DIGITAL ACTIVISM: JESTERS IN THE AGE OF THE INTERNET

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By

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ABSTRACT

We live in an age of rising political cynicism about essentially every major traditional political institution. Yet the advent of the internet has made it easier than ever to get involved in politics – how do these two macro trends interact? To answer this question, this thesis undertook a comparative study of survey respondents from “The Donald,” a community of supporters of President Donald Trump from the popular social media website Reddit, and the general American public as reflected by the American National Election Study (ANES). This thesis attempts to distinguish what makes people on The Donald unique, particularly with respect to their attitudes on the political process, their own political efficacy, and how meaningful they view their online activities to be. It finds that survey respondents had much higher internal political efficacy than the general public, but appear to be drawn to online activism as a result of their unusually low external political efficacy. These sincere-presenting trolls are labelled ‘jesters,’ with significant implications for future political trends in America.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With thanks to those who helped me get here; Niki, Dave, Sonia, and countless others.
# Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction and Background ........................................................................... 1  
  Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 1  
  Background .......................................................................................................................... 3  

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework .................................................................................. 6  
  Political Efficacy .................................................................................................................. 6  
  Movement Politics in the Age of the Internet ...................................................................... 8  
  Trolling as Online Activism ................................................................................................. 12  
  Trolls and Jesters .................................................................................................................. 17  

Chapter Three: Research Questions and Hypotheses ......................................................... 20  
  Research Questions ............................................................................................................. 20  
  Hypotheses .......................................................................................................................... 21  

Chapter Four: Methodology ................................................................................................. 22  
  Data and Methods ............................................................................................................... 22  
  Variables of Note .................................................................................................................. 22  
  Models .................................................................................................................................. 25  
  Limitations ............................................................................................................................ 25  

Chapter Five: Results .......................................................................................................... 28  
  Descriptive Statistics Of The Donald (Responses From Survey) ........................................... 28  
  Empirical Findings: Demographics ...................................................................................... 32  
  Empirical Findings: Internal Political Efficacy ................................................................... 33  
  Empirical Findings: External Political Efficacy ................................................................... 37  
  Empirical Findings: Media Consumption .............................................................................. 45  

Chapter Six: Discussion ....................................................................................................... 53  
  Overview ............................................................................................................................... 53  
  Policy Implications ............................................................................................................... 54  

Chapter Seven: Conclusion ................................................................................................... 58  

Appendix 1: Survey ............................................................................................................... 60  

Appendix 2: Codebook .......................................................................................................... 62  

Notes ..................................................................................................................................... 64  

References ............................................................................................................................. 67
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Internal Political Efficacy Over Time in the U.S. (ANES) .................................................. 7
Figure 2: External Political Efficacy Over Time in the U.S. (ANES) .................................................. 8
Figure 3: A Comparison of Memes From The Donald and The Mueller ........................................... 11
Figure 4: Post From The Donald ......................................................................................................... 15
Figure 5: Other Than Reddit, What Is A News Source You Use Frequently? ........................................ 31
Figure 6: If You Had To Give an Example of "Fake News", What Would It Be? ............................. 32
Figure 7: Internal Political Efficacy for The Donald Users and Trump Voters (ANES) .................. 33
Figure 8: External Political Efficacy for The Donald Users and Trump Voters (ANES) ............... 38

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: How Internal and External Political Efficacy Effects Participation ...................................... 10
Table 2: List of Most Active Reddit Communities for March 2, 2018 .................................................. 16
Table 3: What Is Your Highest Level of Education Obtained? ......................................................... 28
Table 4: Do You Identify as Male or Female? ....................................................................................... 28
Table 5: In Politics, as of Today, [What Party] Do You Consider Yourself? ....................................... 28
Table 6: Thinking Politically and Socially, How Would You Describe Your Own General Outlook? .... 29
Table 7: Do You Live in the United States, or Outside of It? ............................................................... 29
Table 8: Public Officials Don't Care Much What People Like Me Think ......................................... 29
Table 9: Sometimes Politics and Government Seem So Complicated That a Person Like Me Can't Really Understand What's Going On ................................................................. 30
Table 10: People Like Me Don't Have Any Say About What the Government Does ............................. 30
Table 11: How Many Hours Did You Spend Yesterday on Reddit.com? ............................................ 30
Table 12: How Much Of Your Time On Reddit Is Spent Exclusively on The_Donald? .................... 31
Table 13: Do You Think The_Donald Had an Impact on the 2016 Presidential Election? ............... 31
Table 14: Internal Political Efficacy as a Function of Characteristics for The Donald Users and Public ... 35
Table 15: Time Spent on The Donald as a Function of User Characteristics .................................. 37
Table 16: External Political Efficacy as a Function of Characteristics for the Public ......................... 40
Table 17: External Political Efficacy as a Function of Characteristics for The Donald Users .......... 41
Table 18: External Political Efficacy for The Donald Users as a Function of Identifying as Independent 43
Table 19: External Political Efficacy for The Donald Users as a Function of Assessing the Community’s Political Impact ........................................................................................................ 45
Table 20: External Political Efficacy for The Donald Users as a Function of a Fake News Example ...... 47
Table 21: External Political Efficacy for The Donald Users as a Function of Russia as a Fake News Example ................................................................................................................... 48
Table 22: Whether The Donald Users Mentioned Russia as Fake News as a Function of Identifying as Independent ........................................................................................................ 50
Table 23: External Political Efficacy for The Donald Users as a Function of Using Non Traditional Media .................................................................................................................. 52
Table 24: Were Hypotheses Supported by Findings ............................................................................. 53
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Introduction

While the 2016 election was historic for several reasons, this thesis arose out of a desire to understand just one of those phenomena. Namely, that political interest in the 2016 election appeared to be higher than ever¹, and yet traditional means of engagement, specifically through either the Republican or Democratic parties, are, to an unprecedented degree, unpopular. In other words, how did people channel this desire to impact a political process that they clearly felt passionately about? While the answer was not immediately clear at the start of this project, there were hints: digital platforms like Reddit, a highly visited social media website, now offer individuals the chance to congregate online in likeminded communities with little transactional cost.

Of all these Reddit subcommunities, “The Donald” stands out as particularly unique. Created in June 2015 as a home for Reddit users that support President Trump, The Donald has since become a political force unto itself. The Donald has over 300,000 subscribers, and a Forbes report in July 2016 assessed its web presence at “between 30 and 50 million page views per month.”² No surprise then, that FiveThirtyEight called The Donald “the epicenter of Trump fervor on the internet.”³

More than simply being a safe place for Trump supporters online, The Donald has managed to activate – independently of the Trump campaign, and in a largely decentralized manner – it’s clearly enthusiastic membership. For example, during the election, the subreddit “mobilized to comb through the hacked Democratic National Committee emails published on Wikileaks,” and did so with enough professionalism that their findings were pointed to by Wikileaks themselves.⁴ Its messaging also frequently made it beyond Reddit – on a number of occasions, Trump himself
“tweeted out memes and videos that originated on The Donald, and in July he participated in a popular Reddit ‘Ask Me Anything’ discussion, after his team communicated with the moderators.”

All of which is to say that, in an age of clearly declining political participation, The Donald has stood out.

**Background**

Going back decades, American political scientists have warned of an impending democratic deficit. Benjamin Ginsberg, for example, wrote in 1989 about the prospect of a “Post-electoral era” in the United States. Ginsberg’s central assertion was that the ascendancy of “political consultants” had rendered the role of the average voter essentially meaningless. While not all of Ginsberg’s argument has been vindicated – he, for example, posited that the supremacy of the consultant over the voter would diminish the divisiveness of elections – there is clearly merit to rising cynicism on the part of the American electorate. As noted previously, there was ahistorical interest in the 2016 election. However, as the Pew Research Center noted afterwards, only 55.7 percent of the eligible American electorate ultimately voted – continuing the long-term trend of the United States lagging behind its Western peers in voter turnout.

To be fair, voter turnout has been steadily decreasing for decades, across essentially all industrialized economies. It would consequently be incorrect to try to portray this as a uniquely American problem, or one that is attributable to the specific circumstances of the 2016 election. Additionally, declining voter participation is already a heavily covered subject, the intent of this thesis is not to relitigate the various theoretical explanations given to the trend. Rather, this thesis is interested in reconciling how voter participation in the 2016 election continued this long term decline, despite the overwhelming general interest in the day-to-day coverage of both candidates.
One way of reconciling this apparent dichotomy is to investigate other forms of political activism – beyond voting – that the American electorate might have engaged in throughout the 2016 election. This is where communities like The Donald enter: it was a hotbed for pro-Trump messaging throughout the election, mostly through a now-staple of digital communication: memes. In fact, we can extend far beyond simply The Donald: American political discourse has become dominated by the meme. A meme is any content that is propagated virally over the internet and through its dissemination, subject to increasing “derivation and adaption by other….meme creators.” An article published in The Guardian shortly before election day described memes as the new “lingua franca of the 2016 election.” The New Statesman compiled a historical timeline of the 2016 election, told only through various memes.

The dominance of memes throughout American political discourse is not only a now-commonly expressed opinion, it is one which is increasingly supported by emerging research. A 2017 study in Discourse, Context & Media subjected various political memes from the 2016 election to a “Multimodal Discourse Analysis,” and found them to be an effective way of spreading “one’s own political beliefs, attitudes and orientations.” The researchers went on to categorize the creation and dissemination of memes as a new form of participatory politics, one which is facilitated by both its “simplicity,” and also the anonymity inherent to the internet.

Much has already also been written of how Bernie Sanders similarly motivated individuals outside of conventional practices typically relied on by the Democratic Party. In fact, a March 2016 article in The Nation referred to this phenomenon as “Big Organizing.” The thrust of this term was meant to capture the reversal of traditional political organizing, in which campaigns – specifically ones like Bernie Sanders’ – can now empower volunteers to become leaders themselves; essentially “open-source…campaign strategy.”
There is no doubt that Sanders’ campaign succeeded in this venture – perhaps even too much. A small, but extremely vocal, subset of Senator Sanders supporters during the Democratic Primary became notorious for their vehement criticism of Secretary Clinton. These “BernieBros,” as they were pejoratively referred to (a terminology which is itself effectively a meme), attacked the Clinton campaign so intensely that a top Sanders campaign official eventually publicly requested that they “be respectful when people disagree with [them].”¹⁶

A key similarity between both the BernieBros movement and The Donald is their usage of Reddit as a vehicle for their decentralized political organizing. Known as the “front page of the internet,” Reddit is an extremely popular website that functions essentially as a giant messaging board.¹⁷ Each user has the ability to both submit posts, as well as vote up or down those submitted by their peers; this means the site is curated in real time by popular opinion.¹⁸ Reddit is a fertile space for the creation and propagation of memes. Another key feature of Reddit is that users also have the option to self-segregate into subcommunities, centered around some unifying theme. Users can subscribe to any number of subcommunities: this adds popular content from that “subreddit” into their aggregated general feed.¹⁹ Reddit also has a site-wide general feed that combines the most popular content from every subreddit at once; getting content onto this super-feed is an important way for subreddits to demonstrate their importance.

