessed some of the most heightened racial tensions since the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Nationally, issues of police brutality, racial profiling, and racial identity have emerged from grassroots movements that are increasingly using cell phones and social media to raise often ignored tensions in our communities.

Virtually everyone now has a camera phone, which has in many ways allowed for non-white groups to document events and issues that can be provided to media outlets. This is perhaps most evident in the recordings and social distribution of videos showing police arrests, violence, and law enforcement shootings of African Americans.

Last year, *The Atlantic* published a story on the issue of racial perspective on police brutality and racial discrimination in the wake of the events in Ferguson, Missouri. In 2013, the shooting of a black teen by a white police officer launched a national debate over race in the U.S. It also became a vehicle for citizens capturing the events – which becomes both a form of evidence and an important element in getting news outlets to report on them.
It seems too simplistic to say that social media has played a defining role in elevating issues of racial discrimination and racial disparities in the United States. Yet, in many ways, social media has indeed provided an outlet unconstrained by the traditional rules of journalism.

With minority groups reporting high levels of distrust in mainstream media, it would seem minority populations are increasingly viewing social media as a way to seek out more first-hand perspectives on local news – particularly that which directly impacts their communities.

In many ways, this use of social media as a movement tool harkens back to our discussion of social media on a more global scale – where it has been shown to be effective in political movements and pro-democracy protests.

No question, social media has provided that method to a certain extent.

It has also provided an outlet for individuals to share their opinions. With non-white populations feeling under- or misrepresented in mainstream coverage, there could be a desire to share personal, more open, unbridled opinions on social media.

A difference in messenger could be another factor in why non-white populations use social media for news more than white populations. If people don’t trust the media, they are less likely to trust the media source itself. With social media, people are getting information from people they know, which can change perspectives.

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

How and why different racial groups use social media remains a critically under-studied field. As the U.S. electorate continues to grow more diverse, this is an area of behavioral communications that merits more investment and research.

In the U.S., African-American, Hispanic, and other racially diverse communities struggle with how the mainstream media covers, reports, and examines issues relevant to their community. As such, many non-white populations are seeking out alternate venues for news and information.

This is not a one-way exchange of information. Increasingly, minority populations view social media as a vehicle for bringing attention to ignored or under-reported issues – from racial profiling to socioeconomic disparities.

In the U.S., non-white populations have historically had lower levels of trust in institutions. But the democratizing effect that social media has can raise awareness of issues that those in the majority may not know about, understand, or believe are relevant to our national public discourse.

“For most white Americans, #hoodies and #handsupdontshoot and the images that have accompanied these hashtags on social media may feel alien and off-putting given their communal contexts and social networks. If perplexed whites want help understanding the present unrest in Ferguson, nearly all will need to travel well beyond their current social circles.”

Robert Jones, “Self-Segregation”
The Atlantic, August 2015
“Conversation is the most human and humanizing thing that we do.”

Sherry Turkle
*The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*
In this report, we’ve covered behavioral science, politics, journalism, and race. No small task, but each offers us a window into the core question – how influential is what we read about and discuss on social media?

Our intent with every one of our reports is to leave you with our insights on enormously complex challenges. Our hope is that our quantitative analysis and commentary on what it means helps both expand people’s perspectives on this topic as well as spark a desire for continued study and exploration.

As strategic communications professionals, we are often asked if social media really changes people’s opinions. The answer is yes – but it takes time. It’s not as immediate as advertising. It’s not as one-sided as media relations. And it’s far more complex to define because it lacks the traditional parameters we use in public relations.

In short, social media is a long-term play. Those that effectively reshape the public’s perceptions through social media may only be successful over the course of many years. But that seems to be its signature value – granting exposure, perspective, sharing, and letting those forces sink in over time. Moreover, its value increases when done by allowing peers to provide windows into differing viewpoints – be that a debate about civil rights or an ideological value.

In this section, we attempt to summarize our takeaways on each of the primary questions we outlined in our introduction.

**QUESTION:**
Does social media effectively shape the public’s perceptions of critical current events?

**Insights:** The short answer here is yes. But how much remains a matter of the issues and the conditions of the dialogue among a user’s social network.

