This paper investigates the public engagement of the Millennial Generation through the use of new media. Drawing upon existing literature, it reflects results of the author’s survey that seeks to measure relationships between engagement habits and media preferences. The data obtained supports the primary hypotheses that Millennials are more civically oriented than politically, and are more likely to engage publically through new media. Moreover, a case study drawn from recent events on the campus of Wheaton College adds an anecdotal layer of support to these conclusions. Although the findings are also consonant with prior research, the subject population for the survey was limited to Wheaton College students; a nation-wide survey of Millennials covering a broader age range, as well as a variety of educational and socio-economic levels would be needed to obtain robust results.
## Contents

CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................ 3  
A. Historical Perspective ..................................................................................................................... 3  
B. Formulation of Thesis .................................................................................................................... 8  
C. Aims & Objectives ......................................................................................................................... 17  
D. Methodology ................................................................................................................................. 17  
E. Structure of the Paper .................................................................................................................... 18  

CHAPTER II - THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION ........................................................................... 20  

CHAPTER III - ENGAGEMENT ...................................................................................................... 28  
A. Historical Divisions: Political versus Civic Engagement ............................................................... 28  
B. The Disillusionment of Millennial Youth ....................................................................................... 30  
C. Sociological Factors Influencing Political Disengagement ......................................................... 33  
D. The Shrinking Welfare State and Civic Engagement ................................................................. 40  

CHAPTER IV – THE MEDIA ............................................................................................................. 42  
A. Introduction ..................................................................................................................................... 42  
B. Dominant Modern Media: Cable Television and Internet ............................................................... 44  
C. Media Content Selection ............................................................................................................... 49  
1. Desire versus Duty ........................................................................................................................ 49  
2. OMA Framework .......................................................................................................................... 49  
3. Low Choice/High Choice Media Environments ......................................................................... 51  
4. Implications of Knowledge Gaps .................................................................................................. 54  
D. Millennials and Media Choices .................................................................................................... 55  

CHAPTER V – SURVEY ANALYSIS ............................................................................................... 64  
A. Methods ......................................................................................................................................... 64  
B. Measures and Expectations ............................................................................................................ 68  
1. General Engagement Habits ......................................................................................................... 68  
2. General Media Habits .................................................................................................................... 72  
3. Engagement Habits and Media Content Preference .................................................................... 79
4. Engagement Habits and Media Form Preference ................................................. 85
C. Data: Findings and Analysis ................................................................................. 88
D. General Engagement Habits ................................................................................. 89
D. Respondent Political Habits ................................................................................. 91
F. Respondent Civic Habits ...................................................................................... 95
G. General Media Habits .......................................................................................... 99
H. Content Preferences .............................................................................................. 99
I. Form Preferences .................................................................................................. 104
J. Relationships Between Media Content Preference and Engagement Habits 107
K. Content Preferences Affected by Engagement Type ...................................... 109
L. Content Preferences for Civically Engaged Respondents .............................. 115
M. Content Preferences for Politically Engaged Respondents ............................ 117
N. Content Preferences for Dually Engaged Respondents .................................. 120
O. Content Preferences for Withdrawn Respondents ........................................... 122
P. Relationship Between Media Form Preference and Engagement Habits........ 124
1. Form Preferences for Civic Engagement .............................................................. 124
2. Form Preferences for Political Engagement ......................................................... 128
CHAPTER VI – CASE STUDY .................................................................................. 133
CHAPTER VII – CONCLUSIONS .......................................................................... 141
CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

No one can say when the unwinding began — when the coil that held Americans together in its secure and sometimes stifling grip first gave way. Like any great change, the unwinding began at countless times, in countless ways — and at some moment the country, always the same country, crossed a line of history and became irremediably different.

G. Packer, Prologue, The Unwinding

A. Historical Perspective

In the early 1700s, Italian political philosopher and historian, Giambattista Vico, sought to develop a single science of humanity by placing the human experience in a universal historical context. By converging history with social sciences, Vico established a “new science...[that] comes to be at once a history of the ideas, the customs, the deeds of mankind. From these three we shall derive the principles of the history of human nature, which we shall show to be the principles of universal history” (Vico, 1725, 19, 112). Moreover, Vico’s Scienza Nuova introduces the cyclical feature of human development in successive historical events as “the phenomena of human society as revolving in an orbit; as going through periodically the same series of changes” (Mill, 1843, 632).

Vico’s orbital trajectory of civilization is “neither accident nor coincidence. [It] derives from the intersections of the seasons of life with the seasons of time” (Howe &
The infinite cycle of human progress regenerates every few decades or so (Winograd & Hais, 2011, 12), “around the time all living generations start entering new phases of life” (Howe & Strauss 2000, 357). Correspondingly, with each generational cycle, “birth cohorts become socialized with new and different values” (Campbell et al. 2009, 1045) and are therefore inherently shaped by their respective sociocultural environment (Healy and Stewart, 1989, 32).

Over two centuries later, an American president echoed these sentiments. On June 27th, 1936 Franklin Delano Roosevelt traveled to Philadelphia to accept the nomination for a second term as the President of the United States. Addressing a crowd of nearly 100,000 Americans still reeling from the woes and destitution of the Great Depression, FDR proclaimed, “there is a mysterious cycle in human events. To some generations much is given. Of other generations much is expected. This generation of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny” (Smith, 2008, 368). To achieve their destiny, ‘this generation’ “rose together, rallied [their] energies together, applied the old rules of common sense, and together survived” (Roosevelt 1936, 1). Under FDR’s leadership, unity, human fortitude, and charity became renewed principles that enabled the American populace to overcome the severe poverty and economic demoralization that hindered progress for nearly a decade.

The ‘mysterious cycle of human events’ FDR referenced in his acceptance speech is, according to Howe and Strauss (2000, 356):
as old as Exodus, the ‘tempers’ of ancient Greece, the Celtic Wreath, and the circularity of the Navajo sand paintings. It is a generational cycle. Its movement is driven by the same forces that cause each new batch of rising youths to correct for the excesses of midlife parents and leaders and to fill the role vacated by recently departed elders” (ibid).

Throughout the 20th century alone, the United States underwent several generational cycles, each with its own socialization and distinctive experiences. The first of these cycles began towards the end of the Third Great Awakening (1900s) and continued through the First World War and Prohibition. Those belonging to this time period are known as the “Lost Generation” (57) indicating their collective feelings of confusion, hesitancy, and wariness after returning from WWI and in the face of the roaring twenties.

In stark contrast to the Lost Generation, those born into the “GI Generation” sought to revitalize “the importance of citizen participation” (Winograd & Hais, 2011, 11) in order to persevere through the economic upheaval, survive the Second World War, and “ensure the future of a free society” (ibid). Together, the GI Generation pulled the nation out of the Great Depression, conquered half the globe as wartime soldiers, unleashed nuclear power, founded suburbia, took mankind to the moon, and laid the cornerstones for a ‘Great Society’” (Howe & Strauss, 2000, 57). Heralded as “the greatest generation” by television journalist, Tom Brokaw, their legacy is one of “mythic heroism and civic grandeur” (quoted in Howe & Strauss, 2000, 57-58).

Following the GIs were the Baby Boomers (born between 1945-60), the “post-crisis generation” (Howe & Strauss, 2000, 55), who came of age during the Consciousness Revolution (1960-1980), an “upbeat era of strengthening institutions and
weakening individualism, when a new civic order implants and old values regime
decays” (Howe & Strauss 1997, 3). No longer mired by destitute domestic conditions
and world war, Boomers endeavored to create equality for all. This gave rise to feminist,
environmental, and black power movements, which created more opportunities for
women and minorities (Campbell et al. 2009, 1045). Urban and campus riots became
increasingly prevalent during the Consciousness Revolution, particularly regarding the
Vietnam War and civil rights, culminating in a rebellious counterculture (Howe &

Unlike the GIs and Baby Boomers, Generation X (born between and 1960-1980)
does not represent an encompassing generational cohort comparable to its
predecessors. Instead, the concept of Generation Xers (hereafter, ‘Gen Xers’) includes
both young adults and a portion of today’s youth culture. The division of the Gen X
generation explains the conflicting views regarding their stature. Some view Gen Xers
as:

a generation whose worldview is based on change, on the need to
combat corruption, dictatorships, abuse, AIDS, a generation in search of
human dignity and individual freedom, the need for stability, love,
tolerance, and human rights for all”’ (Henseler, 2012, 22).

In contrast, others subscribe to “Gen X’s broader reputation for impatience, risk,
and rootless ambition” (Howe & Strauss, 2000, 62) and their dominance in US politics
since coming of age (Winograd & Hais, 2011, 25). Despite the quandary over the precise
nature of Gen Xers, the period in which they matured was “one of the most passionate
eras of social and cultural upheaval in American history, with often painful
consequences for political, economic, family, and educational institutions” (Howe & Strauss, 2000, 55).

Additionally, Gen Xers are considered to be “the first global generation” (Leidl, 2012, xxi). They abandoned the view that “the world was a small circle, restricted by time, transportation, and money” and instead, embraced being “connected by the Internet, cell phones, improved transportation systems, global education and corporate initiatives” (ibid). The unique circumstances and “special burdens of growing up in this era have defined Xers as an awakening-era generation” (Howe & Strauss, 2000, 54).

Succeeding such an epoch comes a “postawakening generation” (Howe & Strauss, 2000, 56); the current such one is known as the “Millennials”. The Millennial Generation, a cohort of Americans born (roughly) between 1982 and 2003 (Winograd & Hais, 2011, 1), is “unlike any other youth generation in living memory. They are more numerous, more affluent, better educated, and more ethnically diverse” (Howe & Strauss, 2000, 4). Their unique disposition can be attributed to their emergence during a time of “culture wars, new technologies, rising affluence, and civic apathy” (Howe & Strauss, 2000, 54). Moreover, the Millennial’s distinction derives not just from sociocultural forces but also from their exposure to an overwhelming number of catalytic global events. Among others, the Persian Gulf Wars, the Rwandan Genocide, natural disasters (e.g. Hurricane Katrina, the Asian tsunami, Fukushima, Superstorm Sandy), the end of the Cold War, and the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks were defining incidents in the socialization of Millennials (Downing 2006, 2). Thus, as a postwakening generation, Millennials represent “a downcast era of strengthening
individualism and weakening institutions, when the old civic order decays and the new values regime implants” (Howe & Strauss, 1997, 3). Given that the Millennials already comprise a significant portion of the American population, along with their unconstrained access to information and revitalization of individualism and solidarity, they are well situated to accomplish virtually any goal. Thus, “over the next quarter century, if America keeps another ‘rendezvous with destiny’, the Millennials could discover that they are in fact the next generation from whom much is expected” (Howe & Strauss, 2000, 355).

Together, the Lost Generation, GIs, Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials embody a “generational constellation” (Howe & Strauss, 2000, 57) that encapsulates all of America’s living generations. This generational constellation exemplifies Vico’s cyclic trajectory of human development in which there is, to borrow from John Stuart Mill:

- a progressive change both in the character of the human race and in their outward circumstances, so far as molded by themselves; that in each successive age the principal phenomena of society are different from what they were in the age preceding, and still more different from any previous age: the periods which most distinctly mark these successive changes being intervals of one generation, during which a new set of human beings have been educated, have grown up from childhood, and taken possession of society (Mill 1843, 628).

**B. Formulation of Thesis**

Resonant of Vico’s orbital trajectory of successive generations, there is currently “a recurring pattern of four generational archetypes that has cycled throughout Anglo-American history” (Winograd & Hais, 2011, 12). In the course of the last five centuries,
Anglo-American society “has entered a new era – a new turning – every two decades or so” resulting in generational cycles that spans roughly eighty to one hundred years (Strauss & Howe, 1997, 3). Collectively, the four turnings “comprise history’s seasonal rhythm of growth, maturation, entropy, and destruction” (ibid). The four turnings are referred to as “high, awakening, unraveling, and crisis” (ibid). Furthermore, each cycle consists of four types of cohorts that emerge in the same order within that cycle. These generations include the “idealist, reactive, civic, and adaptive” (ibid), each with its own “distinctive attitudinal and behavioral characteristics, regardless of when it appears in American history” (ibid).

The aforementioned generations directly pertain to the successive eras of America since the Revolutionary War. Idealists, for instance, derive from the first turning, an optimistic period regarded as the “American High” (Strauss & Howe, 1997, 3) in which “children are reared in an indulgent manner by their parents, permitting them to develop the strongly held values, or ideology, that guides their behavior throughout their lives” (Winograd & Hais, 2011, 13). In the current generational cycle, the Baby Boomers are the idealists, coming of age when their uncompromising values drove many of the social movements beginning in the second half of the 20th century.

On the heels of the idealists comes the reactive generation during the second turning, a “passionate era of spiritual upheaval, when the civic order comes under attack from a new values regime” Strauss & Howe, 1997, 3). Unlike idealists, reactive children raised in this generation are brought up in an unprotected manner, stimulating an awakening of a revived sense of individualism. As adults, they are “alienated, risk-
taking, entrepreneurial, and pragmatic” (Winograd & Hais, 2011, 13), reminiscent of Gen Xers.

Superseding the idealists and reactive epochs is the civic generation, members of which are reared in a protective manner that emphasizes adherence to group and social norms (ibid). Despite coming of age “during periods of intense stress and turmoil, civic generations invariably exhibit a uniquely high degree of optimism about where they and the nation are ultimately headed” (ibid). Thus, as adults in the third turning, a time of “unraveling” (Strauss & Howe 1997, 3) civics are far more unified as a generation than their reactive predecessors, enabling them to focus on “resolving societal challenges and building institutions” (Winograd & Hais 2011, 13). In the previous generational cycle this was the “highly revered civic” (ibid) GI Generation. The Millennials are the civic generation of the current generational cycle, and like their civic predecessors, “have the capacity to become America’s next great generation” (Howe & Strauss 2000, 35).

Last in the generational cycle is the adaptive archetype appearing during the fourth turning, “a decisive era of secular upheaval, when the values regime propels the replacement of the old civic order with a new one” (Strauss & Howe 1997, 3). As a result of the major societal crises they were born into, adaptives were “reared in an “overprotective, smothering manner, producing adults who tend towards conformity, risk aversion, and compromise” (Winograd & Hais 2000, 14). Those born into this turning in the last cycle were known Lost Generation, but since the adaptive generation of the current cycle consists of those born beginning in 2004 they have yet to be given a name by generational theorists (ibid.).
Although the aforesaid archetypes “occur at predictable levels, they do not have an identical impact on America” (ibid). Instead, two dominant or dynamic generational archetypes – idealist and civic – emerge. Given their differing “attitudes, values, and behaviors of these two dominant generational archetypes have led each of them to make over the country and its institutions in distinctive ways throughout history” (Winograd & Hais 2008, 30-31). For example, former presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush are both members of the idealist archetype but have very different philosophies and priorities regarding their presidential responsibilities. The overall outcome of predictable archetypes with diverging impacts, posited by coauthors Morley Winograd and Michael D. Hais of Millennial Momentum: How a New Generation is Remaking America, is as follows:

Eras that begin with the coming of age of a divided, anti-establishment idealist generation have been characterized by less identification with the existing political parties, resulting in more split-ticket voting, lower electoral turnout, more negative attitudes towards government and politics, policy gridlock in Congress, a contraction of government, and increased economic inequality. These were all characteristics of America’s most recent idealist era, 1968-2008. By contrast, the emergence of an optimistic, unified, civic generation has historically produced a higher degree of partisan loyalties within the electorate, causing greater straight-ticket voting, increased voter participation, more interest in fixing governmental and political institutions, policy breakthroughs – particularly at the federal level – activist government, and greater economic equality. These are likely to be the characteristics of the country’s Millennial-dominated civic era that began with the 2008 presidential election. (14)

Currently in its fifth generational cycle, the future of the United States will ultimately be shaped by the “Millennial Generation’s willingness to engage in a vast civic endeavor to remake America and its institutions and the willingness of the rest of the
country to follow its lead” (Winograd & Hais 2011, 1). Herein lies the paradox of the Millennial generation. Given their vast numbers, ethnic diversity, education, affluence, access to technology and the Internet, along with their “new focus on teamwork, achievement, modesty, and good conduct” (Howe & Strauss, 2000, 4), Millennials have all the necessary tools to propel the nation through the 21st century. However, while some contend that this rising generation will be the “next great generation” (Winograd & Hais, 2011, 5) of America, others view them as a dire threat to its very survival as “their condition is perilous and their behavior disconcerting” (Howe & Strauss, 2000, 25). They’re “lazy, narcissistic and entitled” (Sanburn & Stein, 2013, 34), and until very recently, “the public has been accustomed to nonstop media chatter about bad kids – from mass murderers, hate criminals, and binge drinkers to test failers, test cheaters, drug users, and just all around spoiled brats” (Howe & Strauss, 2000, 11). Today’s adults, the remnants of the GI, Baby Boomer, and Gen X generations, “cannot help but feel a great loss when they meet kids who have no memory of the Cold War or the civil rights movement or of Vietnam or Watergate, of Bobby or Martin, of sports stars who earned less than presidents” (32).