More recently, we have also witnessed the creation of similarly themed political communities on Reddit, such as “The Schulz,” a semi-satirical imitation of The Donald for those who supported candidate Martin Schulz in the 2017 German election.²⁰ There is also The Mueller, a subreddit that arose in support of Special Counsel Robert Mueller. The Mueller, in particular, thrives on using irreverent language, like The Donald, to disseminate their political message throughout Reddit.²¹
Of course, due to Reddit’s inherent anonymity, we know little-to-nothing definitively about those who comprise communities like The Donald, The Mueller, etc. But whoever they are, this thesis believes we should view these individuals as representative of a larger political trend. As skepticism of political institutions and the attractiveness of populism rises, we should expect to not only see additional outsider candidates like President Trump, but also accompanying movements to support them through non-traditional means.
CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Political Efficacy

One way of encapsulating the larger political trends behind declining voter participation are the concepts of internal and external political efficacy. These concepts date back to the 1950s, and refer to two related, but distinct, beliefs that individuals hold with respect to the political process. The first, internal efficacy, is as the name suggests, an assessment of one’s own capacities: “that they are capable of understanding politics and competent enough to participate in political acts such as voting.” Inversely, external efficacy refers to how responsive one believes the system to be to these inputs: whether “the public [can] influence political outcomes…government leaders and institutions.” While these concepts may appear to be slightly nebulous, their relationship to Ginsberg’s earlier discussed hypothesis are surprisingly direct.

In recent years, both observational and experimental studies in the field of political science have found a conclusive link between “exposure to the game frame (termed ‘strategic coverage’) and increased cynicism.” This ‘game frame,’ as the researchers coined it, describes the tendency of the media in recent years to focus on the “strategy, popularity and power of political parties and politicians” – essentially, emphasizing the professionalization of politics that Ginsberg wrote about decades ago. Using a panel of 2,500 web respondents from the Danish Civil Registration System, Rasmus Tue Pedersen (2012), a researcher with the University of Copenhagen, found a significant and negative relationship between both internal and external efficacies and exposure to the ‘game frame’ narrative; though the latter relationship was not robust.

These trends are made particularly pronounced when looking at aggregate responses for the American National Election Studies (ANES) over time. The ANES is a national survey of the U.S. that has administered survey questions prior to and after each presidential election, going
back to 1948. Of the multitude of ANES questions, we are specifically concerned with section 5.B, which is comprised of 3 questions: the first of which assesses internal efficacy, and the latter two of which together measure external efficacy. As the table below shows, the percentage of Americans who agreed with question 5B.1: “Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on,” while highly volatile, has actually declined since 1972. At the aggregate level then, Americans are becoming more confident of their ability to understand politics; though it is also worth highlighting that the majority still lack faith in their internal efficacy.

Figure 1: Internal Political Efficacy Over Time in the U.S. (ANES)

As for the composite external efficacy score, the effect is both more pronounced and extremely negative. Clearly the average voters’ faith in the responsiveness of the system to their inputs has substantially declined, whether this is a product of professionalization of politics and media priming of the process thereof, or other factors. In many respects, this is not unexpected, as assumptions about the corruption and inefficacy of Congress are pervasive in pop culture and political dialogue. But what are we to make of an electorate that is simultaneously more confident
in their own political capabilities, and increasingly cynical about the process’ receptiveness to them?

![Graph: External Political Efficacy Over Time in the U.S.](https://example.com/graph.png)

**Figure 2: External Political Efficacy Over Time in the U.S. (Courtesy of ANES)**

**Movement Politics in the Age of the Internet**

While there is no doubt that the macro attitudinal shifts discussed above have resulted in a myriad of new behaviours, it is the increased presence of online political activism that is of central interest to this thesis. Most importantly, a plethora of research has, to date, confirmed the correlation between internal efficacy and online political activities. For example, Kaye and Johnson’s (2002) study of online respondents during the 1996 presidential election found that individuals with high internal efficacy were more likely to “use political sites.”27 Similarly, Kwan Min Lee’s (2006) study of undergraduate communication students found significant evidence that online activities “increase internal political efficacy.”28 This study also found that certain types of online activities, such as visiting unimpressive or unresponsive “public sector web sites,”29 actually decreased external efficacy. More recently, Joon Kim Byoung (2015) noted a strong
positive correlation between high internal efficacy and using the Internet as an “imperative communication channel to reach elected officials or public servants.”

The relationship between political efficacy and internet usage is further compounded by the capacity of the internet to reduce the cost of activism. Summarizing the general consensus of post-2000 research on this subject, Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (2009) wrote that “the Internet lowers the barriers for collective action because it reduces transaction costs.” It is important to distinguish this feature from how politically engaged individuals may act online – this is a structural observation on how “the technical properties of Internet-mediated communication” have made communication easier than ever before. This means that, whereas previously political organizations could act as gatekeepers to activism by virtue of its entry costs, this is simply no longer the case.

This all adds a significant applied dimension to the theoretical model we use for understanding the individual with “high political efficacy, [and] low trust in government,” or the “engaged grassroots activist.” We expect this individual to generally reject “representative democracy,” and instead “directly participate in politics independent of existing government structures.” Dr. Teodora Gaidyte (2015) also argued that when low external efficacy and high internal efficacy interact, the resulting archetype is in part defined by a rejection of voting – her conceptual framework is summarized in a table below.
Table 1: How Internal and External Political Efficacy Affects Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The dimensions of political efficacy and its meanings</th>
<th>Low internal political efficacy</th>
<th>High internal political efficacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Politics is complicated</td>
<td>• Politics is easily understandable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Politics is boring</td>
<td>• Politics is interesting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Politics is not relevant/important</td>
<td>• Politics is relevant/important</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low external political efficacy</th>
<th>Citizen is not willing to vote or participate in movement politics (demonstrations, protests, boycotts, etc.).</th>
<th>Citizen is not willing to vote, but prefers forms of movement politics.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Citizens have no influence on what the government does</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Government is not responsive to citizens demands</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optional:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Political institutions are not trustworthy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High external political efficacy</th>
<th>Citizen prefers participation in party politics (voting) over movement politics.</th>
<th>Citizen participates both in party and movement politics.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Citizens have an influence on what the government does</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Government is responsive to citizens demands</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optional:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Political institutions are trustworthy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The distinction between movement politics and party politics is one that attempts to capture the fact that “unconventional political participation has become almost as conventional as other forms of political activity.” While party politics refers broadly to all political activism within the confines of traditional institutions – voting, organizing on behalf of an established political party, etc. – movement politics encompasses those activities that exist outside the “electoral cycles,” such as protesting or boycotting. Using data from the European Social Survey, Gaidyte found “that participation in movement politics is nowadays quite common in Western democracies.” At the same time, despite Gaidyte’s efforts to use the concept of movement politics to capture the rise of unconventional activism, she defined involvement in it through what are ultimately conventional activities: having signed a petition, publicly protested, or participated in a boycott.

The difficulty of determining to what extent memes are political activism thus falls into the broader classification problem we have with digital organizing, which is distinguishing between traditional modes of activism ported online, versus new methods of engagement altogether. Too often, it seems contemporary research prioritizes the former – we thus are more likely to think of
signing an online petition as digital activism, rather than sharing a meme on Facebook. Dr. Benita Heiskanen (2017) addressed this point in an article titled “Meme-ing Electoral Participation,” arguing that we should take political memes seriously, as they “penetrate official discourses by carnivalizing them.” They thus stand alone as a unique form of communication, combining fact and culture to “go beyond official, public discourses.”

It is easy to understand why there is a tendency to write off memes as frivolous, contentless forms of communication. They rely in large part on shock value to pierce through the noise of the internet, and they often deviate on the same base structure in what can become a discourse so meta, it is impenetrable to the outsider. Yet, as Heiskanen posited, there is often a strong political undercurrent to many memes on the internet. The capacity of memes to distill complex, nuanced worldviews down to a single image in support of, or in opposition to a candidate also makes them a powerful messaging tool.

Consider the figure below, which contrasts two recent memes: one from The Donald (in support of President Trump) and one from The Mueller (in support of Special Counsel Mueller):

![Figure 3: A Comparison of Memes from The Donald and The Mueller](image)

The default format of this meme (or the top half of the image, which is static) relies on straightforwardly shocking language: the use of “fucking,” as well as the implication that the tweet
is referring to sex. At the same time, the bottom half of each of the memes turns the reader’s expectations on their head. What ‘guys’ want is explicitly political: either to make America great again, or to see further charges by Special Counsel Mueller brought against the Trump campaign. Therefore, the effect of the meme is to argue that those who support the message stand with the silent majority. Furthermore, both memes highlighted above convey contrary political views: one in support of President Trump, one in opposition; yet they do so through an identical narrative structure.

However, even if we accept memes and similar forms of digital communications as a developing frontier in movement-based politics, we still lack a proper explanation as to why the individuals themselves view this activism as meaningful.

**Trolling as Online Activism**

One of the more unexplored elements of the democratization of politics online is that this in turn makes the digital space worth fighting over – in other words, it becomes a winner-take-all space, just like American politics writ large. Jennifer Forestal (2017) captured this point by writing that “we have yet to fully engage with the political dynamics of the communities they form and to study how site architectures might invite or prevent certain kinds of political activity by creating different spaces.” Stockton went on to argue that the importance of digital spaces, alongside their anonymity and low barriers to entry, naturally invites an activity known as “trolling.” Trolls “work to dominate” and disrupt digital discussions – specifically, “for the lulz,” internet terminology meant to convey the irreverent nature of the activity.

The notion of ‘trolls’ is central to any discussion of The Donald, as it has become established wisdom to view many of these supporters of the President online as exactly that: trolls.
Tim Squirrell of the Alt-Right Open Intelligence Initiative has not only identified The Donald as a troll movement, but in fact a composite of many distinct troll movements. This understanding of The Donald as largely a troll movement is echoed in media coverage of the subreddit, from the tech website *Gizmodo*, to mainstream publications like *NBC News* or *New York Magazine*.

A consistent theme across all discussions of trolls is the insincerity that drives them. Folklore scholar Whitney Philips further explored this in her 2015 book, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*, which she based in part on research gathered by “[infiltrating] a group of trolls that was flooding Facebook memorial pages with digital trash.” Philips acknowledged the efficacy of trolls’ tactics, writing that they are “quite skilled at navigating and in fact harnessing the energies created when politics, history, and digital media collide.” In line with previous research, Whitney described the motivation of trolls as essentially one of performance art: “for trolls, exploitation is a leisure activity.” Under this framework, The Donald’s high user activity is driven by the amusement gained from disrupting the larger Reddit platform.