We heard people in our focus groups say that, yes, social media does play a role in shaping their perceptions of things such as gay marriage, gun control, racism, and even ideological differences. But it seems more likely to be just one of a number of ways in which that view evolves. And, such normalization of views and socialization of viewpoints happens over a longer period of time.

This is where the rapid-fire speed of posts, “likes,” and comments may appear to have an outsized impact of shaping public perceptions faster – and with greater force. That does not seem to be true, based on our research.

Of course, there is an old adage about advertising: “Everybody thinks advertising works. Just not on them.” To some extent the same forces are likely at play in how people perceive how much social media activity influences them. From our research, they clearly feel that politicians, reporters, and advocacy groups are heavily influenced by what occurs in these shared forums. They also seem to draw on their own networks when forming opinions about policy debates. Yet, their views on how much what they see changes their own opinion is mixed.

What’s clear is that the public has a fairly sophisticated view of social media – its value, its limitations, and its place in the broader context of public discourse. While more people may be using it, this does not seem to prove a greater willingness among users to alter how they process competing positions on current events.

In fact, it seems social media may be forcing them to question what they see and hear more as they begin to understand information sources today are increasingly complex.

To answer this question, let’s look at a number of ways in which social media does influence public perceptions of political, social, and economic issues:

- Two-thirds of the users we polled say what they see shapes their views on public policy – specifically whether they will support or oppose a given regulatory approach to addressing an issue.
- Social media has the greatest impact in shaping opinions among those who use social media more
frequently – meaning several hours a day. In the Pacific Northwest, this tends to be people under the age of 35, women, those without a college degree, and non-white populations.

- For all its touted benefits of openness and providing voice to the electorate, most of us tend to censor our opinions and beliefs in our digital worlds. Even as our digital selves, we still prefer to fit in and not appear to challenge other viewpoints – whether it’s because it feels futile or we fear the social and professional repercussions of such actions.

Where it doesn’t seem to have as much traction is as a forum for civic dialogue. What is often held up by digital innovators, technologists, and communications professionals as the revolutionary force behind social media’s success appears to be the public’s least supported rationale for using it.

At the end of our analysis, that is perhaps the most concrete counsel we can provide in helping others avoid the mistake of thinking a Facebook page or a Twitter handle is an easy solution to communications or engagement challenges.

**QUESTION:**
Is social media merely an echo chamber of likeminded viewpoints – does it lead to the reinforcement of one’s own beliefs about current social and political debates?

**Insights:** We love this question – in part because it doesn’t have an easy answer. First, communicators, businesses, and elected officials have to ask: *Who am I reaching?*

Based on our research, we know that women and men change their views at different rates based on what they see on their social media feeds. Passive social media users are less likely to change than interactive users. These (and other) variables matter. They tell us that usage data alone is not a very good predictor of attitudinal flexibility. Rather, one’s behaviors on social media are a better predictor of whether or not they can be persuaded by what they see.

Our research indicates that most people feel that social media is a place of like-minded viewpoints. As such, the majority perceive the conversations and discourse on social media as largely reflecting their own – or at the very least, presenting a socially homogenized view of current debates.

Whether this is true from a behavioral science perspective requires much more study – and certainly, a much different methodology than used in our exploration.

Nevertheless, there are some areas where we can draw some conclusions that this perception of an “echo chamber” is having a lasting impact on the kinds of discourse that take place on social media:

- **Censorship remains a major challenge in how people use social media.** There is an increasingly willingness to self-censor one’s views and opinions. Our research illustrated this phenomenon locally – with 67% of users in our Northwest population centers saying they censor themselves on social media.

- **Social media users have mixed feelings about the authenticity of information, image, and news they see on social media.** While much of this is likely relegated to the authenticity of the source of such content, it’s important to remember that 34% of users said they feel other users are not very authentic – and thus, we could deduce that means not very accurate. This opens a door to question how this affects perceptions of the validity and value of the messages shared by inauthentic sources in one’s networks.

