THIS IS NOT A CAGE MATCH

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ABSTRACT

During the 2016 presidential election season, Senator Ted Cruz’s use of social media to promote his campaign and build up a grassroots following was masterful. This case study explores Cruz’s digital outreach efforts in the shadow of GOP rival Donald Trump’s commanding use of traditional earned media. This case study views the Cruz campaign’s digital outreach strategy through the lens of the Agenda Setting theory of communication, which seeks to explain the mass media’s ability to influence what the important issues are to the public, and through the reverse agenda setting effect, meaning if the airtime is unavailable through traditional means, the opportunity to create their own media space is open to anyone that needs it, and their own agenda will be established for the digital audience.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Rafael Edward “Ted” Cruz is a junior Republican Senator from Texas. Cruz was born in Calgary, Alberta, Canada to an American mother originally from Delaware and a Cuban father. At the age of four, his family moved back to the United States and settled in Houston, Texas. Cruz attended Princeton University, where he graduated cum laude with a degree in Public Policy from the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs in 1992. In addition to his studies, Cruz also competed on Princeton’s Debate Panel, winning the top speaker award at both the U.S. National Debating Championship and the North American Debating Championship in 1992, was named the 1992 U.S. National Speaker of the Year, and also won 1992’s Team of the Year award with his debate partner, David Panton. Following his time at Princeton, Cruz enrolled at Harvard Law School, graduating magna cum laude with a Juris Doctor degree in 1995.

Cruz has risen quickly in his professional career in law and government. In 1996, Cruz worked as a clerk for Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court William Rehnquist, becoming the first Hispanic to do so. Cruz was the director of the Office of Policy Planning at the Federal Trade Commission from 1999 until 2003, and was a domestic policy advisor to President George W. Bush during Bush’s 2000 presidential campaign. In 2003, after his time at the FTC was completed, he was appointed by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott to serve as the Texas Solicitor General. As the state’s lead attorney, Cruz argued nine different cases before the United States Supreme Court, winning five. Cruz left the Solicitor General position in 2008, returning to private practice and to also teach Supreme Court litigation as an adjunct professor at the
University of Texas School of Law. In what was called “the biggest upset in 2012” by the Washington Post, Cruz was elected to the United States Senate, first defeating Texas Lieutenant Governor David Dewhurst in a Republican primary, and later Democrat Paul Sadler in the general election. In 2015, after months of speculation, Cruz announced his candidacy to become President of the United States.

A cage match is something promoted by Dana White, the president of the Ultimate Fighting Championships. It isn’t what anyone would normally think of in the context of any kind of campaign for public office, and Ted Cruz was forced to remind everyone of that fact during a televised debate. However, what people witnessed during the race for the White House that took place between 2015 and 2016 wasn’t exactly a normal election season, especially for the Republican Party. The emergence of brash New York billionaire Donald Trump as the party’s front-runner for the nomination truly captured the country’s attention, but often not in a good way. Mainstream media companies, such as CNN, would broadcast his every statement, each one more outrageous than the last, and viewers across the country would tune in, often in record numbers.

At its peak, the Republican Party featured seventeen different candidates, all competing with each other in an attempt to earn the party’s nomination for president. There are multiple steps that candidates are required to take, if and when a decision is made to declare themselves an option for voters. For example, the men and women that make up a campaign organization must be hired. Fundraising needs to be conducted, and donations need to be solicited. A candidate needs to bring in volunteers to assist their outreach programs. And mass media, such as television, radio, and the Internet, needs to be utilized in order to promote a candidate and their policy ideas, in order to help convince voters that they are the best ones for the job.
What if a candidate held a near monopoly on traditional media coverage? What steps can a rival candidate take in order to build up a buzz on their campaign if it is next to impossible to earn any airtime? Enter Social Media.

**Importance of the Study**

The rise of social media has been dramatic. In just a little more than a decade, a significant portion of the world has been plugged into these digital networks, and the companies themselves are becoming major players in the political world. Facebook, for example, teamed up with both major political parties and with major television news networks to present four of the 2016 election season’s debates: first with Fox News for the first Republican debate, then with CNN for the first Democratic debate, then with Fox Business for the sixth Republican debate, then finally with PBS for the sixth Democratic debate. Additionally, YouTube teamed with NBC News and the Congressional Black Caucus Institute to present the fourth Democratic debate.

The first candidate to successfully utilize social media to promote their campaigns at the presidential level was in 2008 with Illinois Senator Barack Obama. In the eight years that followed, the medium spread so rapidly that any candidate seeking public office on any level would be foolish to ignore its potential to generate a following. A case study that takes an active look into how one candidate utilized these digital platforms to promote their campaigns and their policies would be of great benefit to the studies of political communication and the media’s ability to influence the public agenda.

**Statement of the Problem**

During the 2016 election, Donald Trump was able to command constant media coverage, to the point that other candidates were nearly invisible from the airwaves. In the face of this,
Trump’s rivals, Ted Cruz especially, were forced to use other means to reach out to voters. There are multiple questions that a case study that focuses on just one person could answer. How has the Ted Cruz presidential campaign used social media to set their own agenda? Are traditional mediums, such as television and print, now obsolete at setting the agenda, or are they just as important to a political campaign as they’ve always been? Will this approach by Senator Cruz help or hinder his chances at winning enough delegates at Republican primaries across the country to secure the Republican nomination? Ted Cruz’s use of social media to assist in his run for the White House provides an opportunity to explore the importance and the impact of this medium via a focused case study.

Definitions of Terms Used

As a practical definition, the Agenda Setting theory of communication seeks to explain the mass media’s ability to influence what are the important issues in a campaign as they are perceived by the public. Members of the news media, such as editors, broadcasters, reporters, and newsroom staff shape the stories they print and release over the airwaves. News media readers and viewers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position (McCombs, 1972).

The term “social media” refers to various forms of digital and computer-mediated communication tools that provide people or companies the means to interact with each other in virtual networks and communities. Users can create, share, and exchange information, ideas, videos, pictures, and other digital content and disseminate it via several different online platforms. Throughout this case study, three different social media platforms will be brought up: Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. Facebook was launched on February 4, 2004 by Harvard
student Mark Zuckerberg, and is a social media site that allows registered users to create a profile, write status updates, post photos, upload videos, and connect with other users. Over 1.59 billion people worldwide are registered with Facebook and are active on the network. YouTube is a video-sharing website that was launched on February 24, 2005 by three PayPal employees: Chad Hurley, Steven Chen, and Jawed Karim. Twitter is a social media and networking site developed by Jack Dorsey, and was launched on March 21, 2006. Twitter allows users to publicly post their “tweets” in short, 140-character long messages. Worldwide, Twitter has over 332 million active users. How Ted Cruz utilized these three social media sites as a way to counter Donald Trump’s non-stop coverage on traditional mediums will be the focus of this case study.

**Organization of Remaining Chapters**

In Chapter 2, a literature review provides a detailed explanation of the Agenda Setting theory of communication, an idea first traced to the 1922 book *Public Opinion* by Walter Lippmann and later explored in 1968 by Dr. Max McCombs and Dr. Donald Shaw. This chapter also explains the significance of the reverse agenda setting effect, a theory developed in 2007. In Chapter 3, the methodology of this case study will be explained. The size, scope, and timeframe of this study will be laid out. In Chapter 4, how the Cruz campaign utilized social media is explored on a month-by-month basis, starting with the senator’s official announcement at Liberty University and ending on the day of the SEC Primary twelve months later. In Chapter 5, the findings of the case study are summarized, conclusions are drawn, and further recommendations are made.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Philosophical/Ethical Assumptions

Senator Ted Cruz was a debate champion during his time at Princeton, and during his professional career as a lawyer and politician, he has debated various cases in front of the Supreme Court, in front of the Senate, and now in front of the American public. Being able to present his policy views during a crowded campaign season will require him to not only discuss why his policies would be better for the American people, but also why the policies of his opponents would not. This is a modern example of the use of the Socratic Method of learning and philosophy.

The Socratic Learning Method is a constructivist learning method with strong attention to the role of preconceptions in learning. It is useful in learning situations where one needs to evaluate a proposition contradictory to one’s preconceptions, or when one is to generate one’s own hypothesis given new information (Lam, 2011, p. 11). The number of issues at stake for the American people in the 2016 Presidential election are wide-ranging, with topics including health care, international conflicts, the threat of Islamic terrorism, a stagnant domestic economy, a crumbling national infrastructure, and a corrupt Washington D.C. “establishment” (termed by Senator Cruz as “the Washington cartel”) to name only a few examples. Not only did Senator Cruz have to develop policies to address the concerns of the American citizens, but he had to convince the voters that his direction would be best for the country. From an ethical standpoint, the campaign’s use of social media will be one more arm of the campaign, and will reflect the views of what is right and wrong behavior and conduct. Adding in the aspect of politics, political ethics is the practice of making moral judgements about a political action, and also the methods
used by a public official. The political world has a well-deserved reputation for being cut-throat, and has helped bring on the cliché of “all’s fair in love and politics.” If the social media footprint of the Cruz campaign turns to the muckraking of yellow journalism, it is likely the citizens will cast their votes for other candidates. Thus, it was imperative that the Cruz campaign maintain the ethical and moral high ground on their social media outreach.

During any campaign season, candidates draft their proposals and present them during speeches, debates, and through both new and traditional media. It was the job of the Cruz campaign to convince voters that his proposals will be best for the future of the country, and part of the job was to convince those who wouldn’t normally agree with a pure conservative worldview to vote for him in the primary elections, and later in the general election if he wins the nomination. As such, the Socratic Method of philosophy will be an underlying theme of this case study.

**Theoretical Basis**

As a practical definition, the Agenda Setting theory of communication was conceived by Drs. Max McCombs and Donald Shaw (McCombs, 1972), and it seeks to explain the mass media’s ability to influence what the important issues are to the public. The more time and attention is spent on a story, person, or campaign, the more likely it is the viewing audience will consider it to be important rather than irrelevant. If the media pays less attention on a story, the less likely it is the public will consider it to be a pressing issue. Members of the news media, such as editors, broadcasters, reporters, and newsroom staff all help shape the stories they print and release over the airwaves. News media readers and viewers learn not only about a given
issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position (McCombs, 1972).