The notion of The Donald as a community of trolls is further complicated by the inflammatory rhetoric the community thrives on. *Vox* referred to The Donald as Reddit’s “most controversial” community; *Vice* summarized it as “full of memes and in-jokes, far right talking points, coded racism, misogyny, homophobia, and Islamophobia.” To support their point, *Vice* cited a number of posted comments from The Donald echoing evidently racist viewpoints – as one example, a user who wrote about African-Americans that “Africa is their society.” However, the moderators of the community also have rules against racism and anti-Semitism, and individual comments are not necessarily indications of a subreddit’s sentiments. At the very least, it is true that The Donald, in line with their troll-like modus operandi, does fully lean into politically
incorrect language. Though while this thesis is hesitant to categorize the community largely as racist, it is in many respects irrelevant to the core investigation either way. The more important object of analysis is disentangling political language meant only to offend, from those users who imitate the rhetoric to legitimately express their views.

Largely speaking, there are two issues with categorizing The Donald as a troll community. The first is that it posits that there is something fundamentally performative about Trump supporters online in a way that apparently is not true for progressive activists. But it would be difficult to argue that conservative communities like The Donald have a monopoly on advancing political views through ironic mediums. This is made evident through a development previously noted: the existence of copycat Reddit subcommunities that exist to advance progressive causes.

There is also a link between trolling and simply the presence of political discourse online. A 2014 study by Lampe et al., which analyzed moderation on the social news site Slashdot, found that “political forums often break down in flame wars and trolling.” There is an obvious self-selection bias at play here that should temper any conclusions we draw: those who debate politics online are almost certainly more passionate than the general internet populace, leading to heightened rhetoric and tensions. And yet, the increased presence of troll-like activity on Slashdot’s political sub-forums would still indicate that, like the success of The Donald and its imitator communities, trolling really is an effective tool for online activists.

The idea of activist trolling is further reinforced by the oftentimes explicit awareness by The Donald users that their intense activity does spread pro-Trump messaging throughout Reddit. One popular narrative structure for posts within the community revolves around a fact or image which ‘would be a shame if it made it to the front page.’ The titling is meant to be ironic, as the shame in question arises from Reddit’s larger, more liberal user base, being forced to see
messaging which challenges their worldview. One highly up-voted post that demonstrates the structure can be seen below:

![Image of a large crowd at an inauguration ceremony]

Figure 4: Post from The Donald

It is also worth examining in greater detail exactly how productive The Donald users are. Earlier, it was discussed how their crowdsourced research of Wikileaks’ was publicly cited by the organization itself. Another compelling proof point: the outsized volume of content The Donald produces relative to almost every other Reddit sub community. Redditlist.com, which maintains a daily rank of subreddits by volume of user participation, frequently has The Donald “as one of the most active subreddits on the entire site.”54 The intensity of The Donald’s userbase is made further explicit by simply comparing the respective subscriber size of each of the top 5 most active subreddits.5

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5 For the day of March 2, 2018.
### Table 2: List of Most Active Reddit Communities for March 2, 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Subscriber Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AskReddit</td>
<td>18,790,280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>3,701,909</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Donald</td>
<td>579,531</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WorldNews</td>
<td>18,338,997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBA</td>
<td>996,922</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In fact, the outsized activity of The Donald as a subreddit forced the administrators of Reddit in early 2017 to tweak the site’s algorithm to no longer include posts from The Donald on its popular “front page,” which by default shows the most popular new posts. While a number of other communities were also affected by the site changes, it was clear that the intent was to target The Donald. This followed previous efforts in 2016 to lessen the number of posts from The Donald that made it to the front page – when that failed, Reddit’s administrators had no choice but to simply cut the community off entirely.

It is also difficult to think of a reason beyond the messaging that The Donald produces that would allow us to categorize engagement on the subreddit as a legitimate form of activism. Frequently throughout the election, posts throughout The Donald pushed users to go vote or volunteer for the Trump campaign. However, unlike other political subreddits, The Donald’s moderators have also tried to avoid becoming just a volunteering network. Rather, they have intentionally emphasized an atmosphere of jokes and memes “out of fear that nuts-and-bolts discussions of phone banking would water down its appeal as an Internet funhouse.”
Despite then the uncertainty of whether spreading memes through The Donald should be classified under movement politics, it at the very least seems likely that The Donald users consider this kind of online behaviour a form of activism unto itself. As a result, we should in fact be explicit about differentiating between trolls who seek to dominate and disrupt online platforms simply for the thrill of it, from those who do so with the explicit intent of monopolizing the platform to spread their political beliefs. Lacking an existing terminology with which to refer to these quasi-troll activists, this thesis will call them *jesters*. The term jester builds off a framework put forward by the cultural critic Jordan Peterson, with respect to the controversial, conservative figure Milo Yiannopoulos [emphasis in bold added]:

*Milo is a classic example, he’s an amazing person. He’s a contradiction, he’s a walking contradiction, you can’t pin that guy down: what is he, half-Jewish, half-English, gay, provocateur, Catholic, who loves black guys, who appeals to American Republicans. What are you going to say about somebody like that? He’s a trickster figure, archetypically speaking. He’s a provocateur, and a comedian. The funny thing about comedians is they’re like jesters in the king’s court – the jester was the only person who could tell the truth, because he was beneath contempt. And that’s the role that comedians and provocateurs play: they’re poking, and poking, and laughing, and making fun.*

57
**Trolls and Jesters**

Jesters thus represent the fusion of trolling as a digital strategy, and activism as a digital behaviour. While they should share all defining features previously associated with the individuals behind movement politics (high internal efficacy, low external efficacy), they will also be defined by their reliance on memes and ironic language to promote their political beliefs through digital platforms like Reddit.

Given this, we should also be able to predict with some certainty what the demographic profile of jesters will look like, even if previous research has not yet been undertaken on The Donald. According to a 2016 Pew Research Center study, 67% of Reddit’s user base is male.\(^{58}\) When restricted to those who use the site for a news-specific purpose, the demographic narrows even further to 71% male.\(^ {59}\) Similarly, while those with a college degree or more made up 42% of general users, they made up 48% of ‘news’ users.\(^ {60}\) Nationally speaking, Trump supporters were less likely to be college graduates: According to Pew Research, “college graduates backed Clinton by a 9-point margin (52%-43%).”\(^ {61}\) Consequently, while it may be tempting to revise downward our expectation of how educated The Donald users are, given how specific and self-motivated our target of interest is, we should still expect them to be largely college-educated.

Since political efficacy varies based on education and gender, the demographics of our respondent group are of core importance to this thesis. Writing in the March 2010 issue of *Sex Roles*, researchers Hilde Coffé and Catherine Bolzendahl found significantly elevated mean political efficacy scores for men, compared to those of women, across 18 industrialized economies.\(^ {62}\) There is similarly a host of research that links higher rates of political efficacy to education levels, such as a Pew Research report from November 2015, which found a 14 percentage point difference between the political efficacy rates of those with post-graduate
degrees, versus those with only a high school diploma.\textsuperscript{63} Given the expected demographics of Reddit activists, we should expect from the onset that they have high internal efficacy. This makes sense: their activism is proof itself that they have a high degree of confidence in their skillset. Summarizing this research, we should expect The Donald users to have high internal efficacy and low external efficacy, and to be male and college educated.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESIS

As movement politics, and specifically online activism, continues to have an increased presence in American politics, it is important to understand exactly what drives the archetype of those who are behind this trend. As previously discussed, there has been little research to date on the attitudinal motivations of ‘trolls’ (specifically the subset of interest this thesis labels jesters) beyond linking political efficacy in general to engaging in online activism. At the same time, political efficacy should function as a sufficiently powerful predictor of engaging in the kinds of online political engagement discussed – making it feasible to create a theoretical profile of the kind of users who congregate on The Donald. Following this, it should be possible to extend these results to make predictions about these activists generally speaking, rather than simply in a pro-Trump context, and with respect to the future political landscape.

Research Questions

R1: Do collected baseline demographics for The Donald users differ substantially from supporters of President Trump nationally?

R2: Does internal and external political efficacy for The Donald users differ substantially from supporters of President Trump nationally?

R3: Does internal or external political efficacy predict respondents’ time spent on The Donald, and their assessment of the platform’s impact?

R4: Does internal or external political efficacy predict respondents’ media consumption?

R5: Does internal or external political efficacy predict respondents’ belief in fake news?
Hypotheses

The first set of hypotheses deal with expected demographic and political attitudes from users of The Donald.

**H$_1$:** The Donald users will be largely male, college educated, Republican, and ideologically conservative.

**H$_2$:** The Donald users will have higher internal efficacy, and lower external efficacy, than comparative Trump supporters.

The second set of hypotheses deal with the relationship between political efficacy, and usage / impressions of The Donald.

**H$_3$:** There is a positive relationship between internal efficacy, and time spent on The Donald / assessment of The Donald’s political impact.

**H$_4$:** There is a negative relationship between external efficacy, and time spent on The Donald / assessment of The Donald’s political impact.

The third set of hypotheses deal with the relationship between political efficacy, and media consumption habits.

**H$_5$:** Among The Donald users, there is a positive relationship between internal efficacy, and willingness to consume non-traditional media sources / having provided an example of fake news.

**H$_6$:** Among The Donald users, there is a negative relationship between external efficacy, and willingness to consume non-traditional media sources / having provided an example of fake news.
CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

Data and Methods

The core analysis of this thesis is based upon two datasets: a control, consisting of baseline covariates for demographics and political efficacy that come from the American National Election Studies (ANES); and the subjects of interests, active users of www.reddit.com/r/the_donald, who were willing to answer a 16 question survey that was advertised to them (see Appendix 1). As discussed in the literature review, the intent of this thesis is twofold: understand the political attitudes of those who support President Trump online and how they view their online political activities, and secondly, attempt to discern what distinguishes these people from the general public.

As is immediately clear from Appendix 1, and will be discussed in greater detail in the limitations section, it will not be possible to gain a complete demographic profile of the 438 people who took the survey. Nevertheless, the data as collected should make it possible to draw a relationship between political attitudes – specifically political efficacy – and the kinds of activism these people engage in. Secondary and tertiary goals will be to further correlate these attitudes with partisan or ideological views, and impressions of the media.