- **There is a general reluctance to post and share content that could be deemed controversial by peers.** This is particularly true of political content. Whether that’s a facet of the popular feeling that no one has ever won a political debate on social media, our research illustrates that most people aren’t willing to engage – at least not until they feel their peers are on the same page.
All of this brings us back to the questions of social media as a change agent. Here we see an interesting juxtaposition insofar as people do seem to feel that social media is an effective vehicle for making things happen in society.

Despite all of their reservations about social media’s influence on their perceptions of complex issues, majorities still say that social media has an equal or greater impact in driving needed reforms when compared to voting, charitable donations, volunteering, and active civic and political engagement.

**QUESTION:**

*How is social media changing the ways in which people consume news and gain insight into emerging current events?*

**Insights:** One of the biggest challenges with this particular question is the rapidly changing definition of how we view “news.”

Too often, researchers study and analyze adoption trends – people who self-report that they get news from a platform such as Facebook or Twitter. While this is helpful for establishing a sense of behavioral trends, what’s critical is that we continue to engage the public in a conversation about how we define news in the era of social media.

The lines are increasingly blurred between who is driving the coverage. As mainstream news outlets use social media both to disseminate their reporting and simultaneously use people’s social media activity as sources in their journalism, people likely no longer see “the news” as any one thing.

Has social media changed how we consume news? Yes. Has it changed what news and information we see? Yes. But it’s critical to remember that this hasn’t necessarily changed how much news we are consuming – or why we are consuming it.

Despite all the data showing us that people see news on social media, most people do not view social media as a primary news source. It’s simply part of a larger ecosystem of digital information that they may or may not take the time to sift through.

It is important to look at social media with a historic lens. In the 1950s and 1960s, television changed our need to have events re-enacted for us second-hand by journalists. This elevated newspapers to becoming a more finely-tuned vehicle for dissecting why what we saw on TV occurred. Social media has expanded this behavioral evolution by giving us a way to do what we’ve always felt we should be granted – add our own viewpoints to the narrative.

While they may get some news, follow some media outlets, and see editorial views shared among their network, they view it in the context of a lot of other social content – including friend and family interactions. It’s hard to see how people would view social media as an effective news platform given the sheer volume of competing information (and sources) they see.

The problem with this question is that people often assume that social media is somehow going to replace the role of the newsroom. In fact, it likely makes a stronger case for greater journalistic integrity. With so many more perspectives and the ability to offer first-hand accounts of events, we need to ensure that journalists are in many ways not reporting on social media activity itself, but policing and analyzing the perspectives we all feel compelled to offer.
Of note:

- One-third of social media users in the Pacific Northwest say that social media has a greater impact than traditional journalism.
- 40% say that social media is making today’s journalism worse – a sobering assessment of the influence that social media is having on speed and surface-level analysis.
- While a greater percentage of millennials use social media for news compared to mainstream sources, this hasn’t led to any discernable increase in youth consumption of news content. Rather, it’s merely a shift in location and technology.
- In the Pacific Northwest, all generations — millennials, Gen Xers, and Boomers — evenly agree that social media is still largely a social platform. Very small percentages of each say that getting and following news is their primary reason for using social media.

Still, people feel that social media has a strong influence over what gets reported – and they have mixed feelings about this. While they value benefits such as the accountability embedded in citizen journalism, they seem concerned about the pace at which information gets reported. In fact, it would appear that it’s not users who have short attention spans but the Fourth Estate itself that feels compelled to keep up with the increasing speed at which news and information comes to them.

It is nevertheless important to look at social media with a historic lens. In the 1950s and 1960s, television changed our need to have events re-enacted for us second-hand by journalists. Why explain events when we can watch them for ourselves? This elevated newspapers to becoming a more finely-tuned vehicle for dissecting why what we saw on TV occurred.

Now, social media has expanded this behavioral evolution by giving us a way to do what we’ve always felt we should be granted – a way to add our own viewpoints to the narrative. We should remember that this is what news, politics, and debate is all about.

QUESTION:
What is the public’s perception of social media’s value in public discourse, news, and communication?

Insights: The answers here are mixed.