The seeds for the Agenda Setting theory were planted by Walter Lippmann, the founder of *The New Republic* magazine, in 1922 in his book *Public Opinion*. Lippmann was increasingly concerned over the power of the media to construct and present images to the public. Lippmann argued that the “function of news is to signalize an event, the function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them in relation with each other, and make a picture of reality on which men can act” (Lippmann, 1922, p. 107).

Lippmann’s work was expanded on by McCombs and Shaw. McCombs and Shaw conducted a study during the 1968 American presidential election between Richard Nixon, Hubert Humphrey and George Wallace that was nicknamed the “Chapel Hill study.” When voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina were asked to name the most important issues of the day – in the very first empirical study of this agenda-setting influence – their responses closely reflected the pattern of news coverage during the previous month in the mix of newspapers, network television news, and news magazines available to them (McCombs, 2001). This helped McCombs and Shaw determine the influence the media has over shaping current public opinion. Their study was later published in a 1972 of *Public Opinion Quarterly*.

According to Doris Graber in *Mass Media & American Politics*, “when people are asked which issues are most important to them personally or to their communities, their lists tend to correspond to cues in the news sources that they use in their communities” (Graber, 2002, p. 207). News media organizations are not just passive transmitters of information, repeating the words of official sources or conveying exactly the events in a way as they happened. Through
their daily selection and presentation of the news, editors and reporters focus attention of the public's perceptions about the most important issues of the day. Hence, our attention is further focused and our pictures of the world are shaped and reproduced by the way journalists frame their news stories (Riaz, 2008).

Which aspects of an issue are covered in the news – and the relative emphasis on these various aspects of an issue – makes a considerable difference in how people view that issue. From the pattern of the total news coverage, the public learns what journalists consider the important issues are and who the prominent public figures of the day are. From the details of this coverage – the agenda of attributes presented by the news media – the public forms its images and perspective about these issues and public figures (McCombs, 2001, p. 7-8). Going one step further, agenda setting is considerably more than the classical assertion that the news tells us what to think about. The news also tells us how to think about it. Both the selection of objects for attention and the selection of frames for thinking about these objects are powerful agenda-setting roles (McCombs, 1993, p. 62).

The underlying theme of the agenda setting theory is the use of framing and priming by the media. Framing is based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences (Scheufele, 2007, p. 11). Frames, in other words, become invaluable tools for presenting relatively complex issues, such as stem cell research, efficiently and in a way that makes them accessible to lay audiences (Scheufele, 2007, p. 12). The priming hypothesis states that mass media, by making some issues more salient than others, influence “the standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public office are judged” (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, p. 63). While positive stories and the ability to spread the message are both vital for a campaign, just as important today is the ability to make
sure voters can remember where a candidate, such as Senator Cruz, stands on an issue or a policy.

Agenda setting from the policy processes approach is fundamentally about the politics of attention and attention dynamics at the level of the political system. As a consequence of this focus on information processing, media dynamics are intimately bound up with policymaking (Wolfe, 2013, p. 179). Both agenda-setting and priming are based on the assumption of attitude accessibility and, in particular, a memory-based model of information processing. Mass media can influence the salience of certain issues as perceived by the audience; that is, the ease with which these issues can be retrieved from memory (Scheufele, 2000, p. 300). This important factor will be vital when the public views the major candidates for President in the 2016 election, and Senator Cruz is no exception. Being able to differentiate from competitors will make a candidate stand out to voters. The mass media is the institution that will establish the successes and failures of campaigns by establishing the narrative of the public agenda, and the coverage generated will help to influence the results with voting primaries.

**Literature Review**

There is a symbiotic relationship between the mass media and political leaders at all levels. Members of the media, ranging from television executives to local newspaper reporters, and everyone in between, are always on the lookout for hard news stories to print or present over the airwaves. Conversely, it is vital for political leaders to take advantage of every communication medium they can, in order to present their policy proposals to potential voters. The press needs their stories, and politicians need the press. In advanced industrial democracies, media are part of politics, and they are the marketplace/arena in which political ideas and
proposals are launched, tested, scrutinized, and contested (Walgrave, 2006, p. 100). If an individual running for elected office is unable to present their arguments and policies to the public, it is unlikely their campaign will last very long. This is a fascinating example of how influential the mass media can be over a politician’s campaign, for they are the gatekeepers of the stories, and the ones that set the agenda. This case study will examine the relationship between the media’s ability to set the public agenda, the influence of social media, and Texas Senator Ted Cruz’s 2016 campaign to be elected President of the United States.

Since the rise of the Internet in the early 1990s, the world's networked population has grown from the low millions to the low billions. Over the same period, social media has become a fact of life for civil society worldwide, involving many actors – regular citizens, activists, nongovernmental organizations, telecommunications firms, software providers, governments (Shirkey, 2011). The explosion of social media sites and social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube was a rapid, surprising, and seismic shift in nearly all aspects of American life. At its creation, Facebook was simply a way for college students to become connected online, and was exclusively for college students only. During its existence, it has expanded to include high school students, senior citizens, middle-aged parents, schools, media companies, bloggers and commentators, past and present political figures, and major corporations.

Social media’s evolution into a medium to report news has created a much larger marketplace of information. For example, YouTube allows individuals an opportunity to help drive – and at times lead – public discourse on socially relevant and politically important issues. It provides an example of how a social media platform is now being used to bring attention to an issue when the mainstream media are not (Bode, 2010, p. 26). A once trim national media that consisted primarily of the three national networks plus a handful of cable news channels and a
small number of national newspapers has bloated and now includes an ever-growing number of online news outlets that do much to set the public agenda and salience regarding a number of issues (Malcheff, 2010, p. 12).

The use of emerging communication mediums and advancing technology is nothing new, from Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s use of the radio, televised debates first made famous by John F. Kennedy, and e-mails used by former Minnesota governor Jesse Ventura. The impact of social media was on display in 2008. The successful use of social media in the US presidential campaign of Barack Obama has established Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, and other social media networks as integral parts of the political campaign toolbox. Some analysts attribute Obama's victory to a large extent to his online strategy (Tumasjan, 2010, p. 178). With the help of the Internet, (Obama) raised $745 million. He made use of social media platforms such as Facebook and MySpace to identify and communicate with supporters around the country. And through Meetup.com, he launched virtual get-together with voters in many different locales simultaneously (West, 2012, p. 4).

The emergence of social media has generated renewed attention to the reverse agenda-setting idea (Nuemann, 2014, p. 195). This new medium, and its impact on the aspect of “citizen journalism,” has given people the opportunity to create a news story on a social media feed, a personal blog, or on a personal website if and when they witness an event. Instead of waiting for the traditional mass media to broadcast the story, citizen journalists will publish the story on their own. A recent study showed that such a news story, or even a comment on a forum, can become so popular, that the traditional media eventually reports on the issue. This is called the Reverse Agenda-Setting effect (Kim & Lee, 2007). Campaigners would be doing an incredible disservice to themselves if this new medium is ignored. The ability to reach voters in a fast-paced culture
that has an emphasis on 24-hour news coverage has been taken advantage of by all candidates, Senator Cruz especially. A candidate campaigning for a political office shouldn’t wait for the media to create the stories. Instead, they can use their platforms to be one step ahead of traditional broadcasting. In addition, the use of online video has exploded in recent years, and campaigners are beginning to combine the targeting power of rich data analytics with video's attention-getting emotional appeal, creating a hybrid form of campaigning tailor-made for the digital age. Many candidates are using the medium to project a more relatable image than what they put out over television ads (Chang, 2015).

The strength of agenda setting lies in its power to offer a compelling explanation of issues important to society and to predict the issues salient to those with similar media exposure (Matei, 2010). The growth of social media has resulted in an expansion of information and in the size of the media marketplace. The modern media landscape is now populated by bloggers, citizen journalists, Facebook and Twitter users as well as traditional media giants. Today, anyone can become a node in the media production process (Matei, 2010). Traditional media agenda setting is now just one force among many competing influences (Meraz, 2009, p. 701). Now, the consumer takes the role of a gatekeeper because the Internet allows for anyone to be the author and reporter of information (Berger & Freeman, 2011, p. 14). This presents a challenge for anyone in need of media attention, such as a campaigning political leader. If the airtime is unavailable through traditional means, the opportunity to create their own media space is open to anyone that needs it, and their own agenda will be established for the digital audience.

Social media’s impact on the operation of the mass media and on political figures cannot be understated. This type of campaign marketing is much different than creating television commercials, as the politicians can create social media posts quickly and easily to react to news
and reach out to voters, whereas making an advertisement is a much longer process (Jerpi, 2012). This case study provides a glimpse into the new medium’s contemporary influence on a major presidential campaign.

**Rationale**

Social media has moved on from “buzz word” status, and is now a full-fledged communication tool for anyone campaigning for political office, with more candidates, staff members, and volunteers using these platforms to distribute their messages. For many candidates, the capability to tap into the millennial demographic is an important component of their efforts on social networks. Millennials are the bulk of users on many of the most popular niche social sites (Brousell, 2015). As in the business world, the most powerful aspect of social media is that it allows the business to connect and converse with voters in a way you never have before. It gives you a direct line to the people who hold the future of your political career in their hands (Blockey, 2015).

While the agenda-setting theory has been studied since the late 1960’s, it would be beneficial if it was researched with a new communication medium as its centerpiece. Social media is still a relatively young phenomenon, and the impact is has had on the political spectrum is still being felt. When combined with the political process found in an election year, having multiple factors being included all at once creates an opportunity for an additional contribution to the agenda-setting communication theory, and also in political communication.