Variables of Note

The data set will consist of several variables of note which are discussed in the codebook (see Appendix 2). While most of the variables are straightforward, there are some that merit greater discussion.
Political Efficacy (Internal and External)

In order to create an applicable comparison between the ANES, and the survey responses collected from Reddit, the language from the internal and external political efficacy questions was lifted straight from the ANES. While this presents some problems – it is unclear that the phrasing in question accurately captures the sentiments in question, specifically those referring to online activism – it was deemed to be the best method for comparing The Donald users to the general public.

Hours on Reddit

Oftentimes, respondents on surveys will artificially inflate or deflate their response, to fit the answer that they are expected to give – biasing was a particular risk with this question, as an extremely high amount of time spent online might have carried a social stigma. To avoid any bias, the question was rephrased to only ask how much time they spent yesterday. Values below 0 and above 24 were excluded from all models.

Fake News and News Source

These questions were both open ended, and presented the most difficulty in coding – the range of responses, as well as their intricacy, was far beyond what had been expected. To accurately reflect the sentiment of responses, a large number of indicator variables were created, for the most common themes shared among respondents.

For Fake News, these were: (1) any mention mainstream media outlets, (2) any mention of Russia, and (3) any mention of Trump and white supremacism or the alt-right rally in Virginia.

For News Sources, these were: (1) any mention of social media; (2) any mention of identifiably conservative outlets like Fox, Breitbart, or Drudge; (3) any mention of identifiably non-mainstream conservative outlets like LegalInsurrection, or OneAmericaNews; (4) any
mention of InfoWars; (5) any mention of talk radio; (6) any mention of a mainstream outlet, CNN or otherwise; and (7) any mention of no particular reliance on any specific news source, or skepticism of all news sources.

**Political Ideology**

This question adopted language from the ANES with respect to respondents’ political ideology. However, the ANES question uses a 7-point Likert scale – due to concerns about sample size, this thesis opted to condense the survey question into a 5-point scale, combining ‘Extremely Conservative’ and ‘Conservative’ into one value, and ‘Extremely Liberal,’ and ‘Liberal’ into another.

**Education**

Similarly with political ideology, the Education question condensed the categories into: (1) Some high school, (2) high school diploma, (3) some college, (4) a college degree and more.

**Donald _Importance_Election**

This question was taken as an assessment of how much users felt The Donald mattered as a political force in the 2016, specifically with respect to the kinds of activism it has become known for: memes, messaging, etc. This injects some element of uncertainty into the variable – it may have been possible that users answered this question by only assessing The Donald’s importance on traditional political metrics, such as whether The Donald facilitated canvassing for the Trump campaign. Future research should avoid this potential bias by asking users to specifically clarify the axes on which they evaluated The Donald’s impact.
Models

Given that almost all of the survey questions had ordinal or ordered responses, empirical results were modeled through the use of logit, or ordered logits. The logit model is a type of regression model used when the dependent variable is binary – meaning it has a value of either 0, or 1. The logit model is useful because it allows us to calculate the marginal effect that any one variable will have on the probability of an outcome of 0, or 1 in the dependent variable. As for the ordered logit, it is used when the dependent variable has a number of ordinal outcomes; as one example, a Likert scale.

The ordered logit model has a number of advantages over linear regression. Primarily, it does not have to assume linear, or identical differences between distinct response levels; we thus do not need to treat the distinction between ‘Strongly Agree’ and ‘Somewhat Agree’ as equal to the distinction between ‘Strongly Disagree’ and ‘Somewhat Disagree.’ Ordered logits also avoid the implicit assumption that respondents who answered the same have “exactly the same attitude.” Finally, because ordered logit focuses on the “underlying distribution,” rather than modeling responses directly, it mitigates any biasing effects attributable to the wording of the question.

Limitations

There were two substantial limitations that this project faced from the onset: the first was structural, and the second was unique to the subjects in question. Primarily, any online survey is going to have high levels of response bias. Only those most passionate about the subject are going to be interested in filling out a survey; this is especially problematic given that we are studying something as polarized as support for President Trump. Additionally, the subjects in question are
well known for their distrust of traditional institutions like the media – in fact, a number of them expressed exactly that sentiment either in public comments, or private messages.

Building off of that distrust, the moderators of The Donald did not permit the solicitation for respondents to be posted into the forum itself. Instead, the post was redirected to a smaller sub-community specifically designed for asking questions of users of The Donald – “Ask_The_Donald.” This creates a further biasing effect, in that we would expect at least to some extent that users who willingly subject themselves to questioning on their support for Trump, which can be quite hostile, are even more engaged and passionate. To avoid this, paid advertisements for the organic post were run in The Donald; a majority of the 438 respondents thus ultimately came from The Donald regardless. However, it is impossible to distinguish exactly who came from where, beyond broad response trends.

Finally, as a further example of this skepticism towards institutions like academia, the moderators narrowed down the list of demographic questions to only location, education, and gender. This specifically arose from fears of ‘doxxing,’ a new trend in which an individual’s anonymous online identity is publicly tied to their real identity, for the purpose of holding them accountable for views expressed digitally. It is also worth highlighting that this is in fact a legitimate fear for many Trump supporters online. As but one example, consider the Twitter account “@EveryTrumpDonor,” which randomly posts information on donors to President Trump’s campaign, available from the Federal Election Commission.69

Another substantial limitation of the thesis is simply the number of total respondents. While 438 presents a sufficient sample size for statistical validity, there were numerous cases in which the number of sub-groupings that arose prevented statistical significance from being achieved. As

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69 This can be determined by the initially large influx of survey responses (around 100) as the ‘post’ made to Ask_The_Donald experienced organic interest, and then the subsequently diminished but sustained survey response rate as the original post popularity degraded and only the paid ads remained.
an example, respondents provided dozens of possible responses for the two open-ended questions on the survey; this meant that except in very select circumstances, it was difficult to draw any meaningful conclusions. Although different strategies were taken into account to overcome this limitation, it nonetheless presented substantial difficulties at various points of the empirical findings section.

Finally, there are clear limitations with respect to exactly how users interpreted questions. One example is the Donald_Impact_Election variable, which was discussed previously – this thesis took the question as referring to The Donald’s capacity to impact the political process through non-traditional means, but if users do not think that kind of activism has any impact altogether, they are unlikely to engage with the question substantively. In broader terms, this falls under the larger language and classification issues that exist with respect to concisely capturing the essence of new, non-traditional methods of digital activism.
CHAPTER FIVE: RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics of The Donald (Responses from Survey)

Table 3: What Is Your Highest Level of Education Obtained?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade school / some high school</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>9.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college, no degree</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>24.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College / Post-Grad</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>50.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>11.64%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Do You Identify as Male or Female?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>78.08%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>10.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>11.42%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: In Politics, as of Today, [What Party] Do You Consider Yourself?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>44.98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>50.23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6: Thinking Politically and Socially, How Would You Describe Your Own General Outlook?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very conservative</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>6.39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>43.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle of the road</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>23.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>22.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very liberal</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Do You Live in the United States, or Outside of It?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>370</td>
<td>84.47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside the U.S.</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>15.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: Public Officials Don't Care Much What People Like Me Think.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree strongly</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>37.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree somewhat</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>36.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depends</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree somewhat</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>10.96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree strongly</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5.71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 9: Sometimes Politics and Government Seem So Complicated That a Person Like Me Can't Really Understand What's Going On.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree strongly</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>7.08%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree somewhat</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>20.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depends</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>7.08%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree somewhat</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>30.59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree strongly</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>29.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>7.08%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10: People Like Me Don't Have Any Say About What the Government Does.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree strongly</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>14.84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree somewhat</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>27.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depends</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>11.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree somewhat</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>29.22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree strongly</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>11.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5.48%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11: How Many Hours Did You Spend Yesterday on Reddit.com?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev</th>
<th>Missing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.540901</td>
<td>2.297814</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 12: How Much of Your Time on Reddit Is Spent Exclusively on The_Donald?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>19.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>34.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>20.09%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>14.38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None at all</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>10.05%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 13: Do You Think The_Donald Had an Impact on The 2016 Presidential Election?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A lot</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>32.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>31.51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>21.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>10.27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5: Other Than Reddit, What Is a News Source You Use Frequently?
Figure 6: If You Had To Give an Example of "Fake News", What Would It Be?

Empirical Findings: Demographics

The first step to understanding the 438 survey respondents is evaluating how the survey is answered. The results from the survey were presented earlier, but this section will begin by highlighting some of the more salient features. Beginning with demographics, the typical respondent is: (1) overwhelmingly male, (2) on average college-educated, and (3) based in America.

This means that while our expected user – someone on a news-oriented (in this case political) subreddit – is already biased towards being male, and college educated, our respondent group is still beyond that, noticeably male, and college-educated. Specifically, 78% of The Donald respondents identified as male, and 50.91% as college-degree educated or more. Our ability to make a strict comparison here with Trump supporters nationally is complicated by the lack of racial identifying features on our survey respondents; as noted previously, it was not allowed to be included among the survey questions. Nevertheless, in every respect, The Donald users fit in line with the expected demographic profile.
Empirical Findings: Internal Efficacy

The simplest point of reference from which to compare the political attitudes of the ANES control, versus those respondents from The Donald, is a simple cross-tab of how both groups responded. The following chart does so, with the only limitation that those in the ANES are subset to those who self-identified as having voted for President Trump in 2016.