While these conflicting perspectives of Millennials are useful, they fail to offer any insight into the conditions, experiences, or actual actions of their generation. Nor do they indicate Millennials’ prospective role in shaping future societal issues. As Howe and Strauss noted, “to talk about a generation, is to talk not about its bits and pieces, but about its social and cultural center of gravity” (24).
So, who are these teens and young adults? To begin, the name “Millennial” acknowledges their technological superiority without defining them too explicitly in those terms” (Howe & Strauss, 2000, 10). Evidence abounds that the Millennials are “demonstrably reversing a wide array of negative youth trends, from crime to profanity to sex to test scores, that have prevailed in America for nearly half a century” (25).

Despite these positive trends, robust research studies indicate that each successive generation coming of political age has been less engaged than its predecessor (Putnam, 2000, 32-33, 43, 45, 60-61). Political and social scientists attribute this to: prominent instances of corruption and dishonesty in government; the predominant influence of market forces such as corporate lobbying efforts on politics; a distrust of and lack of faith in the efficacy of government by the citizenry; and a noticeable shift towards individualism in society (Putnam 2000, 183, 189, 257-259; Zukin et al., 2006, 22, 26-33, 36-44). As a result, an entrenched and growing divide between power elites in the government and the populace has emerged (Zukin et al., 2006, 53; Dahlgren, 2009, 14-18).

A primary catalyst for this increasing estrangement between the public and private spheres, both perpetuating and compounding same, is the media (Dahlgren, 2009, 2, 35; Putnam, 2000, 216; Zukin et al., 2006, 33-34). As a deeply embedded component of American democracy, the media is effectively the sole conduit of information essential to an informed electorate. It serves both to facilitate the free flow of information between the citizenry and the government and as an independent source of such information through investigative reportage. There remains, however, the
boisterous side of the media, the colorful—frequently sensationalist—entertainment component that may distract from the assimilation of serious news.

Successive technological revolutions have vastly expanded the media content spectrum. No longer limited to a total of three television channels (Williams, 1975, 34), consumers can now select from hundreds of options, watching as many as six programs simultaneously on a single screen while recording additional content. Unsurprisingly, Americans have vastly increased their consumption of entertainment content in preference to hard news. Simultaneously, an ever-widening fissure between active and disengaged citizens has erupted—marked by significant variability in political awareness and participation, particularly in regard to voting (Dahlgren, 2009, 49; Prior, 2007, 95; Putnam, 2000, 221).

This is not to suggest that the sole causal pathway to engagement is cable or satellite TV. The polarization of public opinion exists on a host of issues, including gun control, religion in schools, climate change and health care reform, as well as growing income inequality, all of which contribute to a fractious view of politics from which many choose to withdraw. However, it is clear that the media—by crimes of omission and commission—has contributed significantly to this state of affairs. (Dahlgren, 2009, 2, 35; Putnam, 2000; 216; Zukin et al., 2006, 33-34).

With the development of the Internet, subtle shifts in the dialectic of media’s role in fostering engagement—a passive process of absorption—and active participation have begun to appear. The inclusive nature of the web, along with exponential expansion in speed, coverage and accessibility, has made the Internet an omnipresent
entity in modern discourse. In particular, social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and Tumblr have essentially become new, digital public squares.

It cannot be denied that, just as television traditionally provided escapist entertainment, the Internet offers an inordinate number of diversions, from movies to online shopping. Furthermore, all individuals have available at their fingertips breaking news bulletins, documentary films, scholarly articles, investigative reports, editorials, expert opinions, statistics and the like. In short, vast amounts of information relevant to the socio-political sphere are available through a multitude of venues, including, but by no means limited to, the web versions of "traditional" news media outlets. (Dahlgren, 2009, 150; Putnam, 2000, 221; Prior, 2007, 94).

The quantity of information available is matched by the extraordinary technology the Internet provides for interactive usage. Cyberspace provides direct contact with a website and its ever-expanding universe of visitors, links to related web pages with their past and future readers, and the ability to create shared experiences in real time with friends and acquaintances through social media sites. As a result, where issues of concern arise, concerted responses are easily generated and plans for activism readily formulated and dispersed. Indeed, many experts are of the view that world-changing events such as the "Arab Spring" would not have occurred absent social media websites (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011, 18; Stepanova, 2011, 2).

Nonetheless, in many cases there is not necessarily a bright line between social media and public engagement. Moreover, the term "public engagement" generally is not accompanied by a clear-cut taxonomy of "political activities" as opposed to "civic
activities”. As many researchers note, a large grey area of overlap frequently renders the two indistinguishable (Putnam, 2000, 148; Zukin, 2006, 5-6) This is relevant in terms of assessing both the quantity and quality of true political activism, and, to the extent it has purportedly decreased, assessing whether it has been replaced by equivalent civic participation.

In considering the interplay between new media and public engagement, the Millennial Generation (those born roughly between 1980 and 2000) is of special interest as a subject group. The youngest portion of the adult population, Millennials are uniquely positioned as the first generation to grow up with ubiquitous digital technology, and the Internet as an established presence in most households. Thus, they were weaned on social media from childhood.

Weaving together the strands of political and sociological research described above, the following questions arise: are Millennials continuing a long-established trend of political disengagement, or are there indications a reversal may be in play? Or, are they just as engaged, if not more, than their predecessors? To the extent “political” disengagement is ongoing, does increased "civic" engagement offset this trend, thus resulting in relative but not absolute downturns? In either case, what is the role of social media in fostering public engagement of any sort? In particular, in light of limitless media content available on the Internet, how do individual content preferences impact same?
C. Aims & Objectives

New media manifests public engagement in three ways: 1) through the gaining and sharing of relevant information; 2) by virtual engagement through online communications; and 3) as a conduit for subsequent real-world activities in furtherance of a political or civic goal (Dahlgren, 2009; Prior, 2007). It is not the intent of this research to establish causal links between the use of new media and engagement. Rather the goal is to elucidate the extent to which public engagement by Millennials is manifested through the use of new media. A series of hypotheses are set forth in Appendix A hereto, which constitute the templates for the quantitative research undertaken. It was the goal of the research to prove each of same, failing which to determine where possible the extent to which same were disproven, or require further research.

D. Methodology

Measuring engagement, whether political or civic, entailed the use of a survey that was designed as a “bottom-up” questionnaire, similar to the one employed in Zukin’s study. (A full list of the survey questions can be found in Appendix B; the statistical results of same comprise Appendix C.) Respondents were asked about the frequency they participated in eighteen activities. Ten of these activities were later classified as political activities. Five of these activities were informed by or manifested through traditional media forms, while the other five were informed by or manifested through new media forms.
The specific activities surveyed were categorized as political or civic, despite the difficulties caused by increasing overlaps between these two historically separate lines of engagement. Of necessity, this involved certain subjective judgments, notwithstanding which the distinction remains salient.

Finally, the statistical results of the research are bolstered by inclusion of a homegrown case study involving real-world activities. The timing of this thesis coincides with a very recent example of political engagement through social media at Wheaton College. At the end of the Fall 2013 semester, a group of students launched a dynamic and highly politicized campaign expressing their frustrations with the current administration. Although the issue was broached during final exams, the use of social media telegraphed the group's views to all members of the Wheaton community, and their protest quickly became a cause célébre on campus. Clearly the portrait of this campaign and the people involved is anecdotal, in contrast to the results of the quantitative survey. Nonetheless, it offers additional insight into the questions at hand, thereby enriching the knowledge base of Millennial engagement through social media.

E. Structure of the Paper

The remainder of this paper first discusses each of the three key variables embedded in the research: characteristics and behavioral tendencies of the Millennial Generation; indications of public engagement, both political and civic; and media usage. Thereafter, the results of the author's survey are analyzed, and the Wheaton case study
is described and assessed. Inferences drawn from the work of experts referenced herein, together with the present research, and the implications of public engagement informed by and manifested through new media form the conclusions herein.
CHAPTER II - THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION

Meet the Millennials: born in or after 1982 – the ‘Babies on Board’ of the early Reagan Years, the “Have You Hugged Your Child Today?” sixth graders of the early Clinton years, the teens of Columbine, and, this year, the much-touted high school Class of 2000, now invading the nation’s campuses.

Howe & Strauss, 2000, 4

The Millennials’ first perception of the public world and the adults who run it has thus been dominated by two basic elements: first, by a confident individualism, which kids see reflected both in rising personal optimism and in a booming free-market economy; and second, by a disturbing social fragmentation, which kids see reflected in the vast distance now separating persons and families – by income, race, language, and lifestyle.

Howe & Strauss, 2000, 103

In addition to the general socialization experiences described in the excerpts above, there are certain events never experienced by Millennials that also help to define
them. Red scares, political assassinations of American leaders, and student riots are as alien to Millennials as a cell phone would be to a member of the GI Generation. Additionally, Millennials have “never known what it was like to grow up without miracle vaccines, entertain themselves without electronic games of immense complexity, write a term paper without the Internet or word processor, or duck and cover in nuclear war drills” (ibid, 53-54).

The Millennial generation did, however, endure the horrors of the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. The moments that followed were poignant; they were characterized by unity, patriotism, respect and sacrifice, and invigorated a powerful sense of civic duty among all American generations (Freedman et al., 2004). These moments, however, were all too brief. The hopes at the beginning of the 21st century were replaced by fearfulness, bitter partisanship, economic recession, conflict, and uncertainty (Packer, 2013; Zukin et al., 2006). Despite the catastrophe of 9-11 and the subsequent wars that followed, Millennials have a starkly different understanding of what it means to go to war than their ancestors. For most Millennials, “their only real exposure to violence [and war] is on movie screens, TV news, and video games (Howe & Strauss, 2000, 361).

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Millennial generation witnessed horrendous government ineptitude as the Bush administration essentially abandoned its own citizens in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans (Lee, 2006). Millennial embitterment was fueled even more as Congressional production ground to a halt, not once, but on several occasions, while also witnessing the seamless collusion
between the financial sector and some portions of government that ultimately culminated in a financial crisis with global ramifications (Dahlgren, 2006, 6; Winograd and Hais 2011, 15). It should be no surprise, then, that many Millennials began to adopt the opinion that “politics is a way for the powerful to keep power for themselves” (Kiesa et al., 2008, 17).

The Millennial generation grew even more resentful and disgruntled by Congress’ opaqueness given the “public’s perception that the votes of elected officials are driven more by considerations of campaign contributions than the merits of legislation they are considering” (Winograd & Hais 2011, 84). A comment posted on the Web site *Millennials Changing America* captures the malaise triggered by Congressional disingenuousness and delay; there it was remarked:

> Neither the far left or far right seems interested in any sort of compromise. Any congressional member displaying moderation or centrism is regarded as a party traitor and immediately attached as such. Stifling debate is dangerous (ibid).

As is the case in all generational cycles, the dominant and dynamic archetypes – civic and idealist – “along with the deployment of new communication technology, produces the electoral and political realignments, or shifts in party dominance, that occur about every four decades in U.S. politics” (Winograd & Hais, 2011, 14). Thus, when the Millennial generation did come of political age and entered the electorate, a rejuvenated sense of civic responsibility “provided a new momentum to the nation’s
constant quest to find the best way to organize and govern a democratic society” (ibid, 5; Dalton, 50). This echoes Kennedy, the first GI Generation president, who had stressed “the importance of citizen participation in ensuring the future of a free society” (ibid, 11). The renewal of civic engagement is evidenced by the tremendous outpouring of Millennial voters in the 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama.

Reminiscent of former President Lyndon B. Johnson’s plea to the 1965 graduating class at Howard University to rekindle a sense of community in the nation, Obama delivered a similar message in a commencement speech at the University of Michigan, imploring its graduates to “join in an effort to revitalize and rebuild the United States” (Winograd & Hais, 2011, 9-10).

However, it remains largely unclear to Millennials how they are to access and use the current political system to “revitalize and rebuild”, as Obama urged them to do (Ladd, 2006, 32-34). The legislative branch is plagued by inept representatives and the influence of outside money. The executive branch, for its part, has disappointed Millennials. While campaigning in 2008, President Obama promoted small-donor, Internet-driven contributions, making use of Millennial technological innovations in a manner no presidential candidate had ever done before. Despite his campaign promise to “wrest power from K street lobbyists and give it to community activists” (Winograd & Hais, 2011, 87), Obama did little after his election to combat special-interest influence in the legislative process (ibid).

For its part, the Supreme Court also exacerbated the distrust of and lack of faith in the efficacy of government by the youngest members of citizenry. Believing the
problem of outside money interests’ influence on politics could be remedied simply by “increasing the quantity and quality of what the public knew about contributions to campaigns,” (Winograd & Hais, 2011, 87-88) the Supreme Court eliminated restrictions on corporate contributions entirely, beginning with the case *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission*, 558 U.S. 310 (2010). In doing so, the Supreme Court effectively eroded all notions of campaign finance regulation and “struck down a century’s worth of jurisprudence restricting corporate money in politics” (Winograd & Hais, 2011, 88).

In short, all three branches of the federal government have, in years recent, actively or passively allowed corporate and other economic interests to influence who goes in (representatives) and what comes out (policy) of our political system. As a result, Millennials perceive both the futility of attempting to change a monolithic government as well as a significant void in addressing issues of public concern.

This speaks to another recent and related political trend that has powerfully affected Millennial Engagement. Writing in 2006, the authors of *A New Engagement?* state, “The civic world is becoming more important...as over the past 25 years federal and state governments are increasingly devolving their functions and powers not only to lower levels of government but also to the private and nonprofit sectors” (53). Thus, despite ever-increasing influxes of money to influence the political system, some functions have shifted to the civic realm. Examples included in the foregoing book include: regulating economic inequality, protecting the environment, and education. Consequentially, a shift in the respective powers and functions of the public and private sectors has occurred, and “the line between strictly political activity on the part of
citizens and private actions becomes more porous” (Zukin et al., 2006, 53). As a result of these functional transfers, the line between civic and political engagement becomes less clear.

These trends and developments within the political sphere have largely occurred through the Millennial Generation’s socialization experience, and have certainly affected their engagement habits. Indeed, many young citizens view the devolution of government functions to the private and non-profit spheres as an opportunity to engage with public issues by working outside traditional political structures.

Moreover, Millennials are considered by some to be better positioned to spearhead initiatives on these issues than older generations. While most studies on engagement show that the youngest portion of the electorate traditionally possesses lower forms of political capital (resources that aid political participation) and social capital (networking capabilities), certain social components of Millennials’ upbringing provide today’s young people with the necessary skills, abilities, and inclinations to fill the void left by devolution of the federal government. Specifically, Millennials express “willingness to engage” through local acts amongst small groups, and their proficient use of new media (namely social media), constitute precisely the civic mindset that is likely to foster further Millennial engagement (Webster, 2005).

These positive social components of the Millennial Generation’s upbringing, therefore, are not to be underestimated or misconstrued as unimportant in influencing their engagement habits. The technological innovations of the last twenty years have revolutionized modern communications and increased electronic global connectivity,
giving it a profound influence over many essential aspects of Western societies. In theory, the Internet allows citizens to focus on governmental (as well as not-for-profit and private sector) actions relating to social issues of particular individual concern. As such, there are signs of a shift from traditional political action to alternative civic activities. So far, the positive Millennial response to these shifts indicates that young citizens are beginning to assume a civically oriented role in the public realm. The role technology is playing in this, and the fact that the Internet might be used as an important tool to influence or manifest youth engagement, takes on a central aim of this study.

Millennials, more so than any other generation, “understand the power of technology as communication. They are digital natives in a land of digital immigrants” (Downing 2006, 5). Social network communication technologies enable users, a majority of which are Millennials to “create bonds of trust, unrestricted by cost, distance, or rules of rank” (Howe & Strauss 2000, 141; Pew Internet User Demographics). From a global perspective, this enhanced degree of electronic connectivity provides Millennials with a “second-by-second update on the world’s diplomatic challenge” (Winograd & Hais 2011, 227-228).

However, this “first generation of digital natives”, remains young, and regrettably, is capable of using social media to negative effect, which can just as easily impeded engagement activity online. Millennials have been observed to “send scorching, injudicious, and inappropriate messages” to peers over the Internet (Levine & Dean, 2012, 75). This activity, along with the fact that there is no standard for, or
expectation of users posting accurate information online, can serve to make social media sites as much of a roadblock to engagement as a facilitator.

In summary, there are several key elements of Millennials’ socialization experience relevant to their engagement through the media. First, they grew up in the midst of turbulent political events, radical technological development and expansion. Further, the society they were raised in was noticeably more pluralistic, adding another significant social component to their development. This manifests itself on college campuses in terms of greater diversity and tolerance (Fine, 2014). They are optimistic and jaded (Dalton, 2008); group-oriented and issue-oriented, inclined to act locally, and, above all, technologically proficient (Winograd & Hais, 2011). These respective socio-political trends are expected to be indicative of Millennials’ media and engagement habits. Indeed, the original research component of this paper, both in terms of measurements and expectations, is drawn from these primary aspects of Millennial socialization.
CHAPTER III - ENGAGEMENT

If you were born around 1960 or afterward, you have spent your adult life in the vertigo of that unwinding. You watched structures that had been in place before your birth collapse like pillars of salt across the vast visible landscape — the farms of the Carolina Piedmont, the factories of the Mahoning Valley, Florida subdivisions, California schools. And other things, harder to see but no less vital in supporting the order of everyday life, changed beyond recognition — ways and means in Washington caucus rooms, taboos on New York trading desks, manners and morals everywhere.