**Research Questions & Hypothesis**

How has the Ted Cruz presidential campaign used social media to set their own agenda? Are traditional mediums, such as television and print, now obsolete at setting the agenda, or are
they just as important to a political campaign as they’ve always been? Will this approach by
Senator Cruz help or hinder his chances at winning enough delegates at Republican primaries
across the country to secure the Republican nomination? The grassroots, “retail politics”
approach cannot be overlooked by any serious candidate, and the Cruz campaign’s use of social
media only served to complement their use traditional communication mediums.
CHAPTER 3: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The Scope of the Study

The Agenda-Setting Theory of communication established the criteria necessary in order for a person to measure the influence and power of the mass media. Conversely, the Reverse-Agenda Setting effect shows how a powerful grassroots approach can push back against the mainstream media’s leverage over the national conversation. Senator Cruz was the first major political leader to formally their candidacy for president, and by doing so, he informally started the race to the White House. The 2016 national election season quickly expanded to include a vast field of candidates. At its peak, five candidates competed for the Democrat Party’s nomination, while seventeen candidates competed for the Republican ticket. Instead of a broad approach that would focus on the entire field, this case study centered on the candidacy of only one person, that being Senator Ted Cruz.

The 2016 campaign season, like others in the past, dominated the national conversation, as expected. What made this one unique was the candidacy of one of Senator Cruz’s Republican rivals: Manhattan-based real estate tycoon and reality television star Donald Trump. The announcement from Mr. Trump sent shockwaves through the mass media and the country. No case study focused on the media landscape of the 2016 election could possibly leave Trump out, simply based on his force of personality, and his brilliant use of mainstream and social media as a way to keep himself as the Republican front-runner. As this case study focused on the Cruz campaign’s ability to set its own agenda through the use of social media, leaving out a consistent target of the campaign would have been irresponsible. In addition, the dates of the study were limited. The starting point of the case study was Senator Cruz’s official declaration at Liberty
University, and the ending point was what was nicknamed the “SEC Primary” by some and “Super Tuesday” by others, that being March 1, 2016.

Methodology of the Study

Participants

Ted Cruz announced his candidacy for President of the United States on March 23, 2015 at a student convocation at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, and also through his Twitter page. His campaign had focused on the long term goal of winning the general election for President in November of 2016 by combining fundraising from a broad coalition of conservative donors and backers, by using a data-driven operation to locate independent voters, by using a grassroots approach with volunteers and supporters to conduct a personalized outreach program to these potential voters, and finally by using a strong digital campaign on social media to proactively court voters and supporters through Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. It is this final step to his strategy that assisted Cruz the most in a media environment that has transformed into a 24-hour a day crunch that relies on instant information, and is the focus of this case study.

Materials & Procedure

According to Creswell (1998: 61), a case study is an exploration of ‘a bounded system,’ which can be defined in terms of time and place (e.g. an event, an activity, individuals, or groups of people), over time and through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information that are rich in context (Eriksson, 2008, p. 118). Intensive case study research aims at understanding a unique case from the inside by providing a thick, holistic and contextualized description (Eriksson, 2008, p. 118). In addition, intensive case study research draws on the
qualitative and ethnographic research traditions, emphasizing interpretation and understanding of
the case as well as elaboration of cultural meanings and sense-making processes in specific
contexts (Eriksson, 2008, p. 119).

This case study begins by maintaining a start and end point. The start point is the official
announcement that happened on March 23, 2015. The end point of the case study is March 1,
2016. That was the date of what was nicknamed both “Super Tuesday” and “the SEC Primary.”
Main coverage that was reviewed of the Cruz campaign was the various social media networks
used by Senator Cruz, to include his Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube accounts. Additionally,
coverage from media outlets, including CNN, The New York Times, The Washington Post,
National Review, The Wall Street Journal, and Des Moines Register, is included. The
combination of traditional and social media created a comprehensive view of the Cruz campaign
over a 12-month period before the primary voting began.

Based on how this particular case study is framed, a qualitative based approach with a
single subject matter was the most appropriate avenue to take. The sample size is small, and a
method based on observational evidence with verifiable trends was used. Exploring how the
mainstream media divided up the air-time on television while comparing that to poll results
during the campaign helped create a vital foundation of the Agenda-Setting theory of
communication at work.

Data Analysis

Critical analysis of the Cruz campaign’s use of social media accounts to promote his run
to the White House was needed in order to determine its influence on the voters. Senator Cruz’s
digital footprint was an important piece of his campaign from the very beginning of his political
career. His campaign for the Presidency included a professional campaign website, and active accounts with Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. The ability for Senator Cruz to maintain constant communication with his supporters and with potential voters in an overactive media environment that provides news coverage twenty-four hours per day was vital for his campaign.

Researching the published data by media watchdog groups and mainstream media outlets assisted in following the trends of the election season. The Media Research Center, The Washington Post, and analyst Nate Silver’s polling aggregation website FiveThirtyEight.com each provided invaluable research in publishing the trends and media attention during modern political campaign seasons, and the 2016 race for President has been no exception. Mr. Silver’s FiveThirtyEight.com blog, currently owned by ESPN, is a highly respected and highly rewarded website that has earned the “Bloggie Award” in 2008 for Best Political Coverage, a “Webbie” Award from the International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences for “Best Political Blog” in 2012 and 2013, among numerous others. These three organizations provided a great amount of analytical work for consumers and readers, and were invaluable for this case study.

It is no coincidence that this case study on the Cruz campaign relied on statistical data to show the effects of his digital outreach and social media footprint, because data analytics was one of the cornerstones of the entire Cruz operation. Cruz’s campaign manager, Jeff Roe, is on the record as stating, “The conventional wisdom has been destroyed. What you can do is rely on data.” At the start of the campaign, Cruz hired a Massachusetts company called Cambridge Analytica (a U.S. affiliate of a behavioral research company based in London called SCL Group) to build the data-gathering operation. In addition, the campaign hired Chris Wilson, the president of the polling firm WPA Opinion Research, to be the campaign’s director of research and analytics. The two primary aspects of the data analytical approach are behavior modeling
(predicting action based on social media activity) and microtargeting (personal and direct communication in the form of phone calls and in-person house visits). The goal of this data-driven approach was to locate and mobilize potential Cruz voters into a core support group of evangelical Christians, Tea Party conservatives, and blue collar “Reagan Democrats.”

Validity

In general, validity means measuring what we intend to measure. If an index, test, or scale is used to measure a particular construct, such as credibility, the measure should include items or questions about all aspects of the construct (content validity) – for example, authoritativeness, believability, and the like (Rubin, 2010, p. 203). To put it another way, validity refers to the extent to which conclusions are drawn in research that gives an accurate description or explanation of what happened (Eriksson, 2008, p. 292). In qualitative research, the term ‘validity’ is used in a rather differently defined meaning: the aim is to provide research with a guarantee that the report or description is correct (Eriksson, 2008, p. 292).

This case study avoided fringe media outlets that have had questionable stories proven to be fabrications, such as Gawker Media (a progressive website that published a false story about a candidate for the U.S. Senate from Colorado named Cory Gardner). More than anything, this study will take a step-by-step view on the verified facts of the Cruz campaign so that the validity of the research cannot be called into question.

Reliability

Reliability refers to how dependable, stable, consistent, and repeatable measures are in a study and across several studies. If we use a measure twice and the results are about the same both times, the measure has test-retest reliability. If all items in a measurement scale seem to measure the same thing, we say the measure has internal consistency (Rubin, 2010, p. 203).
Reliability tells you the extent to which a measure, procedure or instrument yields the same result on repeated trials. Therefore, the question of reliability is related to the establishment of a degree of consistency in research in the sense that another researcher can replicate your study and come up with similar findings (Eriksson, 2008, p. 292).

What is reported and how consumers interpret it are two very different things. As the Agenda-Setting theory demonstrated, the media does not tell the public how to think. Instead, it only tells the public what to think about. With this aspect in mind, it would be important to remember that what is reported, especially for political leaders, can and does result in a variety of reactions. For example, if a hypothetical report from FiveThirtyEight.com indicates that Senator Cruz is rising in polls for various states, that report is exactly that, a report. How readers interpret that information is outside of the control of Nate Silver and his staff. The only things this researcher can do are dig for the facts of the campaign and present them as they are.

**Ethical Considerations**

Research ethics concerns what is right and wrong in the conduct of research (Rubin, 2010, p. 204). Empirical researchers need to remain systematic and objective in the many choices they make when designing measures, selecting and observing participants, analyzing their data, and reporting the results of their studies (Rubin, 2010, p. 204). In addition, it is imperative that researchers conduct themselves with honesty and accountability, avoid deception and harm to all participants, maintain confidentiality, and respect the privacy and anonymity of all subjects.

In full disclosure, this researcher is a registered Republican, currently lives in the state of Maine, and caucused for Senator Ted Cruz during the 2016 election season. At no time did this
researcher volunteer or work for the Cruz campaign in any capacity on any level. In addition, this researcher is also a former journalist that greatly values the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics. In this Code of Ethics, there are four principles which will be applied while conducting this case study. These principles are: seek the truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently, and be accountable and transparent. Those principles are exactly what this researcher intended to do: seek the truth of the Cruz campaign’s digital outreach and its effects on his candidacy by using a variety of sources, and report it via this case study. Nothing more, and nothing less.
CHAPTER 4: THE STUDY

Introduction

According to the political journalism company Politico, the secret to Ted Cruz’s political success dating back to his 2012 election to the United States Senate has been his masterful use of social media. After that, he “became Exhibit A of how to effectively use social media to grow a movement.” Right from the very start, Cruz understood the power of the medium of social media, and the benefits to electronically building a grassroots following. He first made his announcement he was running for public office not by a press release, or a press conference, but by a simple tweet to his Twitter account. That same year, Cruz hired a gentleman named Josh Perry to serve as the senator’s Social Media Director, a staff position he continued to hold during the national campaign. His victory against the sitting Texas Lieutenant Governor, David Dewhurst, in the Republican primary, and against Democrat Paul Sadler in the general election, was called “the biggest upset of 2012” by the Washington Post.