![Chart](image_url)

**Figure 7: Internal Political Efficacy for The Donald Users and Trump Voters (ANES)**

As is immediately evident, users from The Donald have vastly increased internal efficacy scores, compared to that of supporters of President Trump from the general public. This is almost entirely due to the fact that, whereas 26% of those in the ANES neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement, only 7% of The Donald users did. Instead, approximately 60% of The Donald respondents either disagreed somewhat, or strongly with the contention that politics was too complicated for their inputs. In other words, not only are The Donald users far less likely to have no strong opinion on the subject, their answer was vastly more likely to also be in support of their own internal efficacy.
Delving deeper into the internal political efficacies of The Donald users versus the general public further reinforces this divide. To do so, an ordered logistic model was run, focusing only on how respondents in both the ANES, or The Donald, assessed their internal political efficacy. This is represented through the following model:

\[
Ordered \text{ Logit } Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + E
\]

Where:

\(Y = \text{Int\_Pol\_Eff}\)

\(X_1 = \text{The\_Donald}\)

\(X_2 = \text{College}\)

\(X_3 = \text{Some\_College}\)

\(X_4 = \text{Sex}\)

\(E = \text{Unexplained variance, error term}\)

\(\beta_0, \beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3, \beta_4 = \text{Coefficients of respective independent variables}\)
Table 14: Internal Political Efficacy as a Function of Characteristics for The Donald Users and Public

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Int_Pol_Eff</th>
<th>(1) Agree Strongly</th>
<th>(2) Agree Somewhat</th>
<th>(3) Neither Agree, Disagree (ANES) / Depends (Survey)</th>
<th>(4) Disagree Somewhat</th>
<th>(5) Disagree Strongly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The_Donald</td>
<td>-0.0368***</td>
<td>-0.113***</td>
<td>-0.0430***</td>
<td>0.0989***</td>
<td>0.0937***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00601)</td>
<td>(0.0170)</td>
<td>(0.00945)</td>
<td>(0.0143)</td>
<td>(0.0177)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>-0.0509***</td>
<td>-0.136***</td>
<td>-0.0325***</td>
<td>0.127***</td>
<td>0.0918***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00800)</td>
<td>(0.0177)</td>
<td>(0.00588)</td>
<td>(0.0169)</td>
<td>(0.0125)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some_College</td>
<td>-0.0186**</td>
<td>-0.0563**</td>
<td>-0.0194*</td>
<td>0.0514**</td>
<td>0.0429*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00655)</td>
<td>(0.0206)</td>
<td>(0.00884)</td>
<td>(0.0180)</td>
<td>(0.0178)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>0.0197**</td>
<td>0.0545***</td>
<td>0.0136**</td>
<td>-0.0518***</td>
<td>-0.0359***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00612)</td>
<td>(0.0160)</td>
<td>(0.00415)</td>
<td>(0.0154)</td>
<td>(0.0104)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 1,444 1,444 1,444 1,444 1,444

Marginal effects; Standard errors in parentheses
(d) for discrete change of dummy variable from 0 to 1
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Beginning with College, Some_College, and Sex, we observe the expected direction for each variable. That is to say, women are more likely to have agreed strongly or agreed somewhat that politics is sometimes too complicated for them, compared to men. Inversely, those with some college education, or a college education and beyond, are more likely to have disagreed with the sentiment, compared to those with either some high schooling, or a high school diploma. As for The_Donald, it was a highly significant predictor, again in the positive direction. For example, compared to the general public, respondents from the online survey were more than 9 percentage points more likely to disagree strongly with the sentiment that politics is sometimes too complicated. In fact, when focusing only on respondents who expressed some level of internal
political efficacy (“Somewhat Disagree,” or “Strongly Disagree”) membership in The Donald was a more powerful predictor than having a college degree or higher.

Presumably, the high internal political efficacy of members of The Donald should explain why they are attracted to the forum. Consider the earlier table, which depicts how respondents viewed the impact that The Donald had on the 2016 election. More than 70% of survey respondents answered that the community had either a “Medium,” or “A Lot” in terms of political impact. However, efforts to link internal efficacy to opinions of The Donald’s impact were found to be not significant, at all levels. The same was true with respect to any possible relationship between internal efficacy, and how much of users’ time on Reddit was spent specifically on The Donald. However, it was true that the higher a respondent’s assessment of The Donald’s impact on the 2016 election, the more of their time on Reddit was spent exclusively on The Donald. This is represented through the following model:

\[
\text{Ordered Logit } Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + E
\]

Where:

\[
Y = \text{Time_On_Donald}
\]

\[
X_1 = \text{Donald_Impact_Election}
\]

\[
X_2 = \text{College}
\]

\[
X_3 = \text{Some_College}
\]

\[
X_4 = \text{Sex}
\]

\[
E = \text{Unexplained variance, error term}
\]

\[
\beta_0, \beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3, \beta_4 = \text{Coefficients of respective independent variables}
\]
Table 15: Time Spent on The Donald as a Function of User Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time_On_Donald</th>
<th>Donald_Impact_Election</th>
<th>College</th>
<th>Some_College</th>
<th>Sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>(1) -0.0123** (0.00441)</td>
<td>(1) -0.00436 (0.00437)</td>
<td>(1) 0.00272 (0.00486)</td>
<td>(1) -0.00920* (0.00411)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little</td>
<td>(2) -0.0947*** (0.0155)</td>
<td>(2) -0.0333 (0.0312)</td>
<td>(2) 0.0207 (0.0359)</td>
<td>(2) -0.0759** (0.0238)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half</td>
<td>(3) -0.0884*** (0.0168)</td>
<td>(3) -0.0303 (0.0278)</td>
<td>(3) 0.0185 (0.0307)</td>
<td>(3) -0.0898** (0.0338)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most</td>
<td>(4) 0.0699*** (0.0171)</td>
<td>(4) 0.0250 (0.0241)</td>
<td>(4) -0.0158 (0.0285)</td>
<td>(4) 0.0278 (0.0148)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>(5) 0.125*** (0.0184)</td>
<td>(5) 0.0430 (0.0393)</td>
<td>(5) -0.0260 (0.0428)</td>
<td>(5) 0.147* (0.0641)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Marginal effects; Standard errors in parentheses
(d) for discrete change of dummy variable from 0 to 1
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

As the above table demonstrates, in addition to the generally high internal efficacy of The Donald users, and their generally high impressions of The Donald’s impact on the 2016 election, there was a clear relationship between the latter, and how much of their time was exclusively spent on the community. In particular, those who had a higher opinion of The Donald’s 2016 impact, were 12.5 percentage points likely to say they spent “All” of their time on Reddit on The Donald. The lack of a relationship between internal efficacy and Donald_Impact_Election or Time_On_Donald will be further discussed in the following section.

Empirical Findings: External Political Efficacy

Whereas respondents from The Donald presented as immediately more politically empowered than the general public, the reverse is true when it comes to their external efficacy. Once again, this can be illustrated by comparing how those from The Donald answered, compared
to those from the ANES who identified as having voted for President Trump.

![Graph showing Public Officials Don't Care What People Like Me Think]

**Figure 8: External Political Efficacy for The Donald Users and Trump Voters (ANES)**

As the graph demonstrates, those from The Donald were far likelier to have strongly agreed that public officials do not care what people like ‘them’ think. This belies a strong suspicion or cynicism towards government, which as this section will show, is linked to their online activities. Interestingly, The Donald was not a significant predictor of response for the second question used to measure external efficacy, or ext_pol_eff_b. This question is formulated as “*People like me don’t have any say about what the government does.*” The significance of this finding will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, but at face value, the most logical interpretation is simply that the question’s wording fails to capture the relevant concept behind external efficacy.

In this case, ‘people like me’ – or users of The Donald – do have some say about what the government does, because the current president is Donald Trump, who they support. There is thus an immediate problem between distinguishing between the faith users have in President Trump, versus their cynicism towards the rest of the government establishment. This is captured far more meaningfully by the phrasing of the other external efficacy question: “*Public officials don’t care*
We hypothesize this to be true because The Donald users probably do not think of Trump as a public official, or at least not in the traditional sense of the word; they thus separate him out when answering that question. As a result, external efficacy in the following models will be measured solely by ext_pol_eff_a.

One significant finding in these models is that the expected relationship between education and external efficacy among The Donald users is reversed. As noted previously, the literature to date shows that the more educated one is, the more political efficacy we expect them to possess. Rasmussen and Norgaard (2017) provide a concise explanation of this relationship by emphasizing the ‘like me’ vocabulary used in the above question. As they note, “education primarily matters for external efficacy…because it influences the relative standing of individuals and the ease with which they can gain access to political decision makers and political networks.”70 This can be more definitively demonstrated by looking at how education affects external efficacy, among those taken from the ANES.

\[
\text{Ordered Logit } Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + E
\]

Where:

\[
Y = \text{Ext\_Pol\_Eff\_A}
\]

\[
X_1 = \text{College}
\]

\[
X_2 = \text{Some\_College}
\]

\[
E = \text{Unexplained variance, error term}
\]

\[
\beta_0, \beta_1, \beta_2 = \text{Coefficients of respective independent variables}
\]
### Table 16: External Political Efficacy as a Function of Characteristics for the Public

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ext_Pol_Eff_A</th>
<th>(1) Agree Strongly</th>
<th>(2) Agree Somewhat</th>
<th>(3) Neither Agree, Disagree</th>
<th>(4) Disagree Somewhat</th>
<th>(5) Disagree Strongly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>-0.0721***</td>
<td>-0.0358***</td>
<td>0.0332***</td>
<td>0.0569***</td>
<td>0.0178**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0204)</td>
<td>(0.0107)</td>
<td>(0.00965)</td>
<td>(0.0161)</td>
<td>(0.00551)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some_College</td>
<td>-0.0627**</td>
<td>-0.0435*</td>
<td>0.0284**</td>
<td>0.0583*</td>
<td>0.0195*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0221)</td>
<td>(0.0200)</td>
<td>(0.00977)</td>
<td>(0.0238)</td>
<td>(0.00894)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>-0.0202</td>
<td>-0.0103</td>
<td>0.00939</td>
<td>0.0161</td>
<td>0.00500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0177)</td>
<td>(0.00901)</td>
<td>(0.00826)</td>
<td>(0.0140)</td>
<td>(0.00441)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1,056</td>
<td>1,056</td>
<td>1,056</td>
<td>1,056</td>
<td>1,056</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Marginal effects; Standard errors in parentheses
(d) for discrete change of dummy variable from 0 to 1
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

As the table shows, compared to those with either some high school education, or a high school degree, individuals from the ANES dataset with either some college education, or a college education and beyond, were significantly likelier to have higher external efficacy – in other words, faith in government. Given that this is corroborated by existing research, this finding is not too surprising. However, consider what happens below when we run the exact same model, but now focusing on respondents from The Donald.
Table 17: External Political Efficacy as a Function of Characteristics for The Donald Users

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ext_Pol_Eff_A</th>
<th>(1) Agree Strongly</th>
<th>(2) Agree Somewhat</th>
<th>(3) Depends</th>
<th>(4) Disagree Somewhat</th>
<th>(5) Disagree Strongly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>0.136*</td>
<td>-0.0401*</td>
<td>-0.0297*</td>
<td>-0.0583*</td>
<td>-0.00752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0622)</td>
<td>(0.0190)</td>
<td>(0.0146)</td>
<td>(0.0286)</td>
<td>(0.00491)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some_College</td>
<td>0.169*</td>
<td>-0.0665</td>
<td>-0.0337*</td>
<td>-0.0610*</td>
<td>-0.00752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0720)</td>
<td>(0.0343)</td>
<td>(0.0145)</td>
<td>(0.0241)</td>
<td>(0.00429)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>0.0232</td>
<td>-0.00796</td>
<td>-0.00492</td>
<td>-0.00920</td>
<td>-0.00115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0718)</td>
<td>(0.0260)</td>
<td>(0.0150)</td>
<td>(0.0275)</td>
<td>(0.00345)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>387</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Marginal effects; Standard errors in parentheses
(d) for discrete change of dummy variable from 0 to 1
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

On the whole, respondents from The Donald with some college, or college education, were likelier to express low external efficacy. This is particularly pronounced at the ‘Strongly Agree,’ response level, where we observe a 13 percentage point and 16 percentage point marginal effect, for those with college and some college education respectively. This is a strong validation of this thesis’ hypothesis for why activists are drawn to The Donald. Not only does their level of education give them the requisite tools to be effective online activists – hence their high internal efficacy – but their interest in politics is correlated with their skepticism of it. In other words, the more they know, they less of it they like – driving them to engage through non-traditional mediums.