G. Packer, Prologue, The Awakening

A. Historical Divisions: Political versus Civic Engagement

Engagement as a form of participation in the socio-political culture may be viewed as a continuum. At one end of the spectrum is a liminal awareness of major issues; where these were once primarily domestic, today there is generally a global element to each public concern. This type of awareness is consonant with what Agamben would call the ‘bare life’ – an existence unmediated by the higher thought processes required for public action. It arises by virtue of an illusion made in the
context of late-night television comedy—the viewer is dimly aware of a Middle Eastern conflict but can name neither the parties to nor the substance of dispute (Baum, 2002; Young and Tisinger, 2006). Alternatively, this rudimentary level of knowledge may be attributable to the 24-hour news cycle, which, as previously discussed, thrives on sensationalism. However, it neither provides nor encourages thoughtful analysis.

It goes without saying that this level of awareness does not breed activism of any sort. For that matter, while a deeper level of awareness is a necessary prerequisite to engagement, alone it is insufficient to spark movements toward change (Althaus, 2002). Some sort of conscious, affirmative action is needed. Assuming that the individual becomes sufficiently interested in a public issue, activism, broadly speaking, may take one of two forms. Historically, relatively clear delineations existed between the political and civic realms. The former involved candidate and/or political party support. At a minimum, the engaged citizen would vote; canvassing, monetary donations and communication to elected officials (the “write your Congressperson” approach) evidenced a deeper commitment (Verba and Nie, 1972). Later research expanded the scope of the political to include such things as protests, petitions and boycotts (Zukin et al., 2006, 51).

Civic engagement, on the other hand, traditionally meant volunteering at homeless shelters, building a local playground, or establishing a neighborhood watch group. Such activities, while within the public realm, essentially remained outside the scope of government—or political—policy. Indeed, these activities
continue to fall outside the scope of political engagement today. However, with respect to Millennials, despite significant political concerns, traditional forms of activism are exceedingly low (Kiesa et al., 2008, 15). Instead, this population group has developed its own style of engagement that, in essence, reduces the broadly political to the specificity of the local.

Questions then arise as to why the Millennial Generation has chosen to forego traditional political engagement in favor of this type of hybrid activism, what such engagement looks like, and what it presages for their future participation in the socio-political process. Some of the answers are unfathomable, but it is fair to say that any analysis involves a matrix of complex factors.

**B. The Disillusionment of Millennial Youth**

According to *Generation on a Tightrope: A Portrait of Today’s College Student*, in many respects the Millennial Generation remains optimistic about its own and the planet’s future, despite their disenchantment with the political process (Levine and Dean, 2012, ix). The most positive assessment of Millennials’ views regarding the latter, however, is “ambivalent” (Kiesa et. al, 4). Other researchers, however, describe a palpable collective disgust with government in all its aspects.

When asked to assess the actors, regulations, and output/production of politicians, particularly Congresspersons, Millennials’ anti-political mindset quickly reveals itself. They see politicians as self-interested and self-serving, except when reciprocating support for the businesses and corporations perceived as helping them to get elected (Kiesa et al., 2008, 15; Winograd & Hais, 2011, 87).
Concomitantly, Millennials view the institution of voting as being heavily influenced by outside money interests, and otherwise characterized by polarization and gridlock (Webster, 2005; Winograd & Hais, ibid). Further, Millennials feel that the system is alien, and, unsure of their political voice, hesitate to criticize same (Kiesa et al., 2008, 17; Dahlgren 2009, 6-7). In this regard they fall back on the excuse that they have nothing new to contribute; all relevant arguments appear online almost instantaneously. In short, Millennials strongly doubt their ability, not to mention elected officials’ capabilities, to realize desired changes through political engagement.

The 2008 presidential election was an anomaly in Millennial withdrawal from politics. Throughout the campaign Obama used new media in ways never before seen in a national political campaign: tweets, facebook pages, television appearances all contributed to intense Millennial interest (Freedman, Franz and Goldstein, 2004). The response to the Democratic candidate was remarkable. Millennials came to the polls at such high rates that “the turnout gap between younger and older voters...was the smallest it had been since 1972”, and an overwhelming percent would vote for Obama (Winograd & Hais 2011, 3). Thus, for a brief moment Millennials demonstrated a clear “willingness to engage” at the political level despite general dislike and distrust for same.

However, it cannot be denied that Millennials watched with dismay as Obama reneged on his campaign promise to “wrest power from K street lobbyists and give it to the community activists,” and “did little ... to tackle the problem of
special-interest influence in the legislative process” (Winograd & Hais, 2011, 87). As a result, Millennials once again felt their political capital to be sorely inadequate, as their role within the political sphere diminished perceptibly (Zukin, 2006, 128-129).

According to a number of experts, the issue of special-interest influences on the political system became a touchstone for political cynicism following the Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission*, 558 U.S. 310 (2010). “The Supreme Court’s decision in *Citizen United*...struck down a century's worth of jurisprudence restricting corporate money in politics” (Winograd & Hais, 2011, 84). Lest there have remained any doubt as whether all notions of campaign finance limits were moribund, the Supreme Court very recently put the final nail in the coffin with *McCutcheon v Federal Election Commission*, No.12-586, slip op. (U.S. Sup. Ct., April 2, 2014).

Interestingly, Justice Kennedy, writing for the majority in *Citizens United*, referred to the Internet as obviating the need for campaign finance controls, noting:

> with the advent of the Internet, prompt disclosure of expenditures can provide shareholders and citizens with the information needed to hold corporations and elected officials accountable for their positions and supporters.

Congress, however, chose not to require any such disclosure.

In essence, Millennials found that all three branches of government had created an impenetrable wall barring true citizen involvement. This gave rise to the views that “the votes of elected officials are driven more by considerations of
campaign contributions than the merits of legislation they are considering” (Winograd & Hais, 2011, 87), “big business had too much behind-the-scenes influence on congressional deliberation” (ibid), and, perhaps the strongest Millennial indictment: “the political system is inefficient, corrupt, inaccessible, and counter to the genuine welfare of the nation’s citizens” (Kiesa et. al 2008, 15).

C. Sociological Factors Influencing Political Disengagement

Engagement habits are frequently examined across generational lines. In addition to George Packer’s anecdotal work, two seminal studies on this topic include: Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* (2000); and the research of Cliff Zukin and others on “the intersection of two important highways of American political life: the nature of citizen engagement—its amount, quality, and health; and the nature of political and societal change through generational differences and population replacement” (2006, VII). The two latter studies informed the research undertaken herein, as they provide foundations and methods to test for empirical trends on engagement. Additionally, both include comparative analysis of two major themes: the life-cycle theory of engagement, and the generational argument.

The life-cycle argument posits that each generation’s engagement habits can be explained by the fact that “different stages of the life cycle bring different politically relative events” (ibid, 11). This perspective, when applied to Millennials, centers on their low levels of political capital. This has been defined as a cluster of attributes that include a significant level of issue awareness, an ingrained belief in
civic duty, and strong allegiance to a particular party. Moreover, as Putnam notes, “Middle-aged and older people are more active in more organizations . . . they vote more regularly, both read and watch the news more frequently...and are more interested in politics.” (247, 248) In addition, one might argue that political capital also includes the financial capability necessary for any given citizen to affect political change. While all generations of young adults experience these same disadvantages, it is believed that the commoditization of government by corporate donors raises grave questions as to whether any individual citizens will in future obtain the necessary collection of assets to impact government.

Competing against this perspective is the generational argument, which devolves upon “the informal and formal education and socialization [processes] that takes place daily through families, friends, schools, the media, and other social, cultural and political institutions” (ibid). The research described in Chapter V focuses on the generational argument, as it seeks to introduce and explain the unique socialization experience of Millennials, relative to their generational predecessors. In particular, this relates to their digital socialization from early childhood.

Putnam sought to examine general trends of engagement in the public, civic, and socially cognizant spheres across several generations. His study examines engagement levels of the Dutiful Generation (1930-1950), the Baby-Boomer Generation (1950-1970), Generation X (1970-1990), and Millennials (1990-present) (years being imprecise demarcations). Zukin’s study seeks “a summary typology of
citizen engagement that distilled (sic) 28 indicators [of engagement].” While Zukin’s study compares the same four generational cohorts as Putnam’s, it places a stronger emphasis on changes in engagement between Generation X and the Millennial Generation. To that end, this research sought to “explore the cultural and political conditions in which GenXers and DotNets [a term interchangeable with Millennials] have grown up,” measuring “a broad panoply of current citizen engagement . . . across a wide variety of behavior and cognitive indicators.” (Zukin et al., 2006, 12)

While both studies measure citizen political and civic cognition and activity, Zukin’s study provides empirical evidence on the trends of engagement that is more directly relevant to this thesis. Zukin gathers empirical evidence via bottom-up approach of measuring engagement, explaining:

rather than asking how young people participated in traditional political and civic activities, we asked what young people were doing, and then considered whether these activities were civic or political. (55)

Given the emphasis on individual choice that is associated with the Millennial generation, it made sense for Zukin, as it does for this research, to use such an approach. Zukin measured 19 activities that involve considerable overlap between the civic and political spheres, covering engagement, public voice and cognitive aspects of public engagement. In so doing, however, Zukin—as well as Putnam—made note of the vast gray areas of overlap. As the former remarked:

While civic engagement occurs largely outside the domains of elected officials and government action, it can have important consequences for matters with which the government is also concerned (for example, public safety, homelessness, education, even national security). And since civic engagement often pertains to
public matters and not solely to private questions, government may not be directly involved but may serve as arbiter, facilitator, supporter, or enforcer of decisions and activities in the civic realm. (52)

It goes without saying that this thesis is likewise subject to the same ambiguities as between the civic and political spheres.

In efforts to distinguish between the two, Zukin’s study drew from general elements of two studies. “In their classic study [on public engagement], Verba and Nie (1972) identified four dimensions: voting, election campaign activity, contacting public officials, and cooperative activity.” A later study “distinguished between electoral (voting and campaign activity) and non-electoral activities, with non-electoral work sorted into categories of conventional (informal community work, contacting elites, organizing memberships, attending meetings) and ‘unconventional’ (signing petitions or participating in demonstrations or boycotts) behavior.” (51). Together, these studies helped provide clarity to the often-confusing picture of public engagement by further distinguishing what best constitutes civic and political activities.

In assessing political knowledge, Zukin and his team measured respondents’ tendency to: follow government and public affairs; talk with family and friends about politics; demonstrate political knowledge (measured by specific questioning; eg, how much of a majority is required for the US Senate and House to override a presidential veto?); and pay attention to the news in the general media. To measure political participation, they used the indicators of regular voting, persuading others
to vote their way, displaying political paraphernalia, contributing to campaigns, and volunteering for individual candidates or political organizations. To measure civic participation, the indicators were community problem solving, regular volunteering for a non-electoral organization, active membership in a group or association, and different forms of participation in fund-raising. To assess public voice, they measured the tendency of respondents to contact officials; contact print media; contact the broadcast media; protesting; email petitions; written petitions; boycotting; buycotting; canvassing. (Table 3.1, pg. 57-58)

Overall, Zukin’s study found that just over half of all American adults that they surveyed were publicly engaged in some way. Of the 52% that were reported as publicly engaged, 16 percent of respondents were classified as both civically and politically active; just over one-third (36%) of respondents qualified as only politically active; and about one-third (32%) qualified as only civically active. The remaining 48% of respondents were classified as disengaged. (64)

In order to be classified as civically active in this study, respondents needed to report that they participated in two of four activities listed in the survey that pertained to civic engagement. Similarly, respondents were categorized as politically active if they responded affirmatively to having performed two of five activities listed.

Examining differences of levels of engagement among generations helps further break down this general overview. For political activities, Millennials were among the bottom two generations in five of the six activities, and the lowest in four
of the six. Interestingly, Millennials were the most likely to try to persuade others to vote for something or someone they support. Dutifuls were the highest for the explicit electoral activities (registering to vote and always voting). Baby Boomers and Dutifuls were the most likely to contribute money to a political group. The activities that reported the lowest affirmative responses across all four generations appear to be the ones that ask the most, at least tangibly, of citizens: contributing money and volunteering. 13% of all respondents said they contributed money to a political group, and 6% said they volunteered for a political group; 79% reported that they were registered to vote, and 51% said that they always vote.

For civic activities, they attempted to differentiate between regular participation in civic activities, and more sporadic participation. This, along with generational differences, reveals some of the new methods of engagement that this thesis seeks to examine more deeply. Overall, their measurements of civic activity reveal a relative consistency in participation levels among the four generations. Noticeable differences include Dutifuls being half as likely (8%) as the other three generations (16%) to walk, run, or bicycle for a charitable cause; and Boomers are nearly twice as likely (40%) to be an active member in a group or organization than Millennials (22%). Zukin credits Millennial’s ability to match, or come close to, the other three generations in the civic realm in some respects to their socialization, specifically via their education. “Much of their (Millennials’) advantage is due to the influence of high schools and colleges. Among high school students--many of whom are encouraged or required to do community service work--over half (54%) have volunteered for a non-electoral group. Over 4 in 10 among college students (41%)
have done so. By contrast, among youth who are not in high school or college, 25% say they have volunteered."

More recent research described in *Generation On a Tight Rope* has affirmed the findings on civic and political engagement in Zukin’s study, and offers keen insight and explanations for these trends. In interviews with college students from 10 campuses, they provoked responses that demonstrated Millennials’ understanding of their upbringing in terms of socialization, and explained how this influences their current activity and decision-making.

The data from Zukin’s study demonstrates a severe lack of political action among youth. Millennials were among the bottom two generations in five of the six political activities measured in Zukin’s experiment, and the lowest in four of the six. Millennials were 10% less likely to be registered to vote (60% for Millennials) than the next lowest generational cohort, Generation X (70%). Similarly, they were half as likely to vote (24%) as the other three generations combined (51%). Finally, only 10% of Millennials had attempted to contact a public official, which is 8% lower than all other generations.

Zukin explains why it takes time for citizens to develop political engagement habits: “Different stages of the life cycle bring different politically relevant events, for example paying income taxes for the first time, choosing a school for a child, or helping an elderly parent deal with Medicare. In addition, habits such as voting take time to build. It is natural that certain behaviors will become more frequent with practice.” (Zukin, 11)
D. The Shrinking Welfare State and Civic Engagement

As Millennials formed decidedly anti-political views, a contraction in government programs, particularly those related to citizen welfare and the environment, would allow Millennials to find or form new, alternative ways to engage publicly. A series of devolutions in government functions resulted in the transfer of same to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), charitable associations and the private sector, such as issues of environmental sustainability and climate change (Kiesa et al., 2008, 13, 22-24). Moreover, the methods Millennials often developed to address these issues involved group efforts. Specifically, students’ methods of engagement involved combining their organizing efforts with others’.

“The more people you get, the more awareness you raise, and then…comes the changes” (ibid, 14). In light of this description of some of the more popular engagement methods developed by college students, the influence of new media cannot be denied. In particular, this speaks to social media facilitating users’ abilities to absorb and share information, and then discuss and formulate actions/responses.

Given the disillusionment described above, Millennials have adopted the mindset that, in order to engage with the public sphere in any meaningful way, they necessarily must find and/or forge alternative paths to political engagement from those trod by their generational forbearers (Bartels, 2005). New media has made the general population more inter-connected, and has made information accessible in ways never before realized. While it seems unlikely at present that Millennials
will use this technology to engage politically, there are strong signs that Millennials are using new media to engage civically, and will continue to do so. The digital revolution giving rise to this change is discussed in the following chapter.
CHAPTER IV – THE MEDIA

Television is not the truth. . . . Television is a circus, a carnival . . . lion tamers, and football players. We're in the boredom-killing business.

Howard Beale, *Network*

The seven marvels that best represent man's achievements over the last 2,000 years will be determined by Internet vote.

Jon Stewart

A. Introduction

The cyclical nature of generational development described in Chapter II has an historical parallel in the media, known as the news cycle. Born just a few years before the first Millennials, Cable News Network (CNN) was responsible for the first dramatic shift from once- or twice-daily snapshots of the news through newspapers and early
television. CNN and its progeny generated the ability to report breaking news at any
time during a 24-hour period (Hindin, 2014).

Revolutionary at the time of its inception and for a quarter-century thereafter,
cable news still serves a purpose for the die-hard news consumer. In many respects,
however, cable news (as distinguished from the universe of cable television) has been
eclipsed to some extent both by the extraordinary breadth of media content, and by the
extraordinary growth in other media forms (Askanase, 2012).

However, cable television in general as well as the Internet, are particularly
salient to the question of Millennial engagement. In both cases, they have exponentially
expanded choices in media content among news, entertainment and "infotainment". In
addition, other recent media changes have impacted form and content choices. These
include: digitalization, proliferation/pluralization, heterogeneous audiences,
commercialization, and new logics for media. These various changes have occurred
broadly throughout the media universe, including broadcast television, print journalism,
and digital media.

Notably, the consumer is no longer constrained by the role of passive recipient.
Interactive features of new media offer the viewer/reader a variety of participatory
opportunities. Moreover, the consumer is no longer limited to the reportage of network
news anchors or The New York Times. A plethora of sources offer every conceivable
viewpoint. As the remainder of this chapter indicates, the media has the primary role in
determining the flows of the information highway, but the consumer is now free to
decide whether to remain on the interstate, or take a narrow country road. In the case
of the Millennials, their media selections, both in form and content, are both novel and complex.