His first three years in Washington, D.C. quickly became controversial. As a star of the far-right Tea Party movement, he built up a reputation as a hot-headed, principled conservative who was unafraid to tangle with anyone, even his own Republican colleagues. Two incidents especially stand out: the shutdown of the federal government in 2013, and a heated argument on the Senate floor with Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell. The former occurred in October of 2013. As an outspoken critic of the Affordable Care Act, Cruz engineered a 21-hour filibuster on the Senate floor which would have held up the passing of a federal budget bill, and thus, defunding the health care act. The end result was a temporary shutdown of the federal government, and according to Bloomberg News, it cost the United States economy over $20
billion. His filibuster had the support of only eighteen of his fellow Senators, and was widely condemned. The latter, with Senator McConnell, occurred in July of 2015. It was the position of Sen. McConnell that the U.S. government should reauthorize the Export-Import Bank of the United States (an export credit agency of the federal government), a position that Cruz opposed. During a hearing on the Senate floor over the Ex-Im Bank, Cruz openly accused McConnell of being a liar. According to Cruz, McConnell scheduled a vote on the Ex-Im Bank, and this was done because McConnell brokered a deal with Senate Democrats to block a trade bill. Senator McConnell denied there was any deal in place, and Cruz slandered him as a liar. When discussing it with Reuters, Cruz said,

What we just saw today was an absolute demonstration that not only what he told every Republican senator, but what he told the press over and over and over again was a simple lie. We now know that when the majority leader looks us in the eyes and makes an explicit commitment, that he is willing to say things that he knows are false.

This public outburst was widely condemned (again) by his Senate colleagues.

With this kind of a background, it should come to no surprise that Ted Cruz quickly became one of the most hated men in Washington, D.C. However, on the other hand, his respect and admiration among the grassroots voters and Tea Party conservatives quickly grew. Public polls have shown that trust in Congress, nicknamed the “Washington cartel” by Cruz, has plummeted in recent years, and while he burned nearly every bridge with fellow Senators in almost record time, this borderline anti-hero was slowly expanding his following. One example is a piece of art drawn up by a California street artist named Sabo. As explained by the Washington Post, Sabo created the piece in 2014, and it depicted Cruz “shirtless, buff and
tattooed, with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth.” Once it was finished and released, the image quickly went viral, and became a hit among the conservative voting bloc. According to Sabo, “he’s always someone that kind of pissed off the establishment in Washington and I thought ‘he’s kind of a badass.’” As we will see in this case study, that “anti-establishment” attitude became the top driving force during the 2016 election season. And how did Ted Cruz react to this depiction of him? He sent out a tweet on March 15, 2014, posting “Saw this, but noticed an error. So I wanted to make one thing clear: I don't smoke cigarettes.” The post was then retweeted 3,600 times.

By the end of 2014, the buzz for the 2016 Presidential election was starting to build, and that buzz could be seen on social media. Both Facebook and Twitter had set up algorithms that tracked the mentions of potential candidates for the upcoming election. The top two potential candidates were Senator Ted Cruz and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. According to Politico in December of 2014, “Hillary Clinton and Ted Cruz together accounted for 40 percent of the discussion on Facebook and nearly half — 47 percent — of mentions on Twitter among 10 top presidential possibilities in the past three months, according to new data provided to POLITICO by Facebook and Twitter.”

All of this momentum came to a head on the morning of March 23, 2015, at the student convocation at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia.

**Results of the Study**

This case study on Ted Cruz’s campaign, specifically his use of social media to expand his support for the November 2016 election, followed his accounts on a month by month basis, and focused on his use of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. The timeframe used will be from his
official start at Liberty University on March 23, 2015, to the finish of the “SEC Primary” on March 1, 2016. The Republican Party’s field of candidates quickly swelled to seventeen candidates, and as we will see, the mainstream media’s attention (and thus, the set agenda) was quickly focused on real estate tycoon Donald Trump. It was up to the Cruz campaign to maximize their use of digital and social media to counter the constant Trump coverage (and thus, put the Reverse Agenda Setting effect into action).

March, 2015

Just like when he started his campaign for the U.S. Senate in 2012, Ted Cruz announced his campaign for the Presidency via Twitter. The message was simple: “I'm running for President and I hope to earn your support!” The tweet was posted in the wee hours of the morning of March 23, 2015, 12:09 AM to be exact. It went on to be retweeted over 13,100 times. Just a few short hours later, Cruz took the stage to announce his candidacy. His thirty minute speech captivated the student audience, and as the first major name to enter the race for the White House, the news quickly went viral. The full speech was uploaded to Cruz’s official YouTube channel, and was viewed over 79,000 times. In addition, it was uploaded to the accounts of C-Span, where it was viewed 96,000 times, by the right wing blog account Right Scoop (52,000 views), the Washington Post (20,000 views), the Washington, D.C. based news station ABC7 WJLA (19,000 views) and by Liberty University (4,000 views).

The date itself is important, because March 23, 1775 is date Patrick Henry exclaimed his famous line, “give me liberty or give me death.” For those that went on to watch Cruz’s announcement, viewers noticed that the speech was built around two concepts: liberty and imagination. The word “liberty” was used fourteen times. The words “imagine” and
“imagination” were used forty times. By doing so, Cruz was immediately establishing a core support base of Tea Party and evangelical conservatives, with plans to expand from there. The following day, Cruz posted to his official Facebook page an interview with conservative radio pundit Glenn Beck, stating in the caption “We are building a grassroots army of courageous conservatives all across this country. Join us: www.tedcruz.org.” The interview had 98,000 views, and shared on Facebook 1,200 times.

With over 250,000 views on YouTube combined with the national news attention for being the first one to enter the race, the campaign was off to a good start. Unfortunately, the initial coverage of Ted Cruz’s chances at victory was dismissive. For example, the blog FiveThirtyEight’s lead story was titled “Let’s Be Serious About Ted Cruz From The Start: He’s Too Extreme And Too Disliked To Win,” and it went on to state, “Cruz almost certainly has no shot of winning the nomination, according to every indicator that predicts success in presidential primaries.”

April, 2015

It was during the next few months, starting in April, that the fields for the Republican and Democrat campaigns started to fill out. Two of Ted Cruz’s Republican Senate colleagues, Rand Paul of Kentucky and Marco Rubio of Florida, announced they would be running. In addition, the entrance of former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on April 12, 2015 was met with great anticipation from the Democrat Party, and she was quickly heralded as the front-runner for both the Democratic nomination and for the general election in November. Stretching out until July, the field expanded, with seventeen candidates for the GOP ticket, and five for the Democrats.
Many early favorites for the Republican nomination included former Florida governor Jeb Bush, Wisconsin governor Scott Walker, and retired neurosurgeon Dr. Ben Carson.

Being the first one in the race combined with a powerful and coded speech focusing on liberty and imagination that went viral online paid off in the short-term for the campaign. On April 1, 2015, the polling company Public Policy Polling placed Cruz third nationally behind Gov. Walker and Gov. Bush, based on a survey of “443 Republican primary voters from March 26th to 31st.” Not bad for somebody perceived to be a fringe candidate with no shot at competing at the national level. Additionally, the campaign’s first attack ad against Hillary Clinton was posted online the very same day Secretary Clinton announced her candidacy, and was received quite favorably. “We’re Ready for Hillary” showed the voters that Cruz was focused on the long-term goal of being elected to the White House, the polls in the short-term were nothing to fuss about, and received just under 48,000 YouTube views. When it was posted to his Facebook account, it received 211,000 views and 4,000 shares. Curiously, the ad included the following line from Cruz: “Does America want a third Obama term? Or are we ready for strong conservative leadership to make America great again?” Two days later, he posted a link to donate.tedcruz.org, garnering 2,500 Facebook shares, with the goal to bring in financial contributions.

May, 2015

It was in this month that Cruz set the tone for the campaign, explaining he would make every attempt to take the high road when the election season becomes heated. During an interview with the Daily Caller at a campaign stop in South Carolina on May 9th, Cruz said, “I understand that our friends in the media love to see Republicans shoot each other. That makes
As the Republican field expanded and the month went on, Cruz found himself dropping in the polls, showing that mainstream pundits might have been correct about him. For example, the *Des Moines Register* article “Iowa Poll: Walker Maintains Popularity With 7-point Lead” reviewed a Des Moines Register/Bloomberg Politics Iowa poll conducted from May 25-29 of 402 likely Republican Iowa caucus goers. This poll resulted in Cruz coming in eighth place at only 5%, and found Scott Walker as the front-runner. At the time, Gov. Walker hadn’t even formally announced his candidacy. The short-term excitement generated from the Liberty University speech had worn off.

With the field growing, Cruz continued his social media outreach while maintaining the “slow and steady wins the race” pacing, but the results were mixed. His interviews with various radio and podcast hosts, such as Larry Kudlow, Adam Carolla, and Pat Campbell were all posted to the campaign’s YouTube and Facebook pages, but hardly made a dent in the oversaturated field. On YouTube, the Kudlow and Campbell interviews received less than 5,000 views, and the Carolla interview garnering only 6,600 views. In addition, his speech at the Iowa Faith and Freedom Coalition Summit also brought in less than 5,000 views.

**June, 2015**

On June 16, 2015, the biggest bombshell of the 2016 election season exploded. At Trump Tower in New York City, real estate billionaire and reality television star Donald Trump announced he was entering the race. During his speech, Trump brought up various domestic issues, such as the national debt, offshoring American jobs, unemployment, and especially illegal
immigration, stating about Mexico, “They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” Mr. Trump’s campaign slogan was also rolled out at the end of his speech: “Make America Great Again.” It was exactly what Ted Cruz said two months prior when Secretary Clinton entered the election race.

While Senator Cruz’s announcement speech was focused, refined and well received (the New York Times noted that Cruz “has an evident flair for the theatric”), Mr. Trump’s speech was bombastic, politically incorrect, and created an immediate backlash. Additionally, mainstream media coverage of Ted Cruz tended to wither out, while the media coverage of Donald Trump was extensive. These traits would continue to define the two candidates for the rest of the election season.

June was busy month for the Ted Cruz. On June 30th, his official autobiography “A Time for Truth” was published. The release also sparked a hashtag that trended on Twitter (#atimefortruth), and this same hashtag was used on fifteen video clips posted to Cruz’s YouTube account. Additionally, it was in this month that the Cruz campaign made the decision to focus on winning the state of Iowa. As the first in the nation caucus, winning Iowa holds great importance to every candidate, and it is why the polls reported in the Des Moines Register are taken so seriously among the candidates and the public.