To some extent, this is also not entirely surprising. Remember that Rasmussen and Norgaard (2017) argued education should correlate with higher external efficacy because of the ‘like me’ component to the question. But President Trump’s political messaging relies in large part on the argument that the existing political institutions are biased, if not outright hostile to his political brand and ideological worldview. Consequently, those who are educated and in turn
probably likelier to be familiar with his messaging, his policy proscriptions, and also political affairs, are clearly also biased towards sharing the president’s alienation towards American politics at large.

It is also worth noting that at the ‘Somewhat Agree’ response level, we observe the expected trend – a negative relationship between external political efficacy, and education. We should interpret this is indicative of the demarcation between The Donald users. While the original hypothesis of this thesis predicted that all, or most of the respondents would fit into the low external efficacy / high internal efficacy model, this table, along with subsequent results, helps to illustrate that in fact there is a clear divide in the user base. Many of The Donald users appear to fit into more typical demographic characteristics, in line with the general populace. At the same time, there are clearly a subset of users who go even beyond the hypothesized characteristics, demonstrating truly polarized views on both their efficacy, and their attitudes of activism.

The ability of low external efficacy to predict whether a respondent from The Donald would reject traditional political channels also carried over to partisan identification. Respondents were much likely to identify as independent, rather than Republican. This is immediately demonstrative of the fact that users associate politically with President Trump as an individual, instead of the GOP altogether. And unsurprisingly, the reason respondents did not identify as Republican is because they lack faith in political institutions.
Consider the following model:

\[ \text{Ordered Logit } Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + E \]

Where:

\[ Y = \text{Ext}_\text{Pol}_\text{Eff}_A \]
\[ X_1 = \text{Independent} \]
\[ X_2 = \text{College} \]
\[ X_3 = \text{Some}_\text{College} \]
\[ X_4 = \text{Sex} \]

\[ E = \text{Unexplained variance, error term} \]

\[ \beta_0, \beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3, \beta_4 = \text{Coefficients of respective independent variables} \]

**Table 18: External Political Efficacy for The Donald Users as a Function of Identifying as**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ext_Pol_Eff_A</th>
<th>(1) Agree Strongly</th>
<th>(2) Agree Somewhat</th>
<th>(3) Neither Agree, Disagree (ANES) / Depends (Survey)</th>
<th>(4) Disagree Somewhat</th>
<th>(5) Disagree Strongly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.159*** (0.0449)</td>
<td>-0.0516** (0.0177)</td>
<td>-0.0345** (0.0113)</td>
<td>-0.0648** (0.0199)</td>
<td>-0.00809 (0.00421)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>College</strong></td>
<td>0.113 (0.0631)</td>
<td>-0.0352 (0.0199)</td>
<td>-0.0249 (0.0146)</td>
<td>-0.0469 (0.0277)</td>
<td>-0.00587 (0.00429)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Some_College</strong></td>
<td>0.146* (0.0729)</td>
<td>-0.0580 (0.0342)</td>
<td>-0.0296* (0.0147)</td>
<td>-0.0521* (0.0241)</td>
<td>-0.00627 (0.00387)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
<td>0.0304 (0.0721)</td>
<td>-0.0109 (0.0278)</td>
<td>-0.00644 (0.0149)</td>
<td>-0.0116 (0.0264)</td>
<td>-0.00141 (0.00323)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ N = 387 \quad 387 \quad 387 \quad 387 \quad 387 \]

Marginal effects; Standard errors in parentheses
(d) for discrete change of dummy variable from 0 to 1
* \( p < 0.05 \), ** \( p < 0.01 \), *** \( p < 0.001 \)
Compared to the baseline category of those who identified as either a Democrat or Republican, political independents had far less faith in government institutions. Independents were almost 16 percentage points more likely to have “Strongly Agreed” with the sentiment, compared to the baseline. Equally importantly, the direction on this relationship regressed back to the normal direction for all response levels other than “Strongly Agree”; as with prior models, evidence continues to demonstrate that there is a specific subset of respondents distinct from the rest.

We can make even further explicit this link between skepticism of government and non-traditional forms of activism among some The Donald users, by regression external efficacy on respondents’ opinions of The Donald’s electoral impact in 2016. Consider the following model:

\[
\text{Ordered Logit } Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + E
\]

Where:

\[
Y = \text{Ext\textunderscore Pol\textunderscore Eff\textunderscore A}
\]

\[
X_1 = \text{Donald\textunderscore Impact\textunderscore Election}
\]

\[
X_2 = \text{College}
\]

\[
X_3 = \text{Some\textunderscore College}
\]

\[
X_4 = \text{Sex}
\]

\[
E = \text{Unexplained variance, error term}
\]

\[
\beta_0, \beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3, \beta_4 = \text{Coefficients of respective independent variables}
\]
Table 19: External Political Efficacy for The Donald Users as a Function of Assessing the Community’s Political Impact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ext_Pol_Eff_A</th>
<th>(1) Agree Strongly</th>
<th>(2) Agree Somewhat</th>
<th>(3) Neither Agree, Disagree (ANES) / Depends (Survey)</th>
<th>(4) Disagree Somewhat</th>
<th>(5) Disagree Strongly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Donald_Impact_Election</td>
<td>0.0986***</td>
<td>-0.0329**</td>
<td>-0.0221**</td>
<td>-0.0389***</td>
<td>-0.00479*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>0.149*</td>
<td>-0.0450*</td>
<td>-0.0339*</td>
<td>-0.0619*</td>
<td>-0.00780</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some_College</td>
<td>0.164*</td>
<td>-0.0663</td>
<td>-0.0340*</td>
<td>-0.0571*</td>
<td>-0.00687</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>0.00517</td>
<td>-0.00175</td>
<td>-0.00115</td>
<td>-0.00202</td>
<td>-0.000249</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 386

Marginal effects; Standard errors in parentheses
(d) for discrete change of dummy variable from 0 to 1
*p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

As the table shows, those who felt that The Donald had a higher impact on the election, were more likely to strongly agree with the sentiment that public officials do not care about the opinions of people ‘like me’. Again, this trend reverted back to a more standard relationship at all other response levels.

Empirical Findings: Media Consumption

Respondents from The Donald also demonstrated attitudes toward the media well in line with what we would expect from a highly empowered and politically active group, who specifically shares the President’s skepticism of the mainstream media. The best example of this is Question #14 from Appendix 1, which asked respondents for an example of “Fake News.” As
the word cloud at the beginning of Chapter 5 illustrates, by far the most popular response was “CNN.” In fact, over 52% of respondents provided CNN as at least one of their responses to this open-ended question. Ultimately, the question was coded into the following three categories: 1) did they categorize any mainstream media companies as fake news, (2) did they categorize the Russia-President Trump collusion story as fake news, and (3) did they categorize any attempts to depict President Trump as racist as fake news. Out of the 438 respondents, only 56, or 12.79%, did not provide an example of fake news.

At the same time, a core contention of this thesis is that respondents’ attitudes are driven by more than simply the position that is signalled by the president. As a result, efforts were at first made to link respondents’ internal efficacy to how respondents assessed the media on the survey. However, as with regressing internal efficacy on whether a user spent most of their time on The Donald, or how politically effective they found the community to be, this yielded results lacking significance at all levels. Instead it was external efficacy that determined whether a respondent provided an instance of fake news or not. This is demonstrated by the model below.

\[
\text{Ordered Logit } Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + E
\]

Where:

\[
Y = \text{Ext\_Pol\_Eff\_A}
\]

\[
X_1 = \text{Noresp\_Fakenews}
\]

\[
X_2 = \text{College}
\]

\[
X_3 = \text{Some\_College}
\]

\[
X_4 = \text{Sex}
\]

\[
E = \text{Unexplained variance, error term}
\]

\[
\beta_0, \beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3, \beta_4 = \text{Coefficients of respective independent variables}
\]
Table 20: External Political Efficacy for The Donald Users as a Function of a Fake News Example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1) Agree</th>
<th>(2) Agree</th>
<th>(3) Neither Agree, Disagree (ANES) / Depends (Survey)</th>
<th>(4) Disagree</th>
<th>(5) Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ext_Pol_Eff_A</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noresp_Fakenews</td>
<td>-0.333***</td>
<td>-0.144</td>
<td>0.0646**</td>
<td>0.339**</td>
<td>0.0740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0464)</td>
<td>(0.0905)</td>
<td>(0.0217)</td>
<td>(0.107)</td>
<td>(0.0512)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>0.138*</td>
<td>-0.0414*</td>
<td>-0.0311*</td>
<td>-0.0588*</td>
<td>-0.00701</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0623)</td>
<td>(0.0193)</td>
<td>(0.0151)</td>
<td>(0.0285)</td>
<td>(0.00456)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some_College</td>
<td>0.177*</td>
<td>-0.0711*</td>
<td>-0.0360*</td>
<td>-0.0625**</td>
<td>-0.00711</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0722)</td>
<td>(0.0353)</td>
<td>(0.0149)</td>
<td>(0.0237)</td>
<td>(0.00400)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>0.0106</td>
<td>-0.00355</td>
<td>-0.00231</td>
<td>-0.00420</td>
<td>-0.000488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0713)</td>
<td>(0.0246)</td>
<td>(0.0155)</td>
<td>(0.0279)</td>
<td>(0.00324)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N: 387

Marginal effects; Standard errors in parentheses (d) for discrete change of dummy variable from 0 to 1
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

As the above table clearly demonstrates, having provided an example of fake news made one more likely to have also expressed a lower external efficacy. However, this relationship also lacked significance at the “Somewhat Agree” and “Strongly Disagree” response levels, most likely due to the limitation of sample size already discussed. The relationship between the concept of fake news and external efficacy also carried into how respondents specifically answered the question. While having identified the media (largely speaking) as a source of fake news, or accusations of Trump’s racism as fake news was not a significant predictor, citing the Russia-collusion story was.
Ordered Logit \( Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + E \)

Where:

\( Y = Ext\_Pol\_Eff\_A \)

\( X_1 = Russia\_Fakenews \)

\( X_2 = College \)

\( X_3 = Some\_College \)

\( X_4 = Sex \)

\( E = \) Unexplained variance, error term

\( \beta_0, \beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3, \beta_4 = \) Coefficients of respective independent variables