**B. Dominant Modern Media: Cable Television and Internet**

The notion of individual choice is a major construct in a majority of political science studies on media and engagement (Habermas, 2006; Fung, 2007; Xenos and Moy, 2007). Choice itself relates to options on a number of different virtual and real-world platforms. As the previous chapter detailed, Millennials are faced with an array of possible civic and political activities; they are free to choose engagement in many, some or none. Likewise, the element of choice dominates their media selections both as to preferred forms and content. With regard to the spectrum of public engagement, tensions are inherent in each such choice. However, in order to assess same in terms of the essential thesis hereof, it is first necessary to consider the mechanics, as it were, of cable television and the internet.

The emergence of cable television was the first major technological event of the digital age, profoundly affecting content choice, and dispensing with the captive audience of TV’s early years. As one scholar remarks:

Choosing every night between a scant three or four channels, television viewers in the broadcast period inspired the term ‘captive’ audience. When the networks scheduled news, people watched news. Starting in the 1970’s, the captives’ chains were loosened, albeit slowly. (Prior, 94)
The increased freedom of selection allowed for scholarly correlations between content preferences and public engagement. According to Putnam, viewers who favor educational and new programming exhibit higher levels of engagement, while preferences for action dramas, soap operas, and reality TV signify a desire to distract oneself from troubling current events. Essentially, for those who are disinterested in public affairs cable television offers a plethora of escapist entertainment.

The proliferation of options offered by cable TV resulted in a number of significant media changes: competition between forms of media diminished, while competition for viewer audiences increased. As cable television expanded, print media suffered, as both Putnam and Zukin have observed. Interestingly, Putnam makes one of the seminal generational observations in this regard, identifying print media with older generations, and the more modern broadcast media with younger generations.

Meanwhile, as cable television flourished, news programs were forced to apply new logics to capture increasingly fragmented audiences. These included flashier graphics, sensationalized headlines, and time-reduced stories capable of capturing and maintaining audience attention. In the current environment, this has resulted in dramatically different news cycles. Experts are of the view that social media such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are shrinking the breaking news phase. Analysis and archival stages are being extended, however, through the power of the Internet. Askanase's diagram describes same elegantly:
The compression of the breaking news cycle has been accompanied by the rise of infotainment. While this was intended to attract a broader audience base, it has further blurred distinctions between news and entertainment. Infotainment distorts reality in two ways: “news programs incorporate entertainment elements, and the plots of fictional entertainment shows revolve around political issues.” (Prior, 275) Such programs are also referred to as “soft news”, which Prior describes as “typically more sensational, more personality-centered, less time-bound, more practical, and more incident-based than other news.” (ibid)
The cumulative changes wrought by cable television have altered the democratic process. A high-choice media environment potentially provides exposure to more news. At the same time the content has been both watered down, and exaggerated. While there is less fact, there is more drama, a narrative that fails to establish meaningful dialogue (Bennett, Lawrence and Livingston, 2007). Moreover, the proliferation of content allows for more escapist options, thereby threatening to diminish engagement levels further.

The Internet has emerged as an expanded version of the cable television media matrix, and its development reflects many of cable TV’s characteristics. To start, the Internet has increased content options by orders of magnitude. Netflix, for example, provides news information/documentary programs such as “The Square” and “Restrepo”, infotainment such as “House of Cards”, “The West Wing”, and “Mad Men”, and pure entertainment such as “The Walking Dead” and “Family Guy.” YouTube offers political speeches from a variety of eras, sports highlights and the latest music videos. Finally, the Internet hosts innumerable alternative news sources such as The Huffington Post, Web-logs (blogs), and niche issue sites. In comparing the emergence of the Internet with that of cable television, Prior (111) sees many similarities in this regard: “The variety of content people access online appears to be at least as large as the diversity of cable programming.” If anything, this woefully understates content availability.

Regrettably, however, many of the problematic aspects of cable television in terms of democratic practice have carried over to the Internet. The same tendencies for
sensationalism, which stem from commercialism, are apparent. Similarly, online journalism is not immune to many of the current maladies of print journalism. An arbitrary visit to CNN.com revealed its run-down of top stories on a single day. Of the sixteen headlines, three related to late night TV entertainment, involving David Letterman’s retirement announcement. Three leaders covered a mass shooting on a military base. One story involved a shark attack, another a fatal skydiving accident, and two others covered tornadoes and earthquakes, respectively (CNN.com, April 4, 2014). This left six slots for hard news; unlike David Letterman, however, none of the serious news stories garnered more than one headline. Drugs, suicide, guns, jets, and nukes were among the most popular attention-grabbing keywords.

The Internet has two unique features, however, that set it apart from cable television. It is capable of providing an interactive common ground for users. Content can be shared, events can be organized, and movements initiated with more efficiency and ease than ever before. As Internet access continues to increase, the interactive aspect will become an ever more powerful tool for engagement. Additionally, the Internet provides an extraordinary capability to customize content and data to fit individual preferences. Thus, one can filter out any undesired information, be it hard or soft news. This exemplifies the two-edged sword however: efficiencies in receiving content of choice (significant to the Millennial generation), must be weighed against the resulting lack of exposure to current events.
C. Media Content Selection

1. Desire versus Duty

While selection of media form may in some cases determine—or at any rate influence—content choice, it is by no means dispositive. Thus, the primary tension must be seen as the choice of substantive content. In this regard, on the one hand, notions of civic duty rehearsed since childhood require continual information-gathering to remain up to date on socio-political events. It goes without saying that the media is the conduit both for factual information and editorializing, for discussion and debate, and, ultimately, for a "shared democratic culture" (Arvidsson, 2007; Dahlgren __). Should we desire to access the information, "our computers [will] feed us second-by-second updates on the world’s diplomatic challenges" (Zwick, 2009). Thus, the media, while not a sufficient condition for democracy, are assuredly a necessary one.

Simultaneously, however, the social culture often favors escapist entertainment. This results from a combination of factors including the negativity, sensationalism and venomous partisanship associated with the news, as well as the stresses of modern life (Dahlgren, 2, 126). Herein lies the paradox of the media both as driver of and deterrent to engagement.

2. OMA Framework

It transpires that voluntary selection of certain media content is not necessarily a prerequisite to an informed plebiscite. Prior, for example, provides a framework for examining the educational powers of television based on opportunity, motivation and
ability (OMA Framework). The first component, opportunity, measures direct and indirect effects of relative media access on political knowledge and engagement. (Prior, 29). Motivation defines the level of an individual’s general interest in national and international affairs based on:

the belief that one’s involvement in politics is a good investment of one’s time, that it will produce either psychic, solidarity, or substantive rewards. And it results from a sense of civic duty, the belief that one should be involved in politics regardless of one’s personal interest or the likelihood of an identifiable payoff. (Prior, 29-30)

Finally ability relates to relative amounts learned from exposure, given particular levels of motivation and opportunity. In addition, individuals are rated on a series of attributes relevant to same: cognitive processes, literacy and physical disabilities, if any. (Prior, 30) In this regard, Prior posits two different types of learning: motivated and accidental.

Accidental learning occurs when, for example, sports fans obtain hard data as a by-product of their entertainment consumption, essentially through osmosis. Similarly, early moviegoers were exposed to newsreels prior to the start of the featured entertainment on offer. From the consumer's perspective, the price of admission covered the feature film; knowledge gleaned from the hard news was merely a bonus. (Prior, 30) Thus, accidental learning explains how a given media environment may provide an educational public service despite the audience's lack of motivation. On the other hand, there are news aficionados who obtain more than mere information; this speaks to motivations predicated on the psychological rewards referred to above.
3. Low Choice/High Choice Media Environments

In order to assess the significance of media content quantitatively, Prior devised two studies to measure individuated preferences for news versus entertainment: content preferences in low- and high-choice media environments; and content preference in the current high-choice media environment. With respect to the first study, two interview groups were asked identical questions in opposite order. Each group was provided with a list of content options that reflected two different generations of television: broadcast and cable. Respondents assigned to the broadcast-only group were provided with five content options: ABC Nightly News, NBC Nightly News, CBS Nightly News, the Newshour with Jim Lehrer, and the option to turn off the television. Respondents assigned to the cable group were presented with the five options listed above, as well as additional news channels (cable news) and several entertainment options.

Responses in the low-choice environment were predictable, selections reflecting the “captive audience” notion. 80% of respondents in this group elected to watch one of the four news options presented; the remaining 20% chose to turn off the TV. Interview subjects offered more choice were far less inclined to watch the news. 35% reported that they would watch one of the four broadcast news programs, while 8% said they would watch cable news. Half of the audience selected an entertainment or sports program.

Thereafter, respondents were asked to switch roles. Those from the low-choice group received the list that included cable options; those initially in the high-choice
group were reduced to five broadcast options. The ensuing modifications in viewing behavior were thus correlated with increased or decreased choices (Prior, 42). From this, six viewing groups emerged: the Always News group (those watching news in both low- and high-choice environments); the Cable News Only group (those who moved from no TV to cable news when offered the choice); Switchers (respondents eschewing news for entertainment when offered the choice); the Entertainment Only group (no TV to entertainment viewing when offered the choice); the Non-Viewers (no TV under either scenario); and the Overwhelmed (respondents who moved from watching news to no TV when offered greater choice).

The Always News group constituted the largest segment, with 43% claiming they would watch the news in both environments, thus evidencing significant motivation. The Cable News Only group was marginal, as just 2.2% of respondents switched from no TV to cable news. Switchers were the second largest group of respondents, with 34% moving away from news in a low-choice environment to entertainment in a high-choice environment. 10% of respondents said they would go from not watching in a low-choice environment to watching entertainment programming in a high-choice environment, while 7% said they would not watch anything in either environment. Finally, 3% of respondents said the expansion of content options would cause them to move from watching the news to not watching television.

The results, in terms of respondent political knowledge, were significant. In particular, potential Switchers without cable access were "significantly more knowledgeable than Switchers with cable access.” In addition, Switchers without cable
access were nearly as knowledgeable as those in the Always News group (the accidental learning phenomenon). Meanwhile, those who chose entertainment, if available, and had access to cable were on a par with the Entertainment Only group in terms of political knowledge.

Thus, “content preferences only affect political knowledge when people have a choice.” Essentially, the media environment determines the influence content preference may have on political knowledge. If there is a large degree of choice, content preference becomes more indicative of and influential for political knowledge.

To test for general content preference in the high-choice environment, Prior asked respondents to rank the news relative to other programming genres by selecting their four favorite genres out of ten options. Additionally, respondents were allowed to identify genres that they “really disliked”. Most respondents were largely indifferent. 3% reported that they explicitly disliked the news; 5% listed the news as their most preferred genre. Meanwhile, 50% responded indifferently, neither listing the news in their top four nor expressly disparaging same.

Changes in political knowledge over time were measured by two surveys issued fourteen months apart, that were comprised of twelve knowledge questions. Similar to the Low-Choice/High Choice experiment, respondents’ content preferences influenced their political knowledge. “The difference between someone with a strong preference for entertainment over news and someone with a weak relative preference for entertainment amounts to a knowledge gain of about 23 percent.” (Prior, 115) This effect was subject to changes to the media environment. “A modification of the media
environment, then, is the causal factor that over time produces knowledge increases (in the case of a preference for news) or decreases (if entertainment programming is preferred).” (Prior, 117) One result was counterintuitive. The knowledge base of those who preferred entertainment but lacked access to new media increased more over the course of 14 months than that of entertainment viewers who had cable or Internet available.

4. Implications of Knowledge Gaps

Without question traditional hard news can depict untold forms of brutality, and is often difficult to watch. Given this, along with the wide range of other content available to consumers, it is not difficult to see why many viewers are increasingly selecting entertainment content over the news (Putnam, 219-221; Dahlgren, 44; Prior, 98). As a result, however, an increasing number of Americans are uninformed about current events (Prior 98). This expanding knowledge gap has translated into unequal political turnout, as those who choose to pursue the news are more consistent voters than those who avoid it (Prior, 257). At the same time, citizens more inclined to pursue the news also tend to be the most partisan portion of the general public (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009; Prior, 226). Taken together, these consumption trends provide context for the increasingly polarized political climate of late.

On the other hand, those who avoid the more traditional forms of news dissemination are not necessarily totally withdrawn from public engagement. This is particularly true in light of emerging alternatives to classical forms of political activism,
such as engagement through not-for-profits, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and civic volunteer associations. While traditional news media often marginalizes the relevance and importance of these organizations (Dahlgren, 49), the Internet is providing a venue to highlight the growing significance of same.

D. Millennials and Media Choices

Millennials grew up amidst these rapid and profound changes to the media landscape, and, consequently, their relationship to new media is unique. Generation on a Tightrope defines two salient characteristics: quantum leaps in media form and content, and social media (53, 68, 69). Given the confirmed effects that the media has on engagement, and the unique media environment in which Millennials have come of age, the development of their media habits is of crucial importance for and highly relevant to their engagement habits. In order to demonstrate this, it will be useful to compare Millennial media habits to previous generations.

Zukin’s team examined the relationship of civic and political engagement with voice and cognitive engagement. Given the fluidity between civic and political activities, they sought to extend on and extrapolate from this relationship. Specifically, they speculated that since civic activities can resemble political activities and vice versa, so too could the communicative strategies and tactics used for these activities. “If at least some civic activity has a more political component to it, we might expect civic activists to use the same kinds of tools that mainstream political activists use to send messages and convey their views to policy makers, interest groups, and other citizens.”
Their speculation that civic and political activists might use the same communicative channels would be confirmed. “We find that even those who concentrate their efforts in the civic arena, while eschewing involvement in traditional politics, nevertheless express their views to the same extent and through the same channels that those active in traditional politics do.” Using nine indicators of public voice, they found that for each activity of public voice, the civic and political dimensions were more or less equally represented.

In terms of the specific findings regarding expression of public voice, there are several interesting examples. In comparing e-mail petitions to written petitions, respondents were more likely to have signed a written petition (23%) than an e-mail petition (12%). When the e-mail petition activity is examined across generational lines, Millennials and GenXers are the most likely to perform this activity. For expressing an opinion through print or broadcast media, Millennials are at or close to the overall average of the four generations (10% of Millennials contacted newspapers and magazines, which was the average percentage among generational cohorts; 7% of Millennials called a radio or TV talk show, 1% shy of the average percentage).

Levels of cognitive engagement are perhaps the most indicative and consequential measurements in terms of elucidating differences in engagement among generations. In terms of consumption of political news, Millennials lag significantly behind the other generations. For example, Dutifuls (66%) are more than twice as likely to have developed the habit (at least five days per week) of reading a newspaper than
Millennials (30%). Similarly, Dutifuls more than double Millennials in television news viewership (85% vs. 38%).

These disparities in news consumption between Millennials and the other three generations measured are reflected in levels of political knowledge. In seven of the eight indicators of political knowledge, Millennials are the lowest, and often are far behind the next generational cohort. This is true in terms of international and domestic politics. Millennials were 21% less likely to have been able to identify a Senator who had resigned his leadership post than the next lowest cohort; similarly, 16% less likely to have known North Korea was developing nuclear weapons than the next lowest cohort.

Comparing Millennial levels of attentiveness to politics with those of Generation X, notably, 12% of Generation X were reported to be completely inattentive to politics in 1987-1988, while 13% were classified as highly attentive. Meanwhile, 24% of Millennials in 2002-2003 were classified as completely inattentive to politics, with 14% registering as highly attentive. This disparity existed despite the proliferation of available news sources.

Zukin’s research described here shows Millennials to consume less news than older generations. Specifically, only 30% of Millennials demonstrated habitual newspaper readership, as opposed to 66% of Dutifuls. Indeed, the following advertisement by print media indicates an age-based appeal for new readers.
Millennials also lagged behind in news viewership, as 38% reported they habitually watch the news compared to 85% of Dutifuls registered as habitually news watchers.

Disinterest in news is not a trait unique to Millennials, but news consumption rates of older generations coming of age are noticeably higher, particularly in regards to newspaper readership. (Zukin, 84-85; Putnam, 220). Both Zukin and Prior’s studies ballpark the beginning of this trend in the 1970’s, when content options were expanded. Zukin comments, “News gathering and attention to public issues were no longer societal norms but simply one of many options offered by the marketplace.” (Zukin, 34)

This logic underlies the argument put forth by Prior that the expansion of content choice negatively affects news consumption rates. However, his data suggests a
further conclusion in explaining media and engagement habits: the development and expansion of the Internet allowed for not only a higher degree of content choice, but also preference for *media form*.

It is a thesis of this paper that, as a result of their proximity to and knowledge of the Internet, Millennials are simultaneously more exposed to and distracted from political information than previous generations. Further, as a result of their more modern and pluralistic education, Millennials are inherently more skeptical and critical of all information, but in particular of content from the news media. Consequently, when Millennials approach news content, they do so overwhelmed and distracted by choices, and with a pre-established aversion to political spin.