According to the Washington Post, Cruz was “vowing to visit all of Iowa’s 99 counties, launching a fresh push to recruit key grass-roots volunteers and opening a campaign office.” While Cruz, at the time, had only made a small handful of visits to the state, he said the main focus at that point was on fundraising. “In the early parts of a campaign, you cannot succeed
without having the resources to communicate your message.” Thanks in part to his continued posting to his social media accounts leadings to his donation page, the Cruz campaign was “on pace to have raised $8 million to $10 million by June 30.”

July, 2015

On July 14, 2015, the Obama administration officially announced the Joint Comprehension Plan of Action, commonly known as the Iran Nuclear Deal, making headlines around the globe. After intense international negotiations, a deal was struck with the Iranians in regards to their nuclear program. Enrichment programs would either cease or be limited (with the exception of the enrichment facility at Natanz), research on nuclear centrifuges would only be on an agreed scope and schedule, and there would be additional monitoring from the International Atomic Energy Agency. In return, the United States and the European Union terminate all economic sanctions, freeing up tens of billions of dollars in revenue and frozen assets.

Much of international community praised the agreement. United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon called the deal “a comprehensive, negotiated solution to the Iranian nuclear issue will contribute to peace and stability in the region.” However, the outrage from the Republican members of Congress, and much of the American people, was swift and immediate. Additionally, it altered the trajectory of the entire 2016 Presidential campaign and influenced the policies of all its candidates, and Senator Cruz was no exception. Dating back to March, while the negotiations were happening, Cruz was actively outspoken against the deal, and used his Twitter account to let the world know. On March 3, 2015, Cruz tweeted a photo of himself with the caption: “For three years we have gone round and round in pointless negotiations while we endanger both our security and Israel’s security.” The actual tweet, less than 140 characters,
stated “Obama Admin's negotiations w/ Iran have been a failure. We must stand united with Israel to prevent a nuclear Iran!” Additionally, on the same day, Cruz was featured on the Fox News program “On the Record with Greta Van Susteren,” calling it “catastrophic.” The thirty second video clip was posted to Cruz’s Facebook page and YouTube accounts, resulting in a combined total of just 40,000 views. Two days later, Cruz was featured on the Fox News program “The Kelly File,” doubling down on his position on the Iranian nuclear deal. Being featured on the top rated program on the highest rated cable news station helped increase Cruz’s visibility, as the interview was again posted to his social media accounts, resulting in 88,000 combined views, and 2,100 Facebook shares. Later, on July 28th, Cruz was interviewed on Fox News and challenged President Obama to a one-on-one debate over the Iran nuclear deal. While the offer was never accepted, the open challenge generated over 110,000 views on Cruz’s Facebook page.

On the exact same day the Iran nuclear deal was announced, another shocking news item hit the American airwaves. An anti-abortion group called the Center for Medical Progress released the first in a series of sting videos against the abortion provider Planned Parenthood, alleging that the organs and tissue of aborted babies were sold for profit. From the outset of the scandal, Planned Parenthood denied any wrongdoing. Abortion was already a highly contentious issue among Americans, and this story only increased the divide.

As a candidate that is positioned as a pro-life social conservative, Ted Cruz pounced. Like the rest of the GOP field, he was quick to condemn Planned Parenthood and stand up for the pro-life cause. During a television interview with on Fox Business with Neil Cavuto, Cruz said “every American should watch the videos,” and called for a federal investigation. Like most of his interviews, this one was also posted to Cruz’s social media accounts, with the caption “We
should not be funding a criminal enterprise that is selling the body parts of unborn children. #DefundPlannedParenthood.” This particular post received over 208,000 views and over 4,500 Facebook shares. Regardless if voters agreed or disagreed, there would be no question what Cruz’s opinion and policies were in terms of this Planned Parenthood scandal, and of abortion as a whole.

**August, 2015**

August featured the first official GOP debate out of a scheduled twelve. With the previous month’s news stories featuring the Iran nuclear deal and the Planned Parenthood alleged organ harvesting scandal still fresh in people’s minds, the event carried a lot of intrigue for potential voters. As CNN reported two days before the event, “with the rise of Donald Trump and the drama his surge has provoked, the first debate is arguably the most anticipated 2016 election event to date.” The date was August 6, 2015, the location was Cleveland, Ohio, and the prime time debate was hosted by Fox News, Facebook, and the Ohio Republican Party.

During the early spring campaign season, where did all of the work from the Cruz campaign land him in the national polls leading up to this event? He was tied for sixth place, badly trailing the front-runner. Going into the first debate, Fox News combined the data of five different polling agencies (Fox News, CBS News, Bloomberg, Monmouth University, and Quinnipiac University) in order to determine the ten candidates that would take the main stage. To the astonishment of many mainstream pundits, Donald Trump was by far the front-runner, having overtaken Scott Walker and Jeb Bush in early July. Trump was polling at 23.4%, holding a double digit lead over Gov. Bush. Senator Cruz was lagging behind at 5.4%.
According to the Neilsen ratings, the debate was viewed by 24 million people in the United States, making it “the highest-rated non-sports telecast in cable television history,” and also the most watched primary debate in cable television history. The social media impact was also impressive; both during the event with live tweeting, and after as viewers shared their feedback and opinions. When recapping the first debates from the Democrat and Republican parties, Yahoo! News reported that, “Facebook, which co-sponsored the showdowns, said 7.5 million people in the United States made 20 million debate-related interactions on Facebook, including likes, posts, comments and shares, the social media giant said Friday. Twitter reported that tweets about the two debates were viewed a whopping 1.1 billion times.” Front-runner Donald Trump credited himself with the ratings boost. Much of the mainstream media’s attention was focused on Trump, partly due to the curiosity factor of seeing a political neophyte that had never held elected office in any capacity on a Presidential debate stage, but especially over his feud with Fox News moderator Megyn Kelly over her questions of sexism and misogyny that resulted in a post-debate response from Trump so graphic that this researcher will not, in good conscience, repeat it in this case study.

As a former debate champion, Cruz’s performance was well received, as a review from NPR noted that he “passionately argued his conservative beliefs.” He also avoided the verbal sparring and attacks that are usually found in primary debates. What was lacking was mainstream media attention. In a CNN article titled “First Debate Shakes Up 2016 Republican Field” that recapped the impact of the event, Cruz was not even mentioned.

Following the debate’s conclusion, Cruz’s YouTube account uploaded seven video clips. Five clips were from during the debate. Two were from the post-debate recap shows, one featuring pollster Frank Luntz and a focus group, and another featuring Cruz being interviewed.
by Fox News commentator Sean Hannity. The follow up with Mr. Hannity was featured prominently on Cruz’s Facebook page, and it received over 101,000 views and 2,000 shares.

For the remainder of the month, Cruz and his campaign continued their efforts in both Iowa and in the states that made up the SEC Primary, including Arkansas, Alabama, Oklahoma, Texas, Tennessee, and Georgia. The social media accounts were flooded with quick video clips of the campaign stops in what was dubbed “#CruzCountry.” In addition, Cruz also made appearances on the CBS Sunday morning talk show “Face the Nation.” While the information and availability was there for the public, views and shares were modest, with one exception: a thirty-five second video clip from an interview with Megyn Kelly over the Planned Parenthood scandal hit 149,000 views where Cruz explained that on the first day in office, he would instruct the Department of Justice to open an investigation into that organization and the allegations.

September, 2015

On September 9, 2015, both Ted Cruz and Donald Trump appeared together at a rally in Washington, D.C. showing opposition to the Iranian nuclear deal. This sparked interest into what the relationship between the two candidates was like. When asked why the two teamed up, Cruz told reporters, “The reason’s not complicated. No. 1: I like Donald. He's a friend of mine. But when Donald arrives at an event, he brings an army of TV reporters. And Donald's being there ... means the mainstream media will cover the event.” Piggybacking on the extra media attention was sound strategy. Additionally, it was reported that the reason the two were courting each other was because each were looking to scoop up their supporters, should one of them fizzle out during the election season.
On September 16, 2015, the second GOP debate was held, this time at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California and broadcast on CNN. The main story in the press following this event was the performance of former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina. A combination of a spirited attack on the Planned Parenthood scandal and her countering the sexist remarks made by Donald Trump that were reported in a Rolling Stone magazine article resulted in a boost in Fiorina’s standing. The blog FiveThirtyEight.com recapped the entire event, and at its conclusion, the site’s editor, Nate Silver, wrote “a lot of media types in my Twitter feed seem to think Carly Fiorina did really well, and my colleagues and I at FiveThirtyEight agree.”

Meanwhile, Senator Cruz had a low-key and almost unmemorable performance, again avoiding the verbal fireworks. FiveThirtyEight gave Cruz a C+ grade, while Fiorina earned an A. In a CNN recap article titled “CNN's Republican Debate: Winners and Losers,” Cruz was not mentioned until the very last paragraph, solidly in the “losers” section. He, along with former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee, “revealed an unwillingness to engage their fellow candidates on key policy issues.” This approach was by design, as Cruz knew he wasn’t going to win the election on the second debate, but also knew that a disastrous performance could certainly ruin his chances. A C+ debate grade wasn’t the end of the world.

Be that as it may, much like the first debate, Cruz’s social media accounts were flooded with video clips of his debate, with thirteen short videos posted to his YouTube account. On his Facebook page, his response to a question over the Planned Parenthood scandal (during which he called the organization “a criminal enterprise”) received over 249,000 views, easily the most, and again left no question as to where he stood on the scandal, and on the topic of abortion as a whole.
It was also in this month that his supporters began to see Cruz’s dry sense of humor come out. First, a video was posted on the senator’s Facebook page on September 19th, showing Cruz entering a horse and buggy, explaining in the post that “we are a frugal campaign... our new campaign car.” Three days later, a clip of Cruz on “The Late Show with Stephen Colbert” was posted. Cruz wondered if Colbert could ask Donald Trump a question for him to pass on. The question was if Trump would be willing to donate $1 billion to Cruz’s campaign (which Colbert quickly wrote down).