Table 21: External Political Efficacy for The Donald Users as a Function of Russia as a Fake News Example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ext_Pol_Eff_A</th>
<th>(1) Agree Strongly</th>
<th>(2) Agree Somewhat</th>
<th>(3) Neither Agree, Disagree (ANES) / Depends (Survey)</th>
<th>(4) Disagree Somewhat</th>
<th>(5) Disagree Strongly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Russia_Fakenews</td>
<td>0.155* (0.0760)</td>
<td>-0.0730 (0.0428)</td>
<td>-0.0291* (0.0135)</td>
<td>-0.0494* (0.0211)</td>
<td>-0.00376 (0.00261)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>0.137* (0.0630)</td>
<td>-0.0459* (0.0221)</td>
<td>-0.0299* (0.0152)</td>
<td>-0.0568* (0.0269)</td>
<td>-0.00461 (0.00355)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some_college</td>
<td>0.186** (0.0682)</td>
<td>-0.0808* (0.0349)</td>
<td>-0.0364* (0.0147)</td>
<td>-0.0639** (0.0216)</td>
<td>-0.00497 (0.00324)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>0.0314 (0.0719)</td>
<td>-0.0121 (0.0295)</td>
<td>-0.00653 (0.0147)</td>
<td>-0.0118 (0.0260)</td>
<td>-0.000929 (0.00201)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( N = 376 \)

Marginal effects; Standard errors in parentheses
(d) for discrete change of dummy variable from 0 to 1
* \( p < 0.05 \), ** \( p < 0.01 \), *** \( p < 0.001 \)

Continuing a running trend from the previous section, the most significant effect was
observed at the “Strongly Agree” level, where having identified the Russia story as fake news made a respondent over 15 percentage points likelier to have the lowest score for external efficacy. At other levels, the magnitude of noticeably Russia_Fakenews drops. We again interpret this to reflect the subpopulation within The Donald, who embody the archetype predicted by this thesis.

Conceptually speaking, there are multiple explanations we can provide for the relationship between Russia_Fakenews and those with the lowest external efficacy. It is possible that the fact that most responses were able to be grouped into one of three categories is indicative that, with respect to fake news, the President tends to call out either the media, the accusations of racism, or the Russia collusion narrative; as a result, his supporters feel similarly. Or, if we had a greater sample size, we would see significance across all categories of fake news, with respect to internal efficacy. And yet, these types of explanations nonetheless feel like they miss out on some greater insight by discounting the significance of the “Strongly Agree” level in particular.

To begin with, the Russia narrative presents as the most detail-heavy out of the three categories. Since details first emerged post-2016, it has been a long running story, stretched across multiple Congressional investigations. It is also, out of the three, the one most commonly cited by political opponents of Trump. For someone to recall it as example of fake news is thus a testament to not exactly their internal efficacy – remember there was no significant relationship between internal efficacy and the fake news question – but rather the respondent’s willingness to reject a common accusation made by establishment political institutions.

Another way of illustrating the underlying importance of having rejected the Russia narrative is attempting to link it to other political beliefs. In particular, a surprisingly large number of respondents identified as ‘independent,’ rather than ‘Republican’ – in effect clearly distinguishing themselves as supporters of the President, rather than of the larger GOP movement.
As a result, it is unsurprising that having identified as an independent is also clearly linked with Russia_fakenews. This is demonstrated through the logit model below:

\[
\text{Logit } Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + E
\]

Where:

\[
Y = \text{Russia_Fakenews}
\]

\[
X_1 = \text{Independent}
\]

\[
X_2 = \text{College}
\]

\[
X_3 = \text{Some_College}
\]

\[
X_4 = \text{Sex}
\]

\[
E = \text{Unexplained variance, error term}
\]

\[
\beta_0, \beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3, \beta_4 = \text{Coefficients of respective independent variables}
\]

Table 22: Whether The Donald Users Mentioned Russia as Fake News as a Function of Identifying as Independent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Russia_Fakenews</th>
<th>(1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentioned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent</strong></td>
<td>0.0691*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0300)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>College</strong></td>
<td>-0.0264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0403)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Some_College</strong></td>
<td>-0.0586</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0352)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
<td>0.0183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0484)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td>377</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Marginal effects; Standard errors in parentheses (d) for discrete change of dummy variable from 0 to 1

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001
This model shows, with clear significance, that those who identified as a political independent were also 6.91 percentage points more likely to have mentioned the Russia story as fake news. We should view this as a surrogate for larger sentiments about the rejection of existing political institutions, which in turn carries over to attitudes about the media industry. Low external efficacy was also a significant predictor largely speaking when it came to how The Donald users got their news. This is evident even at face value from the word cloud seen in Chapter 5, and the high number of respondents who gave answers such as “YouTube,” “Twitter,” or “Pol” (which refers to the anonymous message board 4Chan). The binary variable Uses_Any_Non_Trad_Media was used to capture this sentiment, and was given a value of 1 whenever a respondent mentioned these kind of news sources: 4Chan, InfoWars, the pro-Trump aggregator Rantingly, the conservative legal blog Legal Insurrection, or other similar such sites.

\[
\text{Ordered Logit } Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + E
\]

Where:

\[ Y = \text{Ext_Pol_Eff_A} \]
\[ X_1 = \text{Any_Non_Trad_Media} \]
\[ X_2 = \text{College} \]
\[ X_3 = \text{Some_College} \]
\[ X_4 = \text{Sex} \]
\[ E = \text{Unexplained variance, error term} \]
\[ \beta_0, \beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3, \beta_4 = \text{Coefficients of respective independent variables} \]
Table 23: External Political Efficacy for The Donald Users as a Function of Using NonTraditional Media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ext_Pol_Eff_A</th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
<th>(5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Neither Agree,</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>Disagree (ANES) /</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>Strongly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any_Non_Trad_Media</td>
<td>0.143*</td>
<td>-0.0598</td>
<td>-0.0280*</td>
<td>-0.0490*</td>
<td>-0.00591</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.0660)</td>
<td>(0.0340)</td>
<td>(0.0126)</td>
<td>(0.0200)</td>
<td>(0.00341)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>0.137*</td>
<td>-0.0410*</td>
<td>-0.0301*</td>
<td>-0.0584*</td>
<td>-0.00747</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.0620)</td>
<td>(0.0192)</td>
<td>(0.0147)</td>
<td>(0.0283)</td>
<td>(0.00485)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some_College</td>
<td>0.166*</td>
<td>-0.0660</td>
<td>-0.0333*</td>
<td>-0.0595*</td>
<td>-0.00728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.0720)</td>
<td>(0.0345)</td>
<td>(0.0145)</td>
<td>(0.0239)</td>
<td>(0.00418)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>0.00366</td>
<td>-0.00121</td>
<td>-0.000788</td>
<td>-0.00148</td>
<td>-0.000185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.0717)</td>
<td>(0.0239)</td>
<td>(0.0154)</td>
<td>(0.0288)</td>
<td>(0.00360)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>387</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Marginal effects; Standard errors in parentheses
(d) for discrete change of dummy variable from 0 to 1
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

In other words, while not all respondents from The Donald fit into the conceptual archetype discussed earlier, there is clear evidence running throughout the empirical findings that many of its users absolutely do characterize as highly empowered individuals – at least politically speaking – who reject many established norms and institutions, and instead prefer to engage in the system through these non-traditional channels.
CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

Overview

This thesis set out to investigate the political attitudes behind the motivated digital activists that we argue should become known as ‘jesters.’ Using a survey of 438 pro-Trump supporters who willingly opted-in to an anonymous survey advertised on the social media platform Reddit, their responses were compared to the general public in the form of the American National Election Survey (ANES). The key dimensions of study in this thesis were internal and external political efficacy.

Table 24: Were Hypotheses Supported by Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>H₁</strong>: The Donald users will be largely male, college educated, Republican, and ideologically conservative.</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H₂</strong>: The Donald users will have higher internal efficacy, and lower external efficacy, than comparative Trump supporters.</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H₃</strong>: There is a positive relationship between internal efficacy, and time spent on The Donald / assessment of The Donald’s political impact.</td>
<td>Not supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H₄</strong>: There is a negative relationship between external efficacy, and time spent on The Donald / assessment of The Donald’s political impact.</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H₅</strong>: Among The Donald users, there is a positive relationship between internal efficacy, and willingness to consume non-traditional media sources / having provided an example of fake news.</td>
<td>Not supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H₆</strong>: Among The Donald users, there is a negative relationship between external efficacy, and willingness to consume non-traditional media sources / having provided an example of fake news.</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Policy Implications

As repeatedly emphasized throughout this thesis, it is unhelpful to categorize The Donald users as either insincere, or inexplicable in their motivations. Regardless of the underlying political beliefs that draw them to support President Trump, there is no reason to view these beliefs as a necessary precondition for the kind of digital activism they engage in. This hypothesis largely held throughout analysis of the survey results, and has clear, significant implications for American democracy moving forward.

Originally, this thesis hypothesized that internal efficacy would play a strong role in determining to what extent respondents were likely to engage in non-traditional forms of digital activism; i.e., viewing The Donald as a meaningful political force. However, as the results consistently demonstrated, internal efficacy correlated significantly with very little of the response types. That is not to say that it had no impact at all: the vast majority of respondents still did have unusually high internal efficacy compared to the general public. As discussed previously, this makes sense – we should expect a natural self-selection bias in that the more empowered an individual is, the more likely they are to willingly engage in political activities online.

At the same time, we should not downplay the importance of the finding that, once online, internal efficacy tells you very little about how an activist will behave. In other words, being politically empowered tends to be a necessary precondition for having been a member of The Donald, but past that point, internal efficacy loses most of its predictive power. We can consequently rule out an individual’s self-assessment of their own capabilities as the primary motivator behind sincere trolling. Individuals clearly need a deeper, underlying political belief to turn them into jesters, beyond simply the tools to do so. Most of all, this is further proof that these individuals are sincere in their online trolling.
Instead, the strongest predictor for these individuals’ behaviours was external efficacy. To make explicit the relationship, we should return to internal efficacy as a precondition for being a member of The Donald. Many users in the survey expressed medium or high external efficacy – in other words, some, or a strong faith in government. At face value, this is what we would expect: it is highly contradictory for these users to remain skeptical of government when it is their candidate who is currently president. Further deconstructing this dichotomy will require much more research into the attitudes of respondents, probably in the form of open-ended questions or interviews. Nevertheless, we can at least hypothesize with some certainty that respondents separate conceptually President Trump, from the larger mechanisms of government – or even the ‘deep state.’

Having expressed low external efficacy actually is a logical predictor of engaging in non-traditional forms of activism. Given that most would probably group the Republican Party itself into the existing political infrastructure, it would be at least somewhat contradictory to distrust the GOP and yet still volunteer with them. In the past, activists tended to have no choice – political parties monopolized activism. This is where the advent of the internet has proven to be so important.