Certain people feel that social media offers a way to share information that is either under-reported or not visible in the popular discourse. At the same time, they feel that the competition for attention has increased and they have to spend more time filtering information, thinking about sources, and asking questions before they can arrive at a conclusion.

Perhaps most critical is the value of authenticity. Social media users seem to struggle with this. There appears to be a growing perception our elected officials, businesses, and other institutions have caught on to the opportunities afforded by engaging others through social networking. Therefore, we may be experiencing a phase where users increasingly don’t put a lot of stock in what these “brands” are saying or doing on social media.

Many users are willing to engage and follow political figures, news outlets, and corporate brands, but they have high expectations of that engagement – and they quickly detect engagement that is too one-sided or controlled — or worse, inauthentic in its representation of image or information.

For many users, the truest value of social media remains a social one. There is a reason it is called “social media.” Most of the public uses these tools for personal reasons. It’s a way to stay in touch with friends. It’s a way to share personal news and milestones.

For all that is said about social media transforming the way we share news and its transformation of the news industry, the truth is the public does not view it that way – at least not yet.
Stepping Back: Maintaining Your Perspective

In many ways, communications professionals are too often compelled to view public use of social media the way we want them to use it. We learned this lesson ourselves in our very first focus group in Seattle. You can’t mix how we feel people should use social media with how they actually use it. It only leads both sides to fail in engaging with each other.

In truth, people now have access to so much information that they aren’t willing to take what they see at face value. In many ways, getting into social media can create more problems than it solves for a team that isn’t ready to fully embrace its true value in strategic communications.

Public relations teams still have a tendency to measure social’s value quantitatively. This is why so much of the literature out there looks at volume – the number of users a site has, increases and alterations in content preferences, or simply the number of clicks and impressions. But we often fail to overlook the quantity of digital engagements and look at the quality.

To us, this gets at the root of our exploration of social media’s measurable influence. If we get stuck measuring impact by usership statistics, we’ll never be able to assess if that usership translates into social media being a persuasive medium.

As communications strategists, we have to define expectations and desired outcomes when using social media to influence a debate. Moreover, we need to resist the urge to set outsized expectations based on how we feel social media should be used by a general public more interested in personal connection than in political debate.

Social media is part of our increasingly interpretive, editorial, and opinion-oriented views of world events and political debate. But it is important to recognize that social media didn’t create this belief that “we the people” should be part of the narrative in holding institutions accountable. In truth, we have been evolving our views on the news media, journalism, and political discourse since the Watergate scandal.

While imperfect, social media is the new paradigm of modern communication. Fast. Multi-dimensional. Opinionated. Personalized. But social media isn’t the force altering the Fourth Estate or our political process. Primarily a digital gathering space for keeping tabs on family and friends, it is a diverse toolbox we use to express our beliefs, challenge the mainstream, question authority, and, if needed, hold others accountable.

The reason social media has become so talked about among communications professionals is because it provides an easy pathway for so many of the cognitive behaviors we feel make us heard, known, and included in our democracy.

No question, the volume of our discourse has increased – both in tenor and scope. One is forced to question everything – to balance issues of trust and authenticity and arrive at conclusions we may not feel are rooted in the full story, but rather our collective interpretation of events.

That is partly because the debate never stops and the information changes so rapidly.

Many users of social media may simply prefer the comfortable feeling of engaging on social media. There we can keep a close eye on the direction of the debate while keeping a moderately safe distance from actually engaging. Behaviorally speaking, social media is easier. It feels empowering. It is a less risky environment that satisfies our desire for interaction, involvement, and self-expression.

Based on our observations in focus groups, it also appears to be one in which we understand the rules of the game and we know the players involved. It’s a useful forum, but we know it offers us a hyper-polished reality.
What’s most troubling is that people don’t seem to feel that there are many other responsive levers for action, dialogue, or participation in today’s fast-paced landscape. As such, the question our corporate and political leaders should be asking is how we can transfer our digital discourse into far more productive off-line discourse.

How can we take what works about our social media conversations and make that work in the halls of democracy and civics?

It’s time we looked at social media not as the debate itself, but as the seed of debate – one that requires multi-dimensional discussion over many years and in multiple forums if it is to lead us toward substantive outcomes.