Indeed, literature on the Millennial Generation supports this hypothesis. Authors of *Generation on a Tight Rope* Arthur Levine and Diane Dean discuss the arrival of the social media, and the effects it has had on Millennial college students. They describe the dizzying activity that takes place on social media, which allows students “to link their lives with [family, friends, and people with shared interests], to share their latest personal information, post a newsfeed giving moment-by-moment status updates, pictures, videos, a wall for messages, email, texting, chatting, gaming, interest groups, event planning and notifications, and apps galore.” (69) While social media certainly provides users with the opportunity to consume and share political news, it offers a much larger variety of more attractive, yet also more distracting entertainment options. Levine and Dean go on to speculate, “Perhaps that’s why a number of students referred to [the Internet] as *electronic crack*.” (69)
Nonetheless, some Millennials still desire to remain up to date on current news and affairs, and shun entertainment options for news information. Despite their motivations, however, few find their forays into the news media to be fruitful or enjoyable. The recently published study *Millenials Talk Politics* describes the Millennial approach to the news as tentative and skeptical. “Students seem motivated to learn more about issues, but they are overwhelmed by the amount of information available and are distrustful of many media sources.” Speaking to this, selecting the “right” news source can be difficult, not only because of the increased amount of options but also because “spin doctors, public relations experts, media advisors, and political consultants using the techniques of advertising, market research, public relations, and opinion analysis have entered the fray to help political actors and economic elites shape their communication strategies.” (Dalhgren, 49) Given that Millennials grew up in an era when “Good American kids [learn] the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on”, they are predisposed to resisting said spin. (My So-Called Opinion) Meanwhile, within the news media, “Citizens are represented as responding to issues and situations, but are almost never portrayed as offering political suggestions or other constructive thoughts.” (Dalhgren, 131) As such, the Millennial approach to the news is apprehensive and doubtful.

It appears, then, that today’s young people are aware of the sensationalized, biased, and polarized atmosphere of the news industry, as it currently exists. This
awareness, and subsequent aversion to political news, goes far in explaining why Millennials lag behind older generations in political knowledge. In seven of the eight indicators of political knowledge used by Zukin, Millennials were the lowest, and were often far behind the next lowest generational cohort. This trend extends to political attentiveness: in a 2002-2003 study, 24% of Millennials registered as completely inattentive to politics, with just 14% classified as highly attentive to politics. When they were the same age as the Millennials measured, members of Generation X were half as inattentive as Millennials (12%), and just below Millennial “highly attentive” rates (13%).

In addition to their aversion to the news industry, Millennials also simply haven’t had as much time and experience to form and develop skills necessary for following and learning from the news. Given that “it is natural that certain behaviors will become more frequent with practice”, it follows that today’s youth haven’t had time to develop “the political resources that arise in citizens who are attentive, knowledgeable, (and) efficacious.” (Zukin, 11, 128-129)

However, all of this begs the question: if Millennials aren’t looking towards politics or political news to address public issues, where are they looking? For one, they tend to focus on specific issues of importance to them as individuals. In particular, today’s college students report interest in education, healthcare, the environment, and human rights, among others (MTP, 12). As the federal government has increasingly devolved its responsibilities for many such issues, students have helped lead initiatives in resolving and remedying them through non-traditional means. (Zukin, 53; MTP, 11, 15, 20) One current student describes how this happens: “Talking to one another and
strategically organizing, working together to a common goal...we’re our own politics.”
(MTP, 16)

Many current students also view these grassroots organizing techniques as “a way to become informed.” (MTP, 20) This introduces the concept that social media largely manifests Millennial’s heightened efforts to address public issues being neglected by the government. Thanks to social media, information about these issues is capable of being shared more efficiently, as well as moving through alternative channels to the disliked traditional news sources. Moreover, social media creates digital networks in which members are, as a result of the proliferation of multi-media devices, constantly accessible to one another. Organization and content sharing, therefore, are two powerful ways social media can influence engagement.

Indeed, the use of social media may seem to be a version of 'engagement-light' among American Millennials. However, it must be noted that elsewhere, Millennials have brought down regimes via texts, tweets and email. Most experts are of the view that the Arab Spring could never have occurred in a pre-digital age (Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011; Stepanova, 2011). The organizational utility of the Internet in these uprisings was key to generating a critical mass of protesters.

It follows that Millennials are largely disinterested in politics and political news, and look instead to the many other media options available to them. Those motivated to use the media for purposes of engagement often do so in efforts to address a specific public issue of interest. Other Millennial media habits hedge between seeking
information and avoiding reality. Finally, some, feeling alienated and isolated, completely withdraw themselves from the public sphere.

Meanwhile, as more people continue to gain access to the Internet, it is becoming an increasingly influential media device on engagement. Looked at optimistically, it has the potential to greatly and positively affect current and future engagement habits. Even more encouraging is the fact that young people, who traditionally struggle to find ways of engaging, are expressing favorable views of the Internet’s civic side. They view it as a way of becoming informed about public issues, and use it to organize efforts for addressing issues they are passionate about. On the other hand, the noisier, more colorful, and more distracting side of the Internet can often stand in the way of engagement.

Given that Millennials have been presented with greater opportunities to engage publically, as well as more attractive options for distraction, than any generation that preceded them, the next chapter of this paper seeks to investigate how Millennials are responding to the media landscape laid out above. It will do so through a survey that measures Millennial media habits for news consumption, for organizing purposes, for content sharing, for manifesting political and civic activities, for escaping or distracting oneself from reality, and for other similar and related variables.
CHAPTER V – SURVEY ANALYSIS

A. Methods

To assess how Millennials approach the media, and manifest engagement in public life, as well as how these behaviors might influence or be indicative of another, I constructed a survey that tested respondent’s frequencies of participation in engagement activities, and use of media forms to manifest these activities. My survey is unique in that it tests for these behaviors simultaneously. Specifically, in two of the three primary sections of the survey, respondents are asked to report their frequency in five political activities and four civic activities (not labeled explicitly on the survey, but considered as such after) in old and new media forms. This provided data feedback
about participation in public engagement activities, as well as media use, in a way that would allow for relationships for these behaviors to be assessed.

This survey, and more specifically the sample population it would be distributed to, possesses inherent limitations. The student population at Wheaton, for one, is not representative of the entire Millennial Generation. While young people are attending colleges across the country at higher rates than previous generations, not all do (Kiesa, 2008). Moreover, current college students have an advantage over other Millennials not enrolled in college, as their campuses provide enhanced opportunities to engage, both civically and politically (Zukin, 2006; Kiesa, 2008; Levine, Dean, 2012). Therefore, surveying students at Wheaton College does not provide a complete picture of youth engagement and media habits.

Also, by emphasizing the media as such a prominent and influential pathway to engagement, I leave several other variables commonly noted in other studies as affecting engagement largely unaccounted for. Most prominently, I don’t test for age, therefore limiting the scope my data and conclusions could encompass. This also makes it difficult to compare my data to other studies that discuss engagement habits across generational lines, but not impossible, as I am able to draw from generational trends in engagement discussed in past research.

With that in mind, I sought a sample population that was representative of the gender, age, and general divisions of study at the college. The only age restriction was participants were required to be at least 18 years of age. From there, the sample population would be comprised of students from eight introductory classes across three
divisions of study: Arts and Humanities, Natural Sciences, and Social Sciences.

Introductory classes tend to be the largest sized classes at Wheaton, and are often filled by students of all four class years. Thus, these classes were the most likely to contribute to a sample population that possessed a broad range of academic interests among students from all four class levels. This, I believed, would provide a more complete picture of student engagement with public issues.

Prior to distribution, however, I also had to consider the possibility of coercing respondents. To limit this possibility, I informed respondents before administering the survey that their participation was voluntary, and that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. I also asked if anyone in that particular class had already completed the survey, so that if a student had done so, they were asked not to participate a second time.

In all, the sample population totals 206 participants. There were three main issues involved with constructing and distributing the survey. For one, freshmen and women were significantly oversampled, and this must be taken into account when interpreting my data. For example, voting frequency could have been affected, as some current freshmen might not have been eligible to vote in the past year. As I did not perceive this potential issue before distributing the survey, I did not ask an accompanying question that would have accounted for voter status at the time of the 2012 general election. However, future studies should be aware of this error, and readers should consider how some variable measurements may be affected by this sampling issue.
The survey also does not test for political knowledge. In hindsight, it would have been beneficial to test for students’ political knowledge, as it could have been significant in assessing how media habits can affect knowledge, and how different levels of political knowledge can affect public engagement behaviors.

Finally, there was the issue that some surveys were improperly filled out. This was by far most common when respondents were asked to rank their content preferences on a 1-8 scale, where errors occurred in 17 of the 206 surveys distributed. Respondents were supposed to assign one number to denote one content option, eight times. Mistakes included ranking multiple content options as most preferred, as well as skipping over content options. However, these errors did not irrevocably affect the data for this measurement, as I was still largely able to glean respondent content preferences.

The survey itself is divided into three primary sections: preliminary questions, questions that test for engagement habits and media form preference, and questions for content preference. The survey asks six preliminary questions, which provide baseline frequency data for sex, class year, major, political ideology, political party identification, and access to multi-media technology. The two middle sections test for participation rates in activities informed by or performed through different media forms. The first of these sections involves traditional media forms; the second involves new media forms. In the final section, I assess content preferences. Respondents are first asked for their preference between hard and soft news, which was designed in a way to get them thinking about the elements of each they either liked or disliked.
Following this subtle conditioning, they were asked to rate their preference for the news in general amongst seven other content options. Constructing my survey like this allowed me to test for general levels of engagement behavior and media use, and to later use that data to investigate relationships between the two.

B. Measures and Expectations

1. General Engagement Habits

H1: More respondents will be civically engaged than politically engaged.

This prediction could also be read as “more college students are civic-minded than politically-minded.” With few opportunities to affect the political system, and an aversion to politicians in general, it is highly unlikely that respondents will participate in the political activities “writing an elected official” and “attending a political meeting”. Also, with little inclination towards politics in general, it’s unlikely for respondents to attempt to persuade others politically. Voting is predicted to be the highest political activity participated in.

On the other hand, it is expected that respondents will frequently participate in protests, signing petitions, and volunteering. These activities free citizens to work outside the political power structures while still addressing public issues of interest. Further, these activities are aided by social media in various ways. For instance, social
media can facilitate citizens who want to organize a protest by creating a virtual public forum for the protest. On this virtual public forum, citizens can post information regarding the issue at hand, and establish times and settings for where the protest might take place. Further, users can connect with other people within their social network, and attempt them to enter this specific public forum.

**H2: More respondents will be withdrawn from public life than dually engaged.**

Students, already saddled with academic and social pressures, are not expected to regularly participate in civic and political activities, as well. Also, it is expected that there are students who don’t have much an interest in engaging publically at all. These generalizations inform this prediction.

To test for these predictions, I asked respondents to mark how often in the past year (1=not at all, 2=rarely, 3=once a month, 4=once a week) they participated in nine general activities that manifested public engagement in some way. In reality, however, my survey contained eighteen measurements on engagement habits, as I tested for frequency of each activity in traditional form and modern form. Traditional forms and methods of public engagement included discussions/meetings in person, calling and letter writing, print media, television, and voting. Their modern, new media counterparts include participating in digital discussions/meetings, emailing/skyping, digital print, digital video, and affirming voting on social media.
I arrived at this distinction by cross-referencing key engagement variables measured in Zukin’s study with the various influential media forms discussed in my media research. I began by assessing the methods of engagement examined in Zukin’s study, where I found that the use of public voice to engage publically did not tend to fit neatly into either the political or the civic sphere. Activities measured in Zukin’s study that involved the use of public voice include signing a petition, calling an elected official, protesting, persuading others politically, and intentionally (not) making purchases to send a political or social message i.e. consumerism. From my research, it appears that these activities are being influenced and manifested in different ways by new and old media forms, respectively (Zukin, 2006, 76-81; Prior, ) This provided a potential window to view comparisons of respondent participation rates in these activities between new and old forms of media.

After the survey was distributed, I formed the nine primary activities into two engagement spheres: civic and political. The activities that comprised the political group were discussing politics, attending a political meeting, contacting elected officials, persuading others politically, and voting. Aside from discussing politics, each of these activities seeks to influence the electoral process. This is the simplest way to distinguish between civic and political activities, as the electoral process is unique to the political sphere. I classified discussing politics as a political activity despite the commonly cited engagement concept that it is one’s “civic duty” to follow and discuss political happenings. My research informs me that an individual’s demonstration of political knowledge, through the art of conversing, not only motivates that individual to continue
following politics, but also to demonstrate more tangible political behaviors, i.e. voting, contacting elected officials, etc., in order to realize desired changes that stem from enhanced levels of political knowledge.

The activities that constituted the civic group were volunteering, protesting, signing a petition, and purposeful consumerism. I had the most difficulty firmly placing protesting in this sphere, and, as such, an explanation of the logic behind this decision can serve as a general explanation as to how these activities were deemed civic. Protesting is one form of public voice that seems to belong equally to the civic and political spheres. However, given the current societal emphasis on compartmentalizing social issues, and the related development of issue-oriented activism that operates largely outside traditional political structures, I felt it most appropriate to assign protesting to the civic sphere. As petitions, protests, purchases, and volunteering often revolve around single issues, this line of thinking influenced the placement of each of these activities within the civic sphere.

Once these groups were formed, I recoded the engagement activity variables so that responses of “did not” or “rarely” were consolidated into one variable, which classified respondents as “withdrawn” from that activity. Similarly, responses of participating “once a month” or “once a week” were consolidated and re-classified as “regularly engaged” in that activity. In determining my qualification for regular engagement, I decided that, over the course of a year, participation in an activity at least once a month was a reasonable baseline for “regular engagement.” To determine whether respondents were engaged in one sphere, both spheres, or not at all, I followed
Zukin’s metric used in his study: regular engagement in two of the five political activities meant the respondent was *politically engaged*; regular engagement in two of the four civic activities meant respondent was *civically engaged*. Respondents who fell into both spheres were classified as *dually engaged*. Respondents who did not qualify for any sphere of engagement in public life were labeled *withdrawn*.

It is a central aim of this paper to investigate how Millennials are engaging with public matters. This section of the survey allowed me to directly measure this by asking respondents how often they participated in eighteen public engagement activities.

2. **General Media Habits**

**H3: Respondents will prefer soft news to hard news**

There is little pleasure to be found in regularly consuming hard news for most. Moreover, college students also face academic and social demands that surely affect their content preferences. Specifically, I speculate that academic pressures are likely to drive students away from heavier and unpleasant news reports and towards a lighter, softer approach to public issues that is nonetheless still capable of keeping them relatively informed. Taken together, these two generalizations underlie this expectation.

**H4: Respondents will prefer issue-specific content to general news content**
Enhanced abilities to filter content preferences, along with the proliferation of alternative news sources, such as the Huffington Post and Alternet.org, provides more issue-specific content, particularly on the Internet. (Dahlgren, 2009; Prior, 2007). Studies show, too, that college students are more focused on specific issues of interest to them, rather than trying to be aware of general societal news (Levine and Dean, 2012; Kiesa et al. 2008).

**H5: Respondents will prefer infotainment content to entertainment content and news/information content**

This expectation has less to do with infotainment being “preferred” at high rates and more to do with entertainment and news/information being avoided at higher rates than infotainment. Generally speaking, infotainment programming tends to provide pleasure while also touching on relevant and interesting societal and cultural issues. These programs, however, vary in the amount of informative content they provide viewers. Therefore, measuring preference for the infotainment group can only go so far in assessing the information a viewer might be exposed to by watching a certain program. Nonetheless, respondent’s expressed preferences for content will still serve to provide a framework for as much to be referenced later.

As students at Wheaton are generally expected to be relatively informed, and are encouraged by the curriculum requirements to broaden the scope of what informs them, I believe it is unlikely that respondents will report high rates of preference for
entertainment programming. This programming genre, characterized by reality TV, is associated with escapism, and is therefore unlikely to be popular among active, intellectual college students. At the same time, pressure from academics might drive students to avoid complex and upsetting news stories. This direction, taken to its maximum could result in higher reported preferences for entertainment, but it is more likely that students will settle on the more moderate infotainment programs. Therefore, I expect infotainment to be the preferred content genre of the three primary groups.

**H6: Respondents are more likely to consume general news on the Internet instead of traditional forms of media.**

To assess these general media habits, I constructed my survey so that I could measure preferences for media forms and content separately. Earlier, I briefly mentioned how I distinguished between media forms. This distinction will be particularly important when addressing relationships between media preferences and engagement habits.

To begin, I established baselines for news type preference, and for preference of general news among several other content options. I began by measuring respondent rates of news consumption in traditional and new media forms. Specifically, I asked respondents how frequently they read news articles in print (traditional), and digitally (new), as well as the rates at which they watched the news on TV (traditional) and digitally (new). To assess content preferences, I first tested respondent preference for a
specific type of news, namely soft or hard news, followed by their preference for
general news among seven other content options. Respondents were asked to rate their
preferred content in progressive order from 1 (least preferred) to 8 (most preferred).

I measured preference of media forms for the purpose of news consumption by
running frequency distributions for two cognitive engagement activities in traditional
and new media forms. The activities were reading and watching the news; the forms
were in print and on television (traditional), and in digital print and on digital video (new
media). The purpose of testing for preference of form between traditional and new
media when consuming news was to provide a window to see whether Millennials are
using the Internet to consume news at all, and, if so, whether those rates exceed
Millennials’ use of traditional media to consume the news (Stiglitz, 2013).