Going further, the link between external efficacy and the behaviours of interest for this thesis, explain concisely why we should not view The Donald as anomalous. External efficacy, for example, predicted whether users thought The Donald was meaningful, whether they spent most of their time on the platform, or whether they relied on non-traditional media sources. These are all activities that almost identical corollaries exist for, with respect to more progressively minded activists on Reddit. Consider Bernie-bros: it seems highly plausible that their correspondingly low external efficacy also predicted their tendency to engage in decentralized, online activism.
This has strong policy implications for two reasons, both structural. The first is that, as the ANES results to date have shown, external efficacy has been clearly and significantly declining for decades. Similar findings apply to other industrialized democracies. Following this, we are also seeing a rise in populist, insurgent political movements across the Western world. All of this means that we should expect a proliferation in communities like The Donald.

The rise of the jester archetype is also meaningful because of the impact it will have on the internet at large. The internet will only continue to increase in relevance as a political tool and platform as it matures. Given this, the way in which jesters weaponize the troll’s monopolization of discussion is something we should absolutely be focused on. As previous research showed, online political dialogue naturally involves trolling (sincere, or not). This naturally leads to questions about to what extent intra-partisan discourse is possible, digitally.

Inversely, there are also legitimate fears about further segregating activist communities because of their overwhelming output. Remember that Reddit was forced to do exactly this for The Donald. The intent here is not to relitigate whether Reddit was justified in doing so – the website is not explicitly sold as a political forum, so it seems only tangentially related to this thesis anyway. Rather, the point is that other websites may feel compelled to adopt imitator strategies also meant to contain political communities that overwhelm apolitical ones. We could easily imagine Facebook, like Reddit, isolating something like The Donald from its general feed algorithms.

But much of Reddit’s justification for isolating The Donald focused on its bad behaviours. This again plays into the motif of The Donald users as nothing more than agents of chaos, who want to see the (digital) world burn. This thesis has instead argued that, irrespective of the tactics, the users are legitimately committed to the cause. There is consequently competing interest at play
here, between maintaining standards of discourse on the web, and not creating completely isolated political communities who never interact with opposing beliefs. These are fundamental issues about the future of the internet, so it is difficult to label either concern as wrong – but at the very least, we need to be more openly discussing these trade-offs.
CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

This thesis undertook to study the motivations behind a new breed of digital activist, one who combines the rhetoric and messaging tools of the internet – i.e., memes – with the motivations behind decentralized, movement politics.

It did so by comparing anonymous, pro-Trump respondents from Reddit who willingly opted in to a survey, with the general public represented by the ANES. Particular emphasis was placed on internal and external political efficacy as the main explanatory factors behind what drives these sincere trolls, an archetype this thesis takes to calling jesters.

Based on the above findings, this thesis believes that while the particular brand of pro-Trump jesters who have gained media notoriety may outwardly appear as an outlier group with limited long-term implications, the opposite is true: they represent the first noteworthy instance of a soon to be much more popularized trend in contemporary activism.

These findings help contribute to the growing body of research on memes as a kind of political communication tool, and how movement-based politics is adapting to the age of the internet – what does the self-empowered and politically motivated individual do now? And how does that differ from 50 years ago?

Most of all, this study has direct implications for how we view these kinds of behaviours. At the moment, much of the existing research hesitates to attribute any seriousness to the act of trolling, let alone any underlying political substance. This thesis will hopefully help promote different interpretations of why people aim to monopolize or disrupt digital conversations, and the extent to which we should continue to rely on archaic understandings of activism when undertaken online.
Practically speaking, this study also has direct implications for the future architecture of the internet. As the internet continues to mature as a serious platform for political debate, we will be forced to confront the tension between allowing it to grow as an unregulated, free-flowing space, and how the existence of that space naturally invites activists to dominate it. Popular websites like Reddit are already grappling with exactly this issue.

Nevertheless, this study also has serious limitations. Respondents were unwilling to provide any substantial demographic information, and the voluntary opt-in nature of the survey, combined with Reddit’s inherent anonymity, obviously restrict the conclusions of this thesis from being extended to the general public. All we can gather from these findings is further insight into the motivations of an extremely select subgroup of online activists.

Future studies should expand on these findings, not only through more detailed study of The Donald, but additionally by trying to find the same kind of attitudes in more progressive communities. The extent to which these findings are true of digital activists outside of the United States is also a topic worth exploring. This is a necessary first step towards a greater understanding of what political activism will look like in the future.
APPENDIX 1: SURVEY

Political Efficacy

1) People like me don't have any say about what the government does.
   a. Agree Strongly
   b. Agree Somewhat
   c. Disagree Somewhat
   d. Disagree Strongly
   e. Depends

2) Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on.
   a. Agree Strongly
   b. Agree Somewhat
   c. Disagree Somewhat
   d. Disagree Strongly
   e. Depends

3) Public officials don't care much what people like me think.
   a. Agree Strongly
   b. Agree Somewhat
   c. Disagree Somewhat
   d. Disagree Strongly
   e. Depends

Demographics

4) What is your highest level of education obtained?
   a. Grade school, some high school
   b. High school diploma
   c. Some college, no degree
   d. College degree, post-grad

5) What gender do you identify as?
   a. Male
   b. Female

6) Thinking politically and socially, how would you describe your own general outlook?
   a. Very conservative
   b. Conservative
   c. Middle-of-the road
   d. Liberal
   e. Very liberal

7) In politics, as of today, do you consider yourself
   a. Republican
   b. Democrat
   c. Independent
8) Do you live in the United States, or outside of it?
   a. United States
   b. Outside the U.S.

Reddit-Specific Questions

9) What is your Reddit username?
10) How many hours did you spend yesterday on Reddit.com?
11) How much of your time on Reddit is spent exclusively on The_Donald?
   a. All
   b. Most
   c. Half
   d. Little
12) Do you think The_Donald had an impact on the 2016 presidential election?
   a. A lot
   b. Medium
   c. A little
   d. Not at all
13) How much do you use The_Donald as a news source?
   a. A lot
   b. Medium
   c. A little
   d. Not at all
14) Other than Reddit, what is a news source you use frequently?
15) If you had to give an example of a “Fake News Source,” what would it be?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Coding (if Applicable)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inner_Pol_Eff</td>
<td>Composite of Q2 in survey and ANES data</td>
<td>1 = “Strongly agree,” 2 = “Agree,” 3 = “Don’t know, depends,” 4 = “Disagree,” 5 =</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Strongly disagree”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ext_Pol_Eff_A</td>
<td>Composite of Q1 and ANES data</td>
<td>1 = “Strongly agree,” 2 = “Agree,” 3 = “Don’t know, depends,” 4 = “Disagree,” 5 =</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Strongly disagree”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ext_Pol_Eff_B</td>
<td>Composite of Q3 and ANES data</td>
<td>1 = “Strongly agree,” 2 = “Agree,” 3 = “Don’t know, depends,” 4 = “Disagree,” 5 =</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Strongly disagree”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>Composite of Q7 in survey, and ANES data</td>
<td>1 = “Very conservative,” 2 = “Conservative,” 3 = “Middle of the road,” 4 = “Liberal,”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5 = “Very liberal”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partyid</td>
<td>Composite of Q6 in survey and ANES data</td>
<td>11 = “Democrat,” 2 = “Republican,” 3 = “Independent”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Composite of Q5 in survey and ANES data</td>
<td>Male=0, Female=1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Composite of Q8, and ANES data</td>
<td>US=1, Not US=0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educ</td>
<td>Composite of Q4 in survey and ANES data</td>
<td>1 = “College / Post Grad,” 2 = “Grade school / Some high school,” 3 = “High school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>diploma,” 4 = “Some college, no degree”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing_Username</td>
<td>Q9 in survey</td>
<td>No username provided=1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours_On_Reddit</td>
<td>Q10 in survey</td>
<td>Value equal to their answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time_On_Donald</td>
<td>Q11 in survey</td>
<td>1 = “None At All,” 2 = “A Little,” 3 = “Half,” 4 = “Most,” 5 = “All”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact_Election</td>
<td>Q12 in survey</td>
<td>1 = “None at all,” 2 = “A little,” 3 = “Medium,” 4 = “A lot”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News_Source</td>
<td>Q12 in survey</td>
<td>See section below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYTTimes</td>
<td>Composite of ANES response and survey response</td>
<td>0 = does not consume, 1 = does consume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washpo</td>
<td>Composite of ANES response and survey response</td>
<td>0 = does not consume, 1 = does consume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Response Type</td>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannity</td>
<td>Composite of ANES response and survey response</td>
<td>0 = does not consume, 1 = does consume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WSJ</td>
<td>Composite of ANES response and survey response</td>
<td>0 = does not consume, 1 = does consume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yahoo</td>
<td>Composite of ANES response and survey response</td>
<td>0 = does not consume, 1 = does consume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABCnews</td>
<td>Composite of ANES response and survey response</td>
<td>0 = does not consume, 1 = does consume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBCnews</td>
<td>Composite of ANES response and survey response</td>
<td>0 = does not consume, 1 = does consume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNN</td>
<td>Composite of ANES response and survey response</td>
<td>0 = does not consume, 1 = does consume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox</td>
<td>Composite of ANES response and survey response</td>
<td>0 = does not consume, 1 = does consume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limbaugh</td>
<td>Composite of ANES response and survey response</td>
<td>0 = does not consume, 1 = does consume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dailymail</td>
<td>Composite of ANES response and survey response</td>
<td>0 = does not consume, 1 = does consume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC</td>
<td>Composite of ANES response and survey response</td>
<td>0 = does not consume, 1 = does consume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The_Guardian</td>
<td>Composite of ANES response and survey response</td>
<td>0 = does not consume, 1 = does consume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business_Insider</td>
<td>Composite of ANES response and survey response</td>
<td>0 = does not consume, 1 = does consume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fake_News</td>
<td>Q15 in survey</td>
<td>See section below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media_Fakenews</td>
<td>Did they mention other mainstream media companies as an example of fake news?</td>
<td>0 = did not mention, 1 = did mention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia_Fakenews</td>
<td>Did they mention collusion between President Trump and Russia as an example of fake news?</td>
<td>0 = did not mention, 1 = did mention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trump_Racist_Fakenews</td>
<td>Did they mention instances of Trump being accused of racism as an example of fake news?</td>
<td>0 = did not mention, 1 = did mention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noresp_Fakenews</td>
<td>Did not provide an answer</td>
<td>0 = responded, 1 = did not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High_Impact</td>
<td>Binary variable of Donald_Impact_Election</td>
<td>0 = answered “A Little,” or “Medium”, 1 = answered “Medium,” or “A Lot”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
NOTES

5 Christine Lagorio-Chaﬁkin.
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