October, 2015

The sense of humor continued as September moved into October. During a campaign stop in New Hampshire, a video was posted of Cruz, his wife Heidi, and his two daughters competing in a sack race at a farm. It was harmless and cute, and it showed the “family man” side of him. As the rest of the month went on, the campaign continued, financial donations were solicited and taken in, and the consistent use of social media went on. The views, again, were modest. The effort was there, but the mainstream attention was not. For example, the two highest viewed videos were an interview with Chuck Todd on NBC’s “Meet the Press,” which garnered 81,000 views, and a speech at the Values Voter Summit, with 55,000 views. Pundits and supporters alike were wondering if Senator Cruz, a highly intelligent candidate and a gifted debater, would break out from the pack and make a run on Donald Trump.

That break out moment came on October 28, 2015. It was during the third GOP debate, this time held in Boulder, Colorado and aired on CNBC. During the first third of the debate, moderators John Harwood, Becky Quick, and Carl Quintanilla notably, and some felt intentionally, asked questions designed to goad the candidates into attacking each other instead
of asking questions about specific policies. When Quintanilla asked about the senator’s
opposition to Congress raising the debt limit, Cruz unleashed what is known in debate circles as
“running a kritik.” Cruz ripped into the moderators, saying:

Let me say something at the outset. The questions that have been asked so far in this
debate illustrate why the American people don't trust the media. This is not a cage match.
And, you look at the questions -- "Donald Trump, are you a comic-book villain?" "Ben
Carson, can you do math?" "John Kasich, will you insult two people over here?" "Marco
Rubio, why don't you resign?" "Jeb Bush, why have your numbers fallen?" How about
talking about the substantive issues the people care about? Carl, I'm not finished yet. The
contrast with the Democratic debate, where every fawning question from the media was,
"Which of you is more handsome and wise?" Let me be clear. The men and women on
this stage have more ideas, more experience, more common sense than every participant
in the Democratic debate. That debate reflected a debate between the Bolsheviks and the
Mensheviks. And nobody watching at home believed that any of the moderators had any
intention of voting in a Republican primary. The questions that are being asked shouldn't
be trying to get people to tear into each other. It should be what are your substantive
positions?

It was Senator Cruz’s finest moment of the campaign to date, and that performance
catapulted him into the top three of national polls. The driving narrative and agenda from the
pundits and media outlets across the country had two main stories: Cruz was declared the winner
of that night’s debate, and the CNBC moderators were soundly condemned for their poor
showing. NBC News, ABC News, The Daily Beast, the National Review, the New York Times,
and even the far-left publication Salon.com expressed their displeasure with the CNBC team
(Salon’s lead story was “CNBC Just Set the Standard For Catastrophic Debate Performances,” explaining in the article that “CNBC presented a textbook example of what not to do”). Meanwhile, social media exploded in Ted Cruz’s favor. According to The Wall Street Journal, Cruz was the most mentioned candidate that night on Facebook, and was the second-most mentioned candidate on Twitter, behind Donald Trump. The moment was viewed on YouTube over 585,000 times. A video posted to the Cruz Facebook page of pollster Frank Luntz explaining how the tirade was the highest tested line in Luntz’s career had over 297,000 views and over 6,200 shares. Later, a video was posted of former Vice Presidential candidate and Alaska governor Sarah Palin praising Cruz’s performance reached 232,000 views. Then, a campaign video was posted, titled “When the Media Fights, Ted Fights Back!” which had 75,000 views on YouTube, and over 328,000 Facebook views, with over 10,000 shares. After that, Cruz never looked back.

**November, 2015**

Polls during the month of November reflected the impact of Cruz’s performance at the CNBC debate. For much of the campaign up to this point, the top two front runners were Donald Trump and Dr. Ben Carson. A Public Policy Polling report released November 2\(^{nd}\) that measured a candidate’s favorability in Iowa ranked Cruz in second place, trailing Dr. Carson (the poll surveyed 638 Republican primary voters). On November 24\(^{th}\), a Quinnipiac University poll of 600 Iowa Republican voters ranked Cruz again in second place in Iowa, this time trailing Donald Trump. This goes to show you that it helps to go viral.

November 13, 2015. Paris, France. The Islamic terrorist group ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) staged a coordinated and multi-targeted attack in the heart of Western civilization.
The jihadists targeted the Stade de France, the Bataclan theatre during a concert by the American rock band The Eagles of Death Metal, and multiple restaurants and cafes in downtown Paris. The ISIS members murdered 130 people, wounded an additional 368, and put France in a state of emergency for three months. It was the worst attack on French soil since World War II.

Just as the Iran nuclear deal changed the narrative of the 2016 race for the White House, so did the terror attacks in Paris. Previously, much of the campaign season was focused on economic policies, illegal immigration, and tax reform. After the carnage in Paris, the trajectory understandably shifted to national security, and how to properly handle the threat of Islamic terrorism. For Senator Cruz, already a national security hawk and an immigration hardliner, his tough approach and answers served to benefit his campaign, especially at the expense of Dr. Carson, who was seen as a candidate out of his league on foreign policy and national defense. The day after the Paris attacks, Cruz was featured on the Fox News program “Fox and Friends,” first thing in the morning. During the eight minute interview, Cruz made his case that he was the best candidate in the field that could fight against the ISIS threat, and “if you wage jihad against America—you're signing your death warrant.” The interview was posted to all social media accounts, and again, Cruz’s comments went viral. The interview was shared over 21,000 times, and was viewed a whopping 1.2 million times.

The following day, November 14th, the Cruz campaign posted a promotional ad. It was titled “Our Enemy: Radical Islamic Terrorism.” The caption on the Facebook feed took a shot at President Obama, saying “We cannot defeat radical Islamic terrorism with a President who refuses to utter the words “radical Islamic terrorism.”” It was a reference to the Obama administration’s policy that the term “Islamic terrorism” be wiped from all communication, only to be replaced with the politically correct “violent extremism.” The ad was viewed 1.1 million
times, and shared over 28,000 times. Between a viral interview and a viral ad, there would be no question among voters where Cruz stood on the ISIS threat.

**December, 2015**

Going into December, the work that was put in the Cruz campaign was slowly starting to pay off. A message of conservative values, a hardline approach to national security, and an outspoken attack on the “Washington cartel,” repeated in campaign stops and promoted on his social media platforms, was resonating with voters and was reflected in his rise in the Iowa polls. On December 7th, a Monmouth University poll was released, showing Cruz leading Donald Trump by five percentage points, based on telephone interviews with 425 potential Republican voters over a four day period. On December 12th, the *Des Moines Register* reported that Cruz was leading Trump by ten percentage points, based on surveys of 400 potential caucusgoers. On December 14th, *The Wall Street Journal* declared both Cruz and Trump were “neck and neck.”

With much of the mainstream media’s agenda focusing on the Trump’s unexpected command of the GOP race, many were wondering if the Cruz campaign would attack the front-runner, thus going back on the campaign promise of focusing on policies and taking the high road rather than resorting to attacks on a personal level. To dispel these calls for more aggression, Cruz took to social media, and in particular, his Twitter account. On December 11th, at 9:03 in the morning, Cruz tweeted: “The Establishment's only hope: Trump & me in a cage match. Sorry to disappoint -- @realDonaldTrump is terrific. #DealWithIt.” It went on to be retweeted 6,100 times, and was picked up and reported on by the mainstream press, including the *New York Daily News* and the *Washington Post.*
Going into the Christmas season, the Cruz campaign decided to film a seasonal campaign commercial that would air during the broadcast of the popular NBC program “Saturday Night Live.” The ad, titled “Cruz Christmas Classics,” featured Cruz in the family living room reading Christmas books to his two daughters, Catherine and Caroline. The titles of the books were satires, with names such as “How Obamacare Stole Christmas,” “Rudolph, the Underemployed Reindeer,” and “The Senator Who Saved Christmas.” The ad was posted on December 18th, and was an immediate hit, garnering 1.9 million views on YouTube. Once again, Ted Cruz found a way to go viral.

Not everybody was amused. On December 22nd, Ann Telnaes, a Washington Post editorial cartoonist that had made a career out of mocking Republican political leaders, drew a cartoon that depicted Cruz’s two daughters, ages 5 and 7, as dancing monkeys being led by Cruz on leashes. There is an unwritten rule in journalism that children are off limits to attacks such as this one, especially from one of the most respected, widely read, and influential publications in the United States. Clearly, that rule was ignored, and Telnaes later doubled down on her decision during the outcry. The cartoon was swiftly condemned and eventually retracted.

Cruz took to Twitter, and responded with the following tweet: “Classy. @washingtonpost makes fun of my girls. Stick w/ attacking me--Caroline & Catherine are out of your league.” Even two of Cruz’s rivals, Senator Marco Rubio and Donald Trump, supported Cruz. First, Rubio tweeted “Wash Post cartoon featuring @tedcruz’s children is disgusting. The Post saying the kids are “fair game” is even worse.” Later, Trump tweeted “The @washingtonpost, which is the lobbyist (power) for not imposing taxes on #Amazon, today did a nasty cartoon attacking @tedcruz kids. Bad.” The next day, Cruz retaliated by creating and tweeting a similar cartoon, only this one featured Hillary Clinton walking two dogs on leashes, with the dogs representing
the New York Times and the Washington Post. The tweet read “Seems like a better idea for a cartoon: Hillary and her lapdogs.” The photo was retweeted 6,100 times. Additionally, a round table discussion of the cartoon on Fox News featuring Meghan McCain, the daughter of Senator John McCain, was posted to the Cruz Facebook page, and was viewed over 308,000 times.

To date, Telnaes has not apologized.

January, 2016

The first in the nation Iowa caucus was scheduled for February 1st, 2016. During January, polls from The Huffington Post, Real Clear Politics, Quinnipiac University, and the Des Moines Register placed Cruz either in second place behind Donald Trump, or as the Iowa front-runner. The intense focus on Iowa meant the Cruz campaign would focus all of its outreach efforts on the state’s Republican voters, and this was reflected in the campaign’s social media accounts. The Twitter hashtag “#CruzinToCaucus” was created and used during the month. Videos of campaign stops were uploaded on a daily basis, campaign contributions were solicited via social media platforms, and volunteer opportunities were promoted. On January 13th, the political ad “Cruz Commander” was released and posted on the candidate’s social media platforms. The advertisement featured Cruz duck hunting with Phil Robertson, patriarch of the Robertson family and star of the hit television show “Duck Dynasty,” and promptly went viral. After reaching over 1 million YouTube views on yet another campaign commercial, it was clear that the campaign’s staff clearly had a knack for creating their own buzz, a vital talent when Donald Trump (a bonafide reality television star) was getting nearly all mainstream media attention during the election season.
Unfortunately for Cruz, the campaign hit some speed bumps during the rest of the month, and he found himself on the receiving end of a lot of negative media attention. On January 14th, the sixth GOP debate was held in North Charleston, South Carolina, and it was aired on the Fox Business Network. During the debate, Cruz was asked to clarify what he meant when he claimed that Donald Trump represented “New York values.” The comments backfired, and the exchange clearly went in Trump’s favor. In an election where every vote counts, Cruz managed to upset an entire state of voters, and later had to apologize. While it was more of a backhanded apology than anything, the uploaded video still garnered over 700,000 views.