To measure content preference, I began by asking respondents of their
preference between two types of news: hard and soft. The next question asked
respondents to rank their preference for general news among seven various types of
content programs. By asking respondents to select their favorite type of news before
assessing their content preferences in a more comprehensive manner, I conditioned
them to think about what they liked and disliked about the news. For example,
respondents that prefer soft news might be inclined towards that news type because of
the lighter portrayal of current events that is common in that type of programming. Or,
put another way, they might be avoiding grim realities that are presented in hard news
programming. Each of these general reasons behind the preference for soft news can be
seen, then, as affecting other content preferences. It isn’t a far leap then, to assess such
a preference for news type and predict that that respondent will prefer infotainment, or
that that respondent will not prefer news/information over other options. Therefore,
and subsequently, I expected to notice relationships between news type preference and
general content preferences emerge from my data assessment.

To measure general content preference, I asked respondents to rank eight
content options in order of preference, with “8” indicating the most preferred option.
The content options were: TV Dramas, TV Comedies, Reality TV, Game Shows, Sports,
Music, Documentary Programs, and General News. After the survey was distributed, I
sorted the eight content options into three primary content genre groups: Infotainment,
Entertainment, and News/Information. The Infotainment group was comprised of the
TV Drama, TV Comedy, and Music options. The Entertainment group was made up of
the Reality TV, Game Show, and Sport options. General News and Documentary
programs formed the News/Information group.

These groupings were based on Prior’s understanding of the relative amounts of
political and societal information offered by each content option. Reality TV, Game
Shows, and Sports are considered to provide minimal information of this sort; TV
Dramas and Comedies, and Music provide some to several opportunities for viewers to
consume information through entertainment programs; and General News and
documentary programs offer the most direct information on current events.

However, when looked at beyond their surface, these general content options’
abilities to inform viewers have several conditions that are in need of discussion. In
general, problems in assessing the informative value of media content stem from the

76
wide range of issues touched on in the general content genres, and even their subgenres. For example, TV Dramas can serve to inform viewers of information pertinent to public matters, or be completely devoid of any valuable information whatsoever. To take this farther, The West Wing is a television drama that presents viewers with an optimistic exploration of the inner-workings, players, and structure of the Executive Branch of the federal government. A show like The Walking Dead, on the other hand, draws its appeal from its enhanced illustrations violence and suspense.

On a related note, sports programming can be just as much a conveyor of societal knowledge as music content. Recent prominent social issues that have been raised in the realm of American sports range from the former Missouri University football player and current NFL Draft candidate Michael Sam coming out as gay, to the fallout from Los Angeles Clippers’ owner Donald Sterling’s racist comments. Music, for its part, can spread knowledge and awareness similarily to sports, and on social issues like the ones described immediately above. Rap star Macklemore won the Grammy this year for Best New Artist, which was no doubt partially a result of his lyrical support for equal rights for the LGBT community in his song “Same Love.” However, given musicians’ heightened abilities and tendencies to more directly and purposefully gear their work towards messages on public issues, I separated these two content options, considering sports to be closer to the entertainment side of the content spectrum, and music to fall into infotainment. Nonetheless, the fact that my survey does not account for the various levels of knowledge conveyed by the different content options measured
by my survey represents a shortcoming of my research, and I look to future studies to address this.

After consolidating the content options into three primary groups, I identified each respondent’s most preferred choice, and coded this preference as “1” in the corresponding group. I then created dummy variables for the other two groups to measure preferences between the three groups together by running frequency distributions. If, for example, a respondent’s most preferred content choice was “TV Dramas”, a “1” was marked in the Infotainment Preference Group, and “0” was marked in both the Entertainment and News/Information Preference Groups. Doing so would provide a baseline for content genre preference.

However, since the News/Information group was underrepresented by content options (it was comprised of 2 options, as opposed to 3 for the other groups), I also ran descriptive statistics for the consolidated content genre groups in order to find the mean preferences for each. This offered another view into how respondents ranked their content preferences.

To assess the comparative frequencies of regular consumption of issue-specific to regular consumption general news content, I measured both types of content separately. To provide a measure for issue-specific content, I drew from responses to my survey’s questions on consumerism. These questions asked respondents how frequently a news article, in print and/or digital form, had either made them want to buy or not buy a specific product or service. I drew from these questions because consumerism is an activity largely performed on an individual level, and is commonly
informed by issue-specific news stories. For example, an article on GMOs in certain food products might influence a person to boycott those food products. On the flip side of this activity, positive corporate behavior, such as a stated and demonstrated company emphasis on sustainability efforts, could provoke people to support that company by purchasing their goods or services. Both of these examples serve to demonstrate that consumerism is an issue-oriented activity influenced by narrowly focused news stories, and is thus a valid measure for issue-specific news content.

To compare this data with preferences for general news, I gathered and assessed responses from questions that measured levels of cognitive engagement (following the news/paying attention to current events by reading and/or watching the news). I assessed these activities, watching and reading the news in their traditional and modern media forms. I then ran frequency distributions for responses to these questions, averaged the “regular” participation responses for the issue-specific questions and the general news questions, and finally compared these averages.

3. Engagement Habits and Media Content Preference

I begin to construct my original research on top of past studies on the subject of media and engagement by assessing the relationship between media content preferences and engagement habits. In his research, Prior established that the expansion of content choice negatively affected general political knowledge and voter turnout, as it expanded the knowledge gap among citizens, and, subsequently,
increased the gap between politically active citizens and politically withdrawn citizens. He did so by measuring political knowledge as a result of content preference in a high-choice media environment. From this, he would see how voter turnout was affected along lines of political knowledge, thus grounding the relationships between media content preference and engagement activity he described in empirical trends.

My study looks to expand on this aspect of Prior’s research. One of the ways it does this is it considers the still ongoing expansion of content choice that is affecting an ever-increasing number of citizens, as more Americans are gaining access to the Internet. Since content options are continuing to proliferate throughout the Internet, and as Millennials are currently accessing the Internet at higher daily rates than any other generation (Pew Research Millennials), I wanted to see how college students expressed their content preferences in this high-choice environment. From this, I sought to assess how these preferences could be used to explain, and even predict their engagement habits, or, vice versa, how their engagement habits could influence their content preferences.

Therefore, in forming my expectations for these relationships, I form direct and indirect hypotheses to test these potential relationships. In doing so, I considered how an individual’s habits of engagement might influence the content they report to prefer. For example, I hypothesized that a politically engaged respondent is more likely to prefer news/information content. I also considered the reverse of this, which is to say I considered how media content preferences (infotainment, entertainment, and news/information) could serve to influence and/or predict respondents’ engagement
activities, as well as their overall engagement type (civic, political, dual, and withdrawn). I speculate, for example, that respondents who prefer entertainment are less likely to report high rates of public engagement activities, and are therefore likely to be withdrawn.

Therefore, I submit these primary hypotheses, along with an inverted version for many. These joint hypotheses provide direct and indirect ways of assessing the relationship between the measures on engagement habits and media content preference, in both directions.

**H7: Civically engaged respondents are more likely to prefer infotainment content.**

**H7a: Respondents who prefer infotainment content are more likely to be civically engaged.**

As civic-minded people expect little from the traditional political system, and the traditional news media that reports on it, I expect that they will consume infotainment, both for pleasure and for knowledge. This logic informs the in-direct hypothesis as well.

**H8: Politically engaged respondents are more likely to prefer news/information content than the other two content groups.**
H8a: Respondents who prefer news/information are more likely to be politically engaged than civically engaged.

While politically active respondents are expected to be few and far between in my sample population, I do expect these respondents to follow the news media more heavily than other engagement types. This expectation persists towards the other two content groups, as heavier consumption of news draws levels of consumption for the other groups down.

From this prediction, it follows that respondents who actively follow the news are likely to actively participate in politics.

However, given the quantifiable disadvantage that the “news/information” preference group was saddled with by only having two content options available as opposed to three in the other two preference groups, it was necessary to provide additional measurements of news preference, both for comparative and reference purposes. To account for this, I use multiple measurements to gauge interest in the news. One way of doing this was sorting the preference groups in order of each group’s mean aggregate ranking. Another measure asks respondents to select which type of news they prefer: hard or soft. As such, I expect that politically engaged respondents will prefer hard news to soft news.
**H9: Dually engaged respondents are more likely to prefer news/information content than the other two content groups.**

Based on their activity levels, dually engaged respondents are expected to be generally highly motivated to engage with public issues. This perception denotes an enhanced desire for social/political awareness. Prior explains that one of the ways to test for this awareness within respondents is through their respective selection and/or ranking of content preferences in a high-choice media environment. Prior expects that the people who, when ranking content, “felt a greater obligation to keep up with politics and public affairs” are more likely to be active in public life (Prior, 2007, 95). I take the reverse approach, speculating that those who report to be highly active and engaged in public life are more likely to prefer news/information content, as this fosters their engagement behaviors.

**H10: Respondents who prefer entertainment content are more likely to be withdrawn.**

**H10a: Withdrawn respondents are more likely to prefer entertainment content than the other two content groups.**
Respondents who express a preference for entertainment content in lieu of more informative options, as well as respondents who report a preference of soft news to hard news, are seen as expressing their aversion to, and subsequent avoidance of societal realities commonly depicted in serious, informative content. These respondents are not expected to have the appropriate levels of skills, knowledge, and abilities that are often considered within established research to be requisite for at least political engagement. I generalize this finding, and expand it so that the expressions of preference for entertainment content and soft news are expected to predict withdrawn behaviors. As such, these respondents are not expected to be active in either realm of engagement.

Looking at this relationship from the reverse perspective, respondents who report to be inactive in civic and political behaviors measured are not expected to be motivated to pursue and consume social or political information when asked to rank their content preferences. Said differently, withdrawn respondents are expected to avoid such information content, and favor lighter, softer entertainment content. These respondents are therefore expected to prefer options from the entertainment content group to news/information, and infotainment options. They are also expected to prefer soft news to hard news.

To investigate relationships between engagement habits and general content preference, I ran separate cross-tabulations for each sphere of engagement (civic, political, dual, withdrawn) with the three content preference groups (infotainment,
entertainment, news/information). The dependent variable was engagement type; the independent variables were the content preference groups. Specifically, I wanted to test for significance between content preferences and engagement types. I hoped the results of these cross-tabulations would be demonstrative of how Millennial engagement habits might be influencing the ways they form their content preferences, and how their content preferences can be viewed in ways that predict how they might engage.

I also included an additional assessment of these relationships by running separate cross-tabulations between engagement types and preferences for more specific content, namely type of news. Before running the cross-tabulations, dummy variables were created for soft news preference and hard news preference. Assessing the results of these cross-tabs provided a window into how Millennials’ preference for type of news might relate to their engagement habits.

4. Engagement Habits and Media Form Preference

Assessing the relationships between engagement habits and preference in media form serves as the other original contribution of my study. Studies on how the forms of media, particularly the modern ones that have completely altered the media landscape, might influence or otherwise be used to manifest engagement activities are few and far between. Given the astounding proliferation of media forms and devices, e.g., the Internet, Smart Phones, Tablets, and laptop computers that has taken place recently,
the possible effects of these developments on engagement is in serious need of investigation.

Indeed, few would argue that as a result of these developments, opportunities to engage have not only increased, but are also more accessible and efficient. As more Americans continue to gain access to the Internet, more are being connected with fellow citizens in a new, online public square. Social media sites are serving to inform citizens of social and political issues, as well as of public initiatives being formed to address them. Moreover, social media can connect users with others who display similar interests, thereby allowing the two forms of social capital Putnam discusses, the tight-knit, personal networks, and the looser, less familiar networks, to apply to the virtual community. Users can share information within these general networks, and coordinate actions among groups of citizens of varying sizes.

It can also not be denied that Millennials, and in particular college students, possess a unique relationship with this technology, and display enhanced skills in accessing its full potential to foster engagement. This generation accesses the Internet, and uses social media at higher rates than any other generation in America (Considine, Horton and Moorman, 2009, 478). Therefore, the second component of this study’s original research involves investigating students’ use of these new media forms, in comparison to more traditional forms still prominently used, to foster public engagement behaviors.

To measure this, I assessed frequency distributions for the eight civic activities (four manifested through traditional forms, same four manifested through new media
forms), and ten political activities (five manifested through traditional forms, same five manifested through new media forms). From this, I compared regular participation rates between the different forms used to manifest the activity being measured. The following are my hypotheses for this section.

**H10: Respondents are more likely to use new media to engage civically**

Civic activities rely on efficient organization and sharing of information. For example, organizing a protest, at a minimum, involves the dispersal of information on the issue being protested, as well as logistical information coordinating the time and place of the event. There is no doubt that new media forms provide more and better opportunities to organize activities in this manner, as well as more efficient avenues to share information, than traditional forms. As Millennials possess unique skills that can maximize these advantages of new media, I expect that respondents who regularly participate in civic activities are more likely to do so through new media forms.

**H11: Respondents are more likely to use traditional media forms to engage politically.**

Our political system, and the methods used to influence and affect it, are older and more rigid than the modern, alternative forms of civic engagement described in this paper. It makes sense, then, that the avenues for participation in politics have remained
fairly constant, and that they would still be largely used today. Despite an expected
aversion to politics and political news, I expect traditional media forms to be more
prevalently used by respondents who engage politically.

C. Data: Findings and Analysis

The survey data yielded predictable results for the preliminary questions.
Respondents, of which a disproportionally large number were female and freshmen,
indicated a major (declared or prospective) in the social sciences division. They
appeared to be liberal minded, and aligned themselves most often with the Democratic
Party. All but one respondent affirmed that they had access to a personal media device
capable of accessing the Internet; one other respondent did not answer that question.

In terms of my hypotheses on general media and engagement habits of
respondents, the data supported both of my predictions for General Engagement Habits
(H1, H2). The results of the frequency distributions showed that respondents are more
civically engaged than politically engaged. However, more respondents were also found
to be dually engaged rather than withdrawn, which went against my prediction for this.
For my predictions on General Media Habits, the results refuted the first two
hypotheses (H3, H4) confirmed the third (H5), and produced mixed results for the fourth
(H6).

The data yielded relationship trends between respondent engagement habits
and media preferences that were largely consistent with my predictions, but were also
sometimes contradictory. For example, the data from respondent content preference refuted outright my prediction that politically engaged respondents are more likely to prefer news/information content (H8); instead, politically engaged respondents were the least likely of four engagement types to prefer news/information content. At the same time, the data from respondent preference for type of news backs up this prediction; politically engaged respondents are likely to prefer hard news (which is one of the content options that comprises the news/information content group) to soft news (programming that is generally classified by media experts as infotainment) (Dahlgren, 2009; Prior, 2007).

Clearly, then, it is necessary to delve into the overlapping data on trends and frequencies of engagement and media use. As I explained earlier, the data gathered on respondents’ general engagement and media habits is meant to provide reference points and baselines for behaviors that will be discussed throughout this analysis. Therefore, I will start by introducing these figures, and explain their significance. This will allow me to comment freely on the original side of my research that investigates the relationships between media preferences and engagement behaviors.

**D. General Engagement Habits**

I begin my data analysis by discussing respondents’ reported frequencies of participation in public engagement activities. It should be noted that in this discussing these activities in this section, I primarily focus on different participatory rates among civic/political activities. Where it is useful to discuss differences in rates among the two
forms of the same activity, I will do so, but please note that the effects of media form on engagement habits will be discussed at length in a later section.

As expected, there were more civically engaged respondents (25%) than politically engaged respondents (12%) (H1). Also as predicted, there were more withdrawn respondents (34%) than dually engaged respondents (29%) (H2), although this was closer than expected.

To review, respondents were asked how often they participated in a total of eighteen activities that constituted one of two spheres of public engagement. To qualify as politically engaged, respondents needed to report regularly participating in two of the five political activities. Similarly, to be classified as civically engaged, respondents needed to report regularly participating in two of the four civic activities. However, to be clear, the threshold for engagement was significantly lower than it appears, as respondents had opportunities to engage in each activity through two forms (traditional and new). I felt that, given the emphasis established research places on individual choice
and preference, as well as the studies investigation into the relationship between form preference and engagement habits, it would make sense to provide test subjects with ample engagement opportunity options. As such, respondent levels of engagement must be noted as somewhat inflated.

D. Respondent Political Habits

The potential for inflated levels of engagement is in need of examination and discussion for the political sphere in particular. To begin, in order to be considered politically engaged, respondents needed to have regularly participated in two of ten activities in the past year. This doubles the political activity options that subjects in Zukin’s study were presented with. Further lowering the threshold for political engagement is that one of the activities that constituted political engagement was discussing politics at least once a month, either digitally or personally. This means that simply discussing politics once a month met 50% of the definition of politically engaged. As 62% of respondents reported to regularly discussing politics in person, this threatened to add undue weight to the sphere of politically engaged respondents. Despite all this, of the four spheres of engagement measured, political engagement, on its own, was least represented.

Elsewhere within the political realm, respondents were nearly completely withdrawn from contacting elected officials, as merely 2.5% of respondents reported
regularly performing this activity. Similarly only 4.5% of respondents reported that they regularly attend political meetings in either form.

A slightly larger percentage (20.5%) of respondents regularly attempted to persuade others politically. Aside from discussing politics, the highest participation rate for regular engagement of the political activities was voting. 40% of respondents reported that they had voted within the last year, including the 2012 general election. This is not particularly surprising, as several studies have commented on the impact of the youth vote in the past two general elections. I worried that the disproportionate amount of freshmen in my sample population might have skewed this variable, as some
might not have been eligible to vote yet. However, this metric does not appear to have been affected by this particular issue with my sample population.

These frequency trends for political activities are indicative of a lack of motivation and skills/abilities among respondents. By far, the three activities respondents regularly participated in were the ones that required the least amount of effort and skills required to participate. Discussing politics seldom requires motivation as it often occurs spontaneously among familiar persons. Further, this activity pertains to a limitless amount of options for discussion and direction, and is thus framed and
driven by whatever the participants’ interests might be. Similarly, persuading others
politically involves an underlying personal interest in participating in that activity, which
accounts for the motivation to participate in it. Also, just as with discussing politics,
people who attempt to persuade others of their political views are not expected to be
experts in the general field of politics. This allows them to freely discuss issues and
actors that they find compelling. Electoral participation, meanwhile, asks voters to
possess some background knowledge on the issues and actors in a given election, but
does not demand excessive knowledge levels, nor does it demand a great deal of energy
or skill.

On the other hand, the two remaining political activities—attending a meeting
and contacting a representative—require more motivation and skills than the other
three activities just discussed. Attending a meeting in person comes at a high
opportunity cost. Given the common perception that the political system takes its time
in addressing public issues, and thus demands consistent attention, it is unlikely that
many citizens, let alone young citizens, would regularly attend political meetings.
Participating in a political meeting digitally, i.e. through Skype or other such forms of
telecommunication, is just as unlikely, as digital participants are inherently isolated from
the main body of the meeting, thus marginalizing their purpose for participating.

Meanwhile, contacting a political official requires the most motivation and skill
to participate of any of the activities measured in this study. In order to participate in
this political activity, a citizen would have to, at a minimum, be cognizant of a specific
elected official, have cause to reach out to said official, and know how to do so in an
effective manner. Participating in such an activity, therefore, indicates awareness of political issues and actors, knowledge of common avenues used to influence the political system, and skills with which to do so. As expected, very few respondents demonstrated the enhanced motivation and skills/knowledge involved in these political activities.

**F. Respondent Civic Habits**

In order to qualify as civically engaged, respondents needed to have regularly participated in two of eight civic activities. The least common civic activity regularly participated in was signing a petition (10.5% regularly signed a petition in one form or the other). Volunteering was the next lowest civic activity regularly participated in, as 16.5% of respondents were involved in volunteer efforts in either form. Participation rates for protesting more than doubled those for volunteering (33% of respondents regularly protested). Finally, selectively making a purchase (boycotting or buycotting) had the highest regular participation rates among the civic activities, as 40% of respondents said they regularly had a purchase affected by a news story.
The low cumulative frequency of signing a petition is somewhat explained by the difference of participation rates between forms for this activity. While only 5% of respondents regularly signed a petition in print form, regular participation rates jumped to 16% when the activity was presented in its corresponding digital form. As petitions are commonly circulated on social media, it makes sense that more respondents would use this form to sign petitions over traditional print form.

The low participation rate for volunteerism is perhaps one of the most puzzling metrics gathered in this study. First, high rates of volunteerism throughout adolescence and into young adulthood have been a documented component of Millennial socialization (Kiesa, 2008; Levine, Dean 2012; Zukin 2007). Compared to just 16.5% of respondents who claimed to have volunteered regularly, Zukin’s study reported that over a quarter of college-aged respondents had volunteered regularly within the past
Second, the lower rates for organizing volunteerism in new media forms as compared to traditional forms contradicts my prediction that new media would be used to a higher degree than traditional media in civic activities. The only speculation I can grasp at is respondents who did regularly volunteer did so in person through campus groups. This would explain the higher rates for this activity in its traditional form than in its new media form. However, I cannot explain the relatively low overall levels of volunteerism of my sample population.

Moving to the more prevalent forms of civic engagement found in my study, respondents seemed to favor consumerism as their preferred civic activity. Zukin’s study foreshadowed this development: “Both forms of consumer activism (buycotting and boycotting) are about as prevalent among the youngest cohort [i.e. Millennials] as among GenXers and Boomers” (Zukin, 2006). One factor that I perceive as driving young people to increasingly become consumer activists is their tendency to be more issue oriented (Kiesa, 2008; Levine, Dean, 2012). Millennials are interested in a host of issues that can be addressed through consumer activism, including protecting the environment, equal marriage rights for same-sex couples, immigration reform, and gun control, among others (Levine). For example, if a company or corporation came out against equal rights for same-sex couples, as the CEO of Chick-Fil-A did in 2012, consumer activists who opposed this corporation’s message would boycott that company. This is an example of a highly publicized controversy that led to organized consumer activism. More often than not, however, consumer activism is performed on an individual level, and is informed by alternative news sources that offer more issue-
specific content than general news (Zukin, 2006; Kiesa, 2008). A far more likely example is an individual consuming a news story that discusses the negative health effects of products that contain genetically modified foods (GMOs), leading to that individual boycotting those products. Moreover, these alternative news sources are found on the Internet more often than other media forms (Dahlgren, 2006; Prior, 2007). It follows, then, that Millennials would be among the most likely to participate in consumerism, and that, further, these behaviors would be influenced by news found on the Internet. The difference in participation rates of this activity between traditional (30%) and new (50%) forms support this claim, and will be discussed in more detail later.
G. General Media Habits

My sample population’s media preferences were a little more difficult to predict than engagement habits. This makes sense, given the expansive nature of the media in comparison to the relatively limited options for engagement activities. To begin, my predictions that respondents would prefer soft news to hard news (H3), and that respondents will prefer issue-specific content to general news content (H4), were found to be incorrect. Meanwhile, the survey data supported my prediction that respondents would prefer infotainment content to entertainment and news/information content (H5). The data also supported my hypothesis that respondents were more likely to consume general news on the Internet instead of traditional forms of media in regards to reading the news, but showed negligible differences in preference of form when watching the news (H6).

H. Content Preferences

I incorrectly predicted that respondents would prefer soft news to hard news. I made this prediction for a number of reasons. For one, this would allow them to avoid the harsh realities portrayed on hard news, of which many young people feel that they have little to no influence or ability to bring about positive change. From the other side of the coin, soft news still allows consumers to remain tangentially aware of current events, which loosely translates to levels of cognitive engagement commonly found
among college students (Zukin, 2006; Kiesa, 2008; Levine, Dean 2012). Nonetheless, of
the sample population, 14% more respondents preferred hard news (56%) to soft news
(42%).

![Bar chart showing respondent preference rates for news types]

I also incorrectly expected that respondents would be more likely to consume
issue-specific content than general news content. This was based off my research on
Millennials being issue-oriented, as well as the common trend of young people avoiding
the news in general that is noted throughout research on engagement (Zukin, 2006;
Putnam, 2000; Kiesa, 2008). Respondents’ average consumption rate of issue-specific
news (40%) was 7% lower than the average consumption rate of general news (47%).
The high rate of general digital print news consumption was certainly the most influential variable in this measure; without factoring rates of digital print news consumption into general news consumption, respondents consumed general news at a 10% lower rate (37%). This data shows, generally, that respondents consumed relatively high rates of issue-specific content, and that reading the news in digital form was the most common way of consuming general news.
Respondent's Preference Rates for Issue-Specific and General News in Different Forms

Regular Consumption Rates

General News (Without Factoring Digital Print News Consumption)

Issue-Specific News

Regular Consumption
As expected, infotainment was the most popular content group among respondents. 57% of respondents marked one of the three infotainment options as their most preferred content option; 25% listed one of the three entertainment options as their most preferred; and 18% reported they most preferred one of the two news/information content options.

To address the fact that the news/information group was underrepresented in this measurement, I ran descriptive statistics to test for mean rankings of the three content groups. Infotainment was still the most popular choice, with an average ranking of 5.26. However, news/information had the next highest average ranking at 4.44, while entertainment received the lowest average ranking at 3.72. This additional data shows that respondents disliked entertainment content, were ambivalent towards news/information content, and preferred infotainment content.
I. Form Preferences

In regards to media form preferences, respondents generally preferred using the Internet and other forms of New Media to consume news than Old Media. In particular, respondents demonstrated a strong preference for consuming print news digitally as opposed to traditional print, but did not show a preference for form when asked about watching news. Respondents were 33% more likely to read an article in digital form (75% regularly did so) than in traditional print form (42%). This data strongly supported my hypothesis that respondents were more likely to use the Internet to consume general news than traditional forms. Data on watching news in the two different media
forms did not yield any significant findings. Indeed, respondents were nearly equally as likely to watch the news on TV as they were to watch it digitally.

Preference for New and Old Media Forms for Consuming General News

- Regular Consumption in This Form
Perhaps the equal rates of watching news in both forms of media can be explained by the greater tendency for TV content to be recycled, or redisplayed on the Internet than for print content to be repeated in its online equivalent. Whereas an online newspaper naturally provides more current information than its corresponding newspaper in print form, television news reports are more likely to be mirrored in recycled reports online. For example, a person who subscribes to receive the New York Times in print form is likely to find some repeated reports in the online version, along with more up-to-date and totally fresh stories. A person who watches several reports on CNN on TV, however, is likely to see essentially the same reports if they visit CNN.com. An alternative perspective is that there are far greater news sources to consume online, a great many of which are only found in digital print. The Huffington Post, for example,
is “an online news aggregator and blog” that doesn’t have a print equivalent. Its content, therefore, is specifically tailored towards Internet users. As the Millennial Generation is currently reported to have the highest percentage of its members with access to the Internet of any generation in America, it is fair to say that their preferences are influencing the content that is being put forth digitally, particularly in digital print form.

J. Relationships Between Media Content Preference and Engagement Habits

To measure what content genres different types of engaged respondents preferred, I ran separate cross-tabulations for each sphere of engagement (DV) with the content preference variables (IV). Additionally, I ran different cross-tabs to test for which news type respondents in the four respective spheres of engagement preferred.

Together, these measures are used to gauge how different engagement types are forming content preferences in the expansive media landscape. This is important for several reasons. For one, the data metrics used in this section provide nuance to the findings on general engagement habits and media preferences in the preceding sections. They allow me to see discrepancies between the two measures for content preference along engagement types, while also providing a window into potential relationships between engagement types and content preferences.

Respondent content preferences are also expected to be indicative of cognitive engagement levels. Specifically, I look to preference rates for general news and hard
news as indicators of higher levels of cognitive engagement; preference rates for infotainment and soft news for mid-to-low levels of cognitive engagement; and preference rates for entertainment and soft news as indicators of low levels of cognitive engagement.

It must be noted, however, that my survey does not comprehensively test for cognitive engagement levels. The most common ways of doing so is to test for political and social attentiveness and political/social knowledge. Zukin tests for attentiveness by asking respondents how often they follow the news, which this study does as well. The findings for this, and accompanying analysis, will be presented in the following section. To test for political/social knowledge, Zukin asks respondents general questions regarding the way in which the political system works, as well as more specific questions on prominent public figures and events. As this study is more focused on public behaviors than public knowledge, I left out a variable to test for political/social knowledge out of fear of inducing survey fatigue. However, I believe it would be beneficial for future studies similar to mine to include this metric, and to run the results across different spheres of engagement as well as different content preferences. This will provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between engagement type and content preference, and how this relationship can be indicative of cognitive engagement levels.

Another weakness of the survey is that, while I ask for measure for preference of different genres that constitute the infotainment grouping, I don’t distinguish between specific programs that affect cognitive engagement levels differently. For example, a
respondent could prefer TV Dramas, which could include shows such as The West Wing, House of Cards, The Newsroom, or satirical TV comedy programs like South Park and Saturday Night Live’s Weekend Update. These programs commonly provide accurate information on our political system and often discuss current societal events and trends. In House of Cards, for example, viewers are exposed to the, albeit dramatized, procedures involved in policy making. The first episode of the latest season of South Park covered the recent NSA controversy, which adds to a plethora of political issues discussed (or mocked) on the show. On the other side of the infotainment spectrum are shows like The Walking Dead, Scandal, Lost, and C.S.I. These shows are more likely to be defined by sensationalism and scandal, and to be play more in to a viewer’s emotional side than his or her logical reasoning side. By not distinguishing between these versions of infotainment, which greatly differ in terms of the amount of knowledge they can provide viewers, my general understanding of respondent cognitive engagement levels is further diminished.

K. Content Preferences Affected by Engagement Type
This graph is placed here to remind readers that, in total, there were 51 civically engaged respondents, 25 politically engaged respondents, 60 dually engaged respondents, and 70 withdrawn respondents. From these totals, I measured the number of respondents of each engagement type that preferred infotainment, entertainment, and news/information.
This data does not support my hypothesis that respondents who prefer infotainment are more likely to be civically engaged (H7a). However when one considers that there is a higher percentage of withdrawn respondents in total, along with the fact that there are sixty additional respondents who reported regularly performing civic behaviors who are not counted in the civic sphere in this graph, this prediction is far closer to being correct. Indeed, if those additional sixty respondents are added to the number of civic respondents in this graph, my prediction would be correct.
This data was startling, as the politically engaged sphere contained the lowest number of respondents who reported a preference for news/information. While it makes sense that dually engaged respondents would prefer the news at such high rates, it is rather astonishing that withdrawn respondents prefer news/information programs at higher rates than politically engaged respondents.
This data reflects my expectation that respondents who prefer entertainment content are more likely to be withdrawn. These individuals prefer news/information at the second lowest rate of the four spheres measured, and prefer entertainment at the highest rates. Their knowledge of public issues is therefore expected to suffer, and, as a result, they are not expected to regularly perform activities in either sphere of engagement in public life.
Number of Respondents of Each Engagement Type that Preferred Soft News
These graphs, taken together, demonstrate that respondents who regularly engaged in one or both forms measured tend to prefer hard news to soft news. The withdrawn sphere is the only one that has more respondents who prefer soft news to hard news, an unsurprising finding.

**L. Content Preferences for Civically Engaged Respondents**

Civically engaged respondents consistently marked infotainment as their preferred option. This finding supports my prediction that civically engaged respondents are more likely to prefer infotainment content (H7). Of the civically engaged respondents (50), 29 listed infotainment as their preferred content option (58%), 12
marked news/information (24%), and 9 preferred entertainment content (18%). Civically engaged respondents, then, appear to want to stay current with societal trends and occurrences, but wish to do so through infotainment rather than the news in general.

Interestingly, when I ran cross-tabs between civically engaged respondents and preferred news type, 30 of the 50 respondents in this sphere preferred hard news (60%), while 20 preferred soft news (40%). This data runs against my prediction that civically engaged respondents would prefer infotainment programs, i.e. soft news, to hard news.
Overall, civically engaged respondents consistently demonstrated efforts to remain cognitively engaged by consuming news and avoiding entertainment. They reported the second highest preference for news/information, just 1% lower than dually engaged respondents, as well as the second highest preference for hard news (tied with dually engaged respondents at 60%, behind politically engaged respondents at 68%). Meanwhile, they also had the lowest preference rates for entertainment of any of the four spheres of engagement.

M. Content Preferences for Politically Engaged Respondents

Politically engaged respondents were predicted to report news/information as their most preferred content option (H8). This prediction was far from being correct, as
news/information was by far the least preferred content option for politically engaged respondents. Only 2 of the 24 of politically engaged respondents (8%) marked one of the two news/information options as their most preferred choice. Meanwhile, 13 reported that infotainment was their most preferred content option (54%), and 9 listed entertainment as their most preferred option (38%). (due to a missing system in my data, there is one fewer politically engaged respondent measured in this section than there is in total).

Similar to their civic counterparts, politically engaged respondents reported preferring hard news to soft news, despite generally preferring infotainment to news/information. 17 of the 25 total politically engaged respondents said that they preferred hard news (68%), while only 8 said they prefer soft news (32%). Their preference for hard news exceeded all other engagement types.
Politically engaged respondents report to strongly prefer hard news when consuming news, but, when given additional content options, overwhelmingly prefer other content, primarily infotainment, besides general news. This is puzzling, as research has demonstrated politically engaged people tend to be more motivated than others to consistently follow the news (Prior, 2007; Dahlgren, 2009; Zukin, 2006; Putnam, 2000). While these studies admittedly measured this trend among the general population, and my survey measured college students, this doesn’t go very far in explaining why college students who are politically active would so consistently prefer other content options to the news in general, especially considering that their engagement counterparts demonstrated higher preference rates for general news.

In this instance, the lack of a metric to measure political knowledge, and failing to clearly distinguish between informative and emotional versions of infotainment
programming, causes my results to suffer. Measures for political knowledge could have accounted for politically engaged respondents’ lack of preference for general news. If, for instance, this engagement group demonstrated high levels of political knowledge, their low preference rates for general news would be marginalized. Further, if I asked respondents to select between specific infotainment programs such as House of Cards and Scandal, I could better gauge cognitive engagement levels. I therefore look towards future studies to address these variables.

N. Content Preferences for Dually Engaged Respondents

Given their consistent participation in a variety of both civic and political activities, dually engaged respondents were predicted to prefer news/information content (H9). This prediction was also incorrect, but with nuances. Of the 60 dually engaged respondents, 15 said news/information was their preferred content option (25%), 31 said they preferred infotainment (50%), and 14 said they preferred entertainment. While this data doesn’t support my prediction outright, dually engaged respondents were found, just barely, to prefer news/information at the highest rate of the four spheres measured. Dually engaged respondents marked news/information as their most preferred content at a higher rate than any other engagement type measured, compared to 24% of civically engaged respondents, 9% of withdrawn respondents, and 8% of politically engaged respondents.
In terms of news type preference, dually engaged respondents reported higher rates of preferring hard news (60%) to soft news (40%). This engagement type’s rates for news type preference matched their civic counterparts, trailed politically engaged respondents by 8%, and exceeded withdrawn respondents by 11%.
When examined comprehensively, dually engaged respondents’ content preferences show consistent efforts to remain current on news and information. They demonstrated the highest preference rates for news/information, and tied for the second highest preference for hard news.