On January 19th, Cruz was hit with a double whammy within hours. First, Iowa governor Terry Branstad publicly denounced Cruz due to the senator’s opposition to the ethanol subsidies that help finance Iowa’s farmers. A CNN article was published with the headline “Iowa Governor Wants Ted Cruz Defeated.” Then, former Vice Presidential candidate and Alaska governor Sarah Palin announced at a press conference that she would be endorsing Donald Trump for president. The move was shocking, because Palin had endorsed and supported Cruz during his campaign for the U.S. Senate in 2012. Now, all of a sudden, she chose to back a different candidate. To respond to the news, Cruz used his Twitter account, tweeting: “I love @SarahPalinUSA Without her support, I wouldn't be in the Senate. Regardless of what she does in 2016, I will always be a big fan.” On January 28th, the seventh debate was held in Des Moines, Iowa, and was hosted by Fox News. Front-runner Donald Trump boycotted the event, protesting the inclusion of Megyn Kelly as one of the debate’s moderators. This left Cruz as the main focus of the evening’s debate, and he was subsequently attacked by each rival candidate.

With a rough couple of weeks, the campaign could only move on. Just as with previous debate, the Cruz’s campaigns social media accounts were flooded with debate highlights that
promoted his policies. A total of thirteen short videos of the debate were uploaded to the Cruz YouTube account, with two additional videos from the immediate fallout posted as well. For the last few days leading up to the caucus, the accounts erupted with video uploads, showing the endorsements of former Texas governor Rick Perry, media pundit Glenn Beck, and Family Research Council president Tony Perkins, all encouraging Iowa voters to “#CaucusforCruz”. It was the social media equivalent of a “hard sell.”

**February, 2016**

The final poll from the *Des Moines Register* revealed that Cruz was trailing Donald Trump by five percentage points, based on a survey of 602 Iowa Republican voters. Undaunted, the Cruz campaign continued to travel the state, and fulfilled their promise to visit every county by the day of the caucus. The hard work paid off. With a record turnout of 186,874 Republican voters, Cruz defeated front-runner Donald Trump by three percentage points, with the total votes coming out to 51,666 for Cruz, and 45,427 for Trump. Cruz made his victory speech from the Iowa State Fair, and a fourteen second video clip was uploaded for the campaign’s supporters, receiving over 414,000 views, calling it “a victory for the grassroots.”

After Iowa, the election moved to New England for the New Hampshire primaries, scheduled for February 9th. The agenda set by the mainstream media focused on how Cruz’s brand and style wouldn’t fit well in the northeast, and there was a lot of truth to that narrative. New England is known for being a liberal region of the country, and New Hampshire specifically is one of the least religious states in the union. As a result, the Tea Party style of conservatism combined with the outreach to Evangelical voters created a poor fit for Cruz. Still, the Cruz team soldiered on. Another GOP debate, this time on February 6th at St. Anselm’s College in
Goffstown, New Hampshire, was held. Following the debate, eight short videos were uploaded to the social media accounts. The highest viewed video featured Cruz’s continued campaign promise to implement a flat tax and abolish the IRS, reaching over 544,000 views. The day of the New Hampshire primary also featured the campaign’s first attack ad that went after a GOP candidate, specifically Donald Trump. It featured young children playing with various action figures, one of them was Trump. When asked what it does, the child with the Trump figure said “he pretends to be a Republican.” While the ad did go viral, garnering over 1 million views, it did little to assist Cruz in the primary. Donald Trump won in a landslide. Out of 284,120 votes cast, Trump won with a commanding 20 percentage points over runner up John Kasich, with Cruz taking third place. The final tallies showed Trump receiving 100,406 votes, with Kasich earning 44,909, and Cruz with 33,189. A last minute ad that went viral did little to compel New Hampshire’s voters to support the Texan.

On February 12th, the Cruz campaign released and uploaded another ad that went viral, this time focusing on Democratic front-runner and presumptive favorite for the November election, Hillary Clinton. The ad, titled “It Feels Good to Be a Clinton,” featured a Hillary Clinton lookalike and two aides in the middle of a field taking turns smashing a computer hard drive with a baseball bat, with a parody rap song called “It Feels Good to Be a Clinton” playing in the background. The ad was a nod to Clinton’s ongoing computer server scandal which is under investigation by Congress and the FBI. Allegedly, Clinton used a personal e-mail server hidden in a bathroom in a house in Colorado to conduct official business with in violation of federal government rules. It was revealed she had deleted over 30,000 e-mails (in violation of federal record keeping regulations), and had conducted Top Secret business through her server. The campaign ad served two purposes: it was a reminder of the ongoing scandal, and reminded
Cruz supporters that the campaign was focusing on the long term goal of winning November’s general election. The ad was a hit. It received over 1.3 million views on the campaign’s YouTube channel, and 2.4 million Facebook views with over 40,000 shares.

Even with another successful and viral advertisement, there was little time to relax, as the primaries for South Carolina and Nevada were scheduled for February 20th and 23rd, respectively. Additionally, two more debates were scheduled for the month: the first in Greenville, South Carolina on February 13th, one week before the South Carolina primaries, and the second held in Houston, Texas on February 25th, five days before the SEC Primary. Much like other debates, the campaign would upload Cruz’s responses to his social media platforms in hopes that his policies would resonate with viewers and it would help earn their votes come Election Day. After the debate in South Carolina, eight videos were uploaded, and the two most viewed were on the topics of immigration reform and how Donald Trump should not be trusted to nominate judges to the Supreme Court, in reference to the recent passing of Supreme Court justice Antonin Scalia. In addition, another viral anti-Trump ad was uploaded, again reaching over 1 million views. The ad, titled “Supreme Trump” featured a 1999 interview by Trump in which he explained he was “very pro-choice,” the implication again being that American citizens couldn’t trust the nomination process of Supreme Court justices to him.

Even with the promotional efforts on social media to assist in Cruz overtaking Trump during the nomination process, the results were lacking. Donald Trump won by ten percentage points in South Carolina, and by twenty-two percentage points in Nevada. Cruz finished in third place in both states. In South Carolina, out of 737,917 votes cast, Trump received 239,851 votes, with Marco Rubio receiving 165,881 and Cruz coming in third with 164,790. In Nevada, Trump
received 34,531 votes, with Rubio receiving 17,940 and Cruz with 16,079. The loss in South Carolina was especially stinging, as it was seen as a precursor to the SEC Primary on March 1st.

Following the debate in Houston on February 25th, a whopping seventeen videos were uploaded. Considering the importance of the SEC Primary to the Cruz campaign, the additional “hard sell” was unsurprising. The trending hashtag “#ChooseCruz” was used on each social media platform in the final week of February as a way to build up buzz. The interviews Cruz conducted on “Face the Nation” on CBS, “State of the Union” on CNN, “This Week” on ABC, “Meet the Press” on NBC, and “Fox News Sunday” on Fox News were all uploaded on February 28th. While this social media blitz was being conducted, one video in particular went viral on February 29th, receiving over 1.2 million views. It was reported that morning the New York Times’ Editorial Board held in its possession a tape recording of Donald Trump saying, off the record, his immigration policies during his campaign were all false, and once elected, he would do something different. During a press conference in San Antonio, Cruz called for the tape to be released. It was a damaging accusation against a candidate that promised to be a hardliner on immigration reform.

March, 2016

March 1st, 2015 was the date of the SEC Primary. The majority of the states that cast ballots that day were found mostly in the south and southeastern parts of the United States. The states that voted, in alphabetical order, were: Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Georgia, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, and Virginia. For the Cruz campaign, results were mixed. Out of eleven states, Cruz won only three. Meanwhile, Trump won seven states, and Marco Rubio won Minnesota. For a region of the country that appeared to
be custom made for his combination of Tea Party conservatism and Evangelical appeal, the overall results were a bit of a letdown. On the other hand, there were reasons to celebrate, as the Cruz campaign earned victories in Alaska, Oklahoma, and the “crown jewel” of the SEC Primary, the delegate rich state of Texas. The senator earned 1,239,370 votes in his home state, and in the process added 104 delegates to support him at the Republican convention on July 18th in Cleveland, Ohio. During the victory celebration from the campaign’s headquarters in Houston, all of the Cruz supporters that had followed his Facebook account, all 2.1 million of them, received a “push” notification on their smartphones. For those that chose to, they could watch a live streaming video on Cruz’s Facebook account of the senator giving a victory speech to the “#CruzCrew” following the big Texas win. During the speech, Cruz made the point that his campaign was the only one that has consistently defeated Donald Trump, and called for candidates and voters to unify behind him, saying, “…we welcome you on our team, standing united as one. That is the only way to beat Donald Trump.”

**Discussion**

During the 2016 election season, mainstream media corporations didn’t necessarily set a particular agenda on any certain policies. Instead, Donald Trump was the agenda. The Media Research Center spent a considerable amount of time tracking the television coverage of the GOP candidates during the election season, and released their findings on a periodic basis. This researcher will include four of the Media Research Center’s results. First, the Media Research Center measured the coverage of the candidates on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news programs from January 1st, 2015 to July 31st, 2015. During this timeframe, Ted Cruz was covered for 16 minutes, while Donald Trump was covered for 116 minutes. Secondly, the Media Research Center measured the coverage of the candidates on CNN’s prime time weekday shows
during the two week timeframe of August 24, 2015 to September 4, 2015. During this time, Ted Cruz was covered for a total of three minutes, an equivalent of 0.35% of the airtime. Donald Trump was covered for a total of 580 minutes, an equivalent of 77.57% of the airtime. Third, the Media Research Center measured the coverage of the candidates on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news programs from January 1st, 2016 to January 31st, 2016 leading up to the Iowa caucus. During the month, Ted Cruz was covered for a total of 79 minutes on the three programs, an equivalent of 30% of the airtime. Donald Trump was covered for a total of 157 minutes, an equivalent of 60% of the airtime. Fourth, the Media Research Center measured the same coverage, each of the three evening news programs, during the month of February, highlighting the Iowa caucus and the voting held in New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Nevada. During the month, Ted Cruz was covered for a total of 62 minutes, an equivalent of 16.7% of the airtime. Donald Trump was covered for a total of 187 minutes, an equivalent of 50.4% of the airtime. Trump nearly had a monopoly on media coverage. Donald Trump was the agenda.

In the world of political candidacies, this type of coverage is called “earned media.” This type of coverage includes mentions and airtime on television, in newspapers, in magazines, and in social media. Instead of using campaign contributions and funding to purchase media coverage, usually through paid advertisements to promote the campaign, Trump was able to leverage his media skills to keep himself as the center of attention at all times without spending any official campaign funds. Trump was so skilled in this aspect that it got to the point when even a late night tweet from Trump would be the lead story on the evening news. As reported by the New York Times, the firm mediaQuant, which “tracks media coverage of each candidate and computes a dollar value based on advertising rates,” calculated that Trump had earned the equivalent of $1.898 billion in free earned media. Taking into consideration his background, this
should be unsurprising. As a native New Yorker, Trump was born and raised in the media capital of the world, and he fully understood the power of television as both a business and as a communication medium. His work on the hit reality show *The Apprentice* is just one example.

This brings us back to the symbiotic relationship between political leaders and the media. The mainstream media needs stories that will generate viewers and revenue, and political leaders need to keep themselves in front of the public’s attention to help their own cause. For every outlandish statement or stunt Trump made, it would inevitably result in more earned media. The more attention he got at the expense of other candidates, the higher his poll numbers would go. The higher the numbers went, the more coverage he got. As the cycle kept going, the agenda continued to be reinforced that Trump would be the candidate on everyone’s minds, and the public would be focused on him. With the extra coverage came even more outlandish statements, creating even more coverage, and even higher poll results. And the cycle kept repeating. This feedback loop made it nearly impossible for other GOP candidates to break in and use traditional media for their benefit. It even got to the point that, according to Politico, on February 29th, 2016, the Chairman of CBS, Les Moonves, admitted at the Morgan Stanley Technology, Media & Telecom Conference in San Francisco that, “It may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS. Donald’s place in this election is a good thing. I’ve never seen anything like this, and this is going to be a very good year for us. Sorry. It’s a terrible thing to say. But, bring it on, Donald. Keep going.”

So where does all this leave Ted Cruz?

With the mainstream media’s agenda overwhelmingly set on the antics of Donald Trump, the reverse agenda setting approach had to be put in place. Plain and simple, as he put it in one of
his viral campaign ads, Cruz had to fight back. He had to fight back metaphorically speaking, of course; again, this is not a cage match. Knowing that relying on the mainstream press would be an exercise in futility, Cruz and his campaign staff had to be creative in order to build up a buzz. Only then would the mainstream media pay attention. Part of their approach was to stick to the basics. Cruz had to focus on the retail politics that is necessary for campaigning: touring much of the south east and all of Iowa’s counties, engaging with voters, going with the style of “shoe leather and phone calls.” The campaign team also deployed their secret weapon, a weapon that has been Cruz’s secret to success dating back to 2012: social media. With over 2.1 million followers on his Facebook account and 1 million Twitter followers, Cruz and his team used a proactive approach on the various platforms to generate support. Policies would be promoted, interviews would be featured, and debate performances would always be uploaded. The real trick was to utilize social media, but without using it at the expense of building a grassroots core of support. Indeed, it was quite common for Cruz to utilize social media as a way to create that support group in the first place, as posts would often solicit donations or would advertise volunteer opportunities.

Ted Cruz would use his social media sites as a way to supplement, rather than to replace, the low-key approach of grassroots campaigning. Plus, it was a good way for Cruz to have fun during a grueling year of campaigning, usually at the expense of Donald Trump. While the cage match didn’t occur, the digital jabs were thrown over social media quite often. For example, in December, during an interview on “Fox News Sunday,” Trump said of Cruz, “when you look at the way he's dealt with the Senate, where he goes in there, like a, you know, frankly like a little bit of a maniac, you're never going to get things done that way.” Cruz responded by taking to his Twitter feed, writing, “In honor of my friend @realDonaldTrump and good-hearted maniacs
everywhere...” and posting the music video for “Maniac” from the film “Flashdance.” On January 5th, in response to Trump’s consistent claims that Cruz is ineligible for the presidency because he isn’t a natural born citizen as required in the Constitution (Cruz was born in Canada but is a natural born American citizen due to his mother being an American citizen), Cruz went with Twitter to retort, writing “My response to @realDonaldTrump calling into question my natural-born citizenship” and posting the infamous clip from “Happy Days” of Fonzie jumping the shark. Later in the month, during an interview with ABC, Trump said of Cruz, “he's a nasty guy. Nobody likes him. Nobody in Congress likes him. Nobody likes him anywhere once they get to know him. He's a very - he's got an edge that's not good. You can't make deals with people like that and it's not a good thing. It's not a good thing for the country. Very nasty guy.” Cruz responded by, once again, taking to his Twitter feed. This time, writing “I gotta say, the American people are feeling pretty "nasty" towards the Washington Cartel” and posting the music video of Janet Jackson’s “Nasty.” Combined with the viral “Cruz Christmas Classics” and “Damn It Feels Good to Be a Clinton” ads, this all served multiple purposes: it responded to media narratives that were pushed by Trump, it displayed Cruz’s instincts with pop culture, it made people laugh, and it created a much needed buzz for the campaign.

As addressed in Chapter 2, this case study looked to answer the following questions: How has the Ted Cruz presidential campaign used social media to set their own agenda? Are traditional mediums, such as television and print, now obsolete at setting the agenda, or are they just as important to a political campaign as they’ve always been? Will this approach by Senator Cruz help or hinder his chances at winning enough delegates at Republican primaries across the country to secure the Republican nomination?
First, Cruz and his staff members used the digital platforms at their fingertips to counter the overwhelming amount of earned media used by front-runner Donald Trump. He had been using his social media sites dating back to 2012 to help in his campaign for the U.S. Senate, and the digital approach would be utilized again. Through the use of humorous campaign ads and policy-driven television interviews that went viral, Cruz was able to carve out an online niche for his campaign and for his supporters. The viral videos would drive home the point that Cruz is a principled conservative and has the policy ideas to improve the country, while his opponents were either pretenders (like Trump) or untrustworthy to lead the nation (like Clinton).

A second lesson of this case study is that the power of the mainstream press to influence the national agenda has not wavered due to the emergence of social media as a communication medium in the 21st century media market. If anything, this election season showed that the mainstream media is just as powerful as it has always been at setting the national agenda. Top media executives, such as Les Moonves, made the conscious decision to feature Donald Trump on their airwaves for an incredible amount of time. Doing so resulted in sky-high television ratings and profits for the media corporations, because people were tuned in, and it also resulted in sky-high poll numbers and voter turnouts in support of Trump’s candidacy. Poll results from newspapers like the Des Moines Register, for example, were reported to the public as soon as they would be released. Feedback generated from Fox News, CNN, and the Washington Post after televised debates would continually drive the public conversation.

The third question asked if using social media platforms and social networks would help or hinder the Cruz campaign. The approach used by the campaign staff did help, but with a catch: Cruz’s social media strategy wasn’t used as a replacement to the “retail politics” that was also used. Rather, the strategies were used in conjunction with each other. The strategy was used
as a way to promote the policies and encourage voters to participate in the election process, and it wasn’t used to replace the work of building a group of supporters from the grassroots level. For any future candidate, using social media to reach out to potential voters is a requirement, but with the caveat that the medium needs to be used properly.

The Trump vs. Cruz cage match never happened. Because elections aren’t cage matches.
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARIES & CONCLUSIONS

Limitations of the Study

Perhaps the biggest limitation of this case study was the inability for this researcher to be in direct contact with the Cruz campaign’s communication team while the campaign was in motion and research was being conducted. Getting a behind the scenes look at the staffers in action, and witnessing the decision making process would have been a tremendous boost to the study.

Additionally, it would be foolish and naive to assume that having a large number of people actively following a social media account will automatically translate into votes. For example, Dr. Ben Carson’s Facebook page is followed by over 5.2 million people. He had built up an impressive grassroots following by the time he announced his candidacy, but by the time votes were cast in February, his campaign fizzled. The most important aspect of a policy maker’s campaign is the actual list of policies and ideas they plan to implement once elected. Then, having the ability to explain them to voters and promote them on multiple media platforms would be next. At this point, having a campaign website, an active social media presence, and a plan to reach voters digitally should be a requirement, but not at the expense of personal interaction.

Further Study or Recommendations

A future study that further explores social media’s influence on the cause and effects during a campaign would be of great benefit to go along with case studies such as this one. If not that, then possibly more case studies that focus on other candidates would be helpful additions to the agenda setting theory and towards increasing the scholarly research done on this new
medium. If and when there are more case studies available, possibly they could be brought together and studied as a whole in hopes that social media’s trends could be identified and explored, especially in the context of political communication.

Conclusions

In a country, and in a world, that is becoming more and more digitally connected, relying on social media to assist in outreaching towards voters will be crucial. People that choose to run for public office, regardless of what the level of government they are reaching towards being a part of, will have to rely on social media platforms as a way to promote their candidacies. Mainstream media executives will still act as gatekeepers, and will still be able to control what is shown on their airwaves and printed in the newspapers they run. They will still set the agenda however they see fit. However, since social media an alternative form of communication available to use, it will provide anyone the means to respond to the media’s narratives, promote themselves and their policies, encourage voter participation, and maybe, just maybe, it will help get them enough votes to get elected.
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