**O. Content Preferences for Withdrawn Respondents**

Withdrawn respondents were expected to demonstrate escapist tendencies when selecting content preferences by marking entertainment as their most preferred option (H10). Similar to my prediction for dually engaged respondents, the data did not clearly support this prediction, but backed it up in some ways. Of the 65 withdrawn respondents, 40 said they prefer infotainment (62%), 18 said they prefer entertainment (28%), and 6 listed the news as their preferred content option (9%). Again, while my prediction that entertainment would be the most preferred option for this engagement type was incorrect, withdrawn respondents had the second highest preference rates for entertainment content, trailing the rate of politically engaged respondents who preferred entertainment by 10%.
Withdrawn respondents were the only engagement type to demonstrate a preference for soft news. 33 of the 65 withdrawn respondents preferred soft news (51%), as opposed to 32 who preferred hard news (49).
Based on these content preferences, these respondents demonstrated the lowest levels of cognitive engagement. They reported the second highest preference for entertainment, the second lowest preference for news/information, and were the only engagement type to prefer soft news to hard news.

**P. Relationship Between Media Form Preference and Engagement Habits**

1. **Form Preferences for Civic Engagement**

   My hypothesis that respondents were more likely to use new media to engage civically was confirmed for three of the four civic activities measured. Respondent participation rates in signing a petition, joining a protest, and consumer activism were
higher when performed through new media forms as opposed to traditional.

Volunteerism, meanwhile, was less frequently manifested online than in person or print, and also suffered from depressed participation rates overall.

Respondents reported regular participation in signing a petition in print at only a 4.4% rate, but participation in this activity jumped to 16.5% when asked about its digital form, for a net increase of 12.1%. Of the four civic activities measured, however, signing a petition was least frequently regularly performed.
The net increase for consumerism was slightly higher, as 18.9% more respondents reported regularly participating in this activity through digital means rather than traditional. 30.1% of respondents were consumer activists influenced by a news story in traditional form, whereas 49% of respondents regularly participated in the activity as a result of a news story in digital form.

The most frequently participated civic activity, protesting, was also the activity most heavily influenced by media form. Only 14.5% of respondents regularly
participated in or found out about a protest by traditional means, while 53.9% did so through new media, representing a net increase of 39.4%.

Volunteerism was the only civic activity less frequently performed as a result of or through new media. 11.7% of respondents regularly volunteered digitally, compared to 21.4% of respondents who did so in print.
My hypothesis that respondents were more likely to use old media to engage politically was confirmed for two of four political activities, rejected in one activity, and had such low participation rates in the other that the results were negligible.

I was correct in predicting that respondents were more likely to discuss politics in person than digitally. 31.5% of respondents regularly discussed politics digitally, while 61.7% of respondents regularly discussed politics digitally, constituting a 30.2% increase between forms. While this finding supports my hypothesis, the relatively low number of respondents that regularly discussed politics digitally is surprising. Given the multiple
avenues for discussion that exist online, as well as the likelihood of exposure to some form of political news on the Internet, I expected higher rates of digital discussion.

I was also correct in my hypothesis that respondents were more likely to attend a political meeting in person than virtually. The increase between forms for this activity was much smaller than for discussing politics, however. This is largely due to the low participation rates for this activity, which are extremely low for virtually participation in a political meeting. Just 1.5% of respondents regularly attended a political meeting virtually, whereas 9.3% did so in person, resulting in a 7.8% net increase between forms.
In hindsight, I believe I should have provided respondents with some examples of what I meant by attending a political meeting, which would have taken on a broad interpretation of the activity. For instance, I would consider participating in a forum on the current crisis in the Ukraine to qualify as attendance of a political meeting. Smaller, more person political meetings are also increasingly taking place online. Weblogs (blogs) can assume a sort of meeting place for posters and followers, as forums are often left open for discussion (Dahlgran, 2009, 179). Important distinctions between the two forms mentioned above would need to be made, primarily the fact that the former option is predicated around established settings and times, and the latter is a relative free-for-all in terms of planning. Nonetheless, I perceive both forms as fostering political engagement by informing people of pertinent public issues and discussing possible
responses. I believe it would serve future studies similar to this one to include such a specific measurement.

I was incorrect in predicting respondents would attempt to persuade others politically through traditional means rather than through new media. 15% of respondents regularly attempted to persuade others politically through traditional means, while 26.2% did so using the Internet for a net increase of 11.2% between the two forms of this activity.

The results for respondent frequency in contacting a public official were so low for both forms that the results are negligible. In total, only 2.5% of respondents
regularly participated in this activity. 1.5% did so by calling or writing officials, and 3.4% did so over the Internet, resulting in an increase of 1.9%.
CHAPTER VI – CASE STUDY

“Social media is a fickle tool when it comes to community engagement.”

Jay Mimes, Wheaton Class of 2015

The survey described in the foregoing chapter produced quantitative data on media and engagement. However, an opportunity to add a qualitative dimension occurred at the end of the 2013 fall semester at Wheaton College. During this time Residential Life, at the behest of the college’s Administration, threatened to remove members of the TWAP (Together We All Prosper) theme house from their on-campus home. In so doing, Residential Life and the Administration cited numerous violations of codes of conduct relating to social gatherings, including transgressions that dated back to the previous academic year.

In response, Jay Mimes, class of 2015 and a member of TWAP, took to social media to mobilize support. Mimes posted a Facebook note that served as the campaign’s mission statement, entitled “Save TWAP, Save Wheaton”.

133
The Facebook post also contained TWAP’s response to the allegations. Finally, the note outlined grievances involving discriminatory behavior of Public Safety officers against house members. The posting read in part:

**Our mission statement:**

Our goal is to build strong, educated men for the future and develop a mutually beneficial relationship between our house residents and the community. Additionally, to help students from low income, urban backgrounds adjust to life and excel at Wheaton.

What we, the members of Together We All Prosper (TWAP) House, are primarily combating at this time is an instance of institutionalized racism.

Mimes provided evidence of divisiveness within the general campus social culture, made disturbing allegations against the Administration and Public Safety officers, and discussed TWAP’s unfounded reputation on campus for being “dangerous”. He described a number of incidents involving Public Safety that constituted gross invasions of privacy, and were indicative of heightened surveillance and racial profiling. His message ended with a plea for change, and a call for Wheaton students to spread awareness. Notably, for the purposes of this study, he did not suggest any particular form of media as a vehicle to express support. On the contrary, he said:

Ask questions. Write letters to administrative members asking for the reason behind these actions and schedule meetings if possible. Bring our story to local and national publications...Comment Below or message any of the 11 members of TWAP House with any questions . .
Initially, students generally reacted sympathetically. Many shared “Save TWAP, Save Wheaton” on their social media pages; others commented directly on the mission statement’s Facebook page. Some went so far as to express their gratitude and solidarity, thanking Mimes for laying out such important issues cogently and publically.

The fact that this post drew the attention of many students speaks to a thirst for meaningful content in social media, as well as a desire to engage. It is also a credit to Mr. Mimes, who was able to present and discuss a complex, abstract, and controversial issue, namely racial discrimination, in a measured and thoughtful manner. This message and the student response it engendered were unique for two reasons. It dared to speak truth to power, regardless of the risks involved. In addition, it avoided a common pitfall of social media activity during controversy: the posting of impulsive, inflammatory messages that are far more divisive than constructive.

However, tracking these issues throughout Spring semester 2014 revealed that, although social media can be used to rapidly mobilize support, it does not necessarily sustain same. It transpired that the Wheaton community would largely avoid discussing the charges of racial discrimination when classes resumed in January. As Mimes puts it, “With social media, our generation seems to only be interested in miracles and disasters, with little time for anything in between, particularly something that involves some form of activism.”
In general, social media is considered to surpass all other forms in its ability to connect people, and to efficiently provide them with information. It has the potential to organize movements, and expand awareness of social occurrences, events, and trends. This, according to Levine and Dean, allows each individual to create his or her own “tribe”, which consists of family, friends, friends of friends and strangers with common interests or experiences across the globe. The result is a virtual autobiography, highly idiosyncratic “news” outlet, photo album, communications link, and game site. Unlike traditional media’s daily updates, however, social media sites are updated by users constantly throughout the day.

Facebook is by far the most commonly used site among Millennials. Other popular sites include Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr, each of which can connect with one another. For example, a person who sees an interesting tweet on their Twitter feed can, with a click of a button, share that content on their other social media pages, thereby creating vast, interconnected networks between different social media users on different social media websites.

Mimes’ cited this sort of connective activity as essential to the success of any movement taking place on social media. “In order for anything to be effective on social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, there needs to be active sharing happening to engage with larger webs within the respective network.” Thus, social media’s role in general college student life is not to be underestimated. This is no less true for engagement purposes.
Its effects on fostering cohesiveness and civility within campus communities, however, are mixed. On the one hand, social media easily connects students with others who display similar interests through their social media pages. It also informs students of news and events within and beyond their respective campuses. Finally, it can function as a vehicle for virtual discussion and debate.

At the same time, there is neither a requirement nor expectation of accuracy or civility when individuals post on social media. This speaks to what Levine and Dean identify as the two main problems associated with college students’ use of social media: lack of awareness that their postings are available to the general public, and using social media to lash out. These commentators note in particular the instantaneous nature of tweets, postings, and the like. While this is a large part of the appeal to Millennials, it overrides any interval for reflection. In addition, younger Millennials lack mature judgment that may result in ‘flaming’, sending scorching, injudicious, and inappropriate messages (ibid). Indeed, this is precisely what occurred in TWAP’s case.

Both of these contradictory aspects of social media, the beneficial side that connects and informs, and the harmful side that misinforms and exposes students to abuse, appeared during the campus movement that took place at Wheaton. On the one hand Mimes made clear that in his view without social media, TWAP’s message would have had only limited circulation. “We absolutely needed new media; it was our greatest ally. Without it, I can’t imagine having gotten [the] word out across all of campus.” However, in his interview with the author, Mimes was also quick to reference
the fact that antisocial postings by one or two house members adversely impacted the group's efforts to air the issues troubling them.

The online activity that followed Mimes’ post provided astounding initial support, and spread information across campus and beyond, as the note was sent to faculty members and alumni. It also cleared up misconceptions and rumors about TWAP that had spread across campus, largely through social media. Some commented directly on the webpage of the original message, expressing disgust at the actions of Public Safety, while others pledged their support for TWAP by “liking” and/or “sharing” the note on their personal social media pages.

However, the seminal issue remained whether TWAP would continue to exist. A meeting was held between members of the Administration and house members to determine its fate, but was derailed by another brand of social media output. A series of tweets issued by two members of TWAP contained inflammatory and offensive comments directed at the Administration and Public Safety. According to Mimes, the entire TWAP membership was held accountable for these comments. All members of TWAP were informed that their use of social media going forward would be monitored. Mimes described this as having a “guillotine effect” on TWAP’s ability to engage in further discussion on the issues. This is a powerful example of how the potential for positive conversation and progress can quickly and easily be derailed by intemperate comments on social media, and how the actions of one can have widespread effects on an entire movement.
Despite the inflammatory tweets, TWAP House was permitted to remain open, although the students responsible for them were evicted. Over winter break students were informed by an email from President Crutcher as to the decision on the house, but no mention was made of the two students who were removed. His message focused primarily on "comments that were patently offensive, hateful and demeaning".

Another email sent at the beginning of Spring semester adopted a more positive, albeit vague, note, calling for an environment that fostered constructive criticism. To that end an open forum to be co-hosted by Student Government Association was scheduled. This was the turning point at which serious allegations of racism were diverted into a discussion of the utopian campus. According to Mimes, members of TWAP felt “castrated" by their inability to use social media, and otherwise unable to influence the ensuing discussions. Thus, when students, faculty, members of the Administration and Public Safety officers came together to deliberate on an inclusive environment, race was not a primary topic of discussion.

As a result, TWAP's worst instances of humiliation at the hands of Public Safety were not raised in any forum, nor was the issue of diversity addressed. Instead an action plan suggested by SGA dealt with improving student-Public Safety relations, and revamping Wheaton's policies on drugs, alcohol and social gatherings. Following town hall meetings on these issues, both new and old media were used to communicate with the student body. Email, which connects the entire campus community, was a prominent form of communication. Hand-drawn flyers announced the town hall meetings, but also contained hash-tags (#) for social media pages providing further
information online. The campus newspaper, The Wheaton Wire, ran numerous articles on the topics under discussion. This mixed usage of old and new forms of communication is unsurprising, and typical of activist agendas.
CHAPTER VII – CONCLUSIONS

The unwinding brings freedom, more than the world has ever granted, and to more kinds of people than ever before — freedom to go away, freedom to return, freedom to change your story, get your facts, get hired, get fired, get high, marry, divorce, go broke . . . walk away . . . succeed. And with freedom the unwinding brings its illusions, for all these pursuits are as fragile as thought balloons popping against circumstances. Winning and losing are all-American games, and in the unwinding winners win bigger than ever, floating away like bloated dirigibles, and losers have a long way to fall before they hit bottom, and sometimes they never do.

Prologue, The Unwinding, George Packer

The preceding chapters were intended to provide some insight into the socio-political culture in which Millennials have grown up in, their current disaffection for government, and their alternative responses to traditional political engagement. Since there have been so many social, political, and technological developments discussed in this paper, it will be useful to briefly review each individually before arriving at its primary conclusions.

The political sphere has inspired neither confidence nor trust among many Americans, but certainly Millennials are among the most withdrawn. Witness the fact that a sizable and influential portion of Congress continues to attack the only landmark “achievement” our government has produced in recent memory. The health-care debate, following passage of legislation enacted into law as well as a
court case that reached the Supreme Court, is now in its fifth year. It is merely one of many well-documented government failures and transgressions that has made large segments of the population turn away in futility.

Millennials, like other concerned citizens, are finding ways to engage publicly, whether on their own, in groups, or through NGOs. The general public is identifying pertinent social issues ignored by government, informing themselves, and looking for ways to take action. Because many of these non-traditional movements lack the structure, funds, and voice that give special interest groups their advantage, they operate on a “by-any-and-all means” basis. This means they solicit the help of as many persons and entities as possible; increased numbers lead to more funding, which, in turn, leads to more political clout.

The media, meanwhile, has evolved dramatically as well. The spectrum of media programming is a galaxy of options; new genres have been created to account for this. Digital technology has allowed for new effects and production values to be created. Both the 24-hour news cycle online and on TV, as well as the “traditional” news media commonly associated with politics, has transformed as new media logics enhance news producers’ ability to sensationalize and spin stories. The Internet is not only an “information superhighway”; it is also an unparalleled mode of communication and connection, as well as a source of distraction. In short, these technological revolutions allow both retreat from, and progress toward public engagement.

Millennials, for their part, tend to be pro-active, and have little patience for delay. As such, if they come across a problem requiring concerted action, they
willingly seek help from whatever source(s) are available. The use of social media provides an extraordinary array of assistance. However, my research indicates that there are nuances to this general approach to engagement. Respondents both to my survey, and Mr. Mimes’ post, demonstrated a heightened sense of awareness regarding specific issues. However, they also appear to be selective in the issues they choose to confront, as well as the methods employed.

Thus, very low participatory rates were reported by survey respondents for political activities, particularly with respect to contacting representatives and attending political meetings. While this might reflect unease or ignorance about using such a vehicle, the better argument is that Millennials understand full well that it is, indeed, often fruitless for a young person to engage with the political system. This behavior aside, civic behaviors provide additional evidence of Millennial selectivity.

The two highest reported civic behaviors among survey respondents were consumer activism and protests, although these are manifested in different ways for different purposes. Consumerism is described as typically being a “sporadic and highly unorganized” activity (Zukin, 78). While this is incongruent with Millennials’ general characteristics, consumer activism is nonetheless a logical corollary of individualist preferences. People who discussed their consumer activism with Zukin’s team “talked about the attitudes of companies toward gay rights, abortion, and other highly charged social issues” (ibid). Such information abounds on the Internet, along with information about products found to be highly beneficial or
harmful (but always sensational) to some element of society. Thus, “sporadic” activity is not overly burdensome.

Protesting, on the other hand, is an activity that relies on strength in numbers. Larger protests denote a louder public voice, which increases the possibility of success. Given that respondents were 40% more likely to organize a protest through social media than traditional media, this speaks to an understanding of the “strength in numbers” concept. Again, this implies that Millennials are selective in the methods and activities in which they choose to engage publicly.

Finally, the case study illustrates how Wheaton students confronted the issues raised in Mr. Mimes’ Facebook post. In addition to issues of racial discrimination, it also discussed Wheaton’s antiquated and obtuse social, drug and alcohol policies. Initially the student body focused on the charge of racism. This desire to engage with issues of campus diversity faded, however, as students were left wondering how they might solve this problem, or if, indeed, a problem existed in the first place.

This uncertainty was generated at least in part by the Administration’s unwillingness to confront the issue, made clear in the series of emails described above. Whatever the reason, students received a clear signal that racism was off the table for discussion. Instead, the SGA and the Administration focused on the college’s social policies and fostering better relationships between students and Public Safety officers. Indeed, clear progress has been made with respect to these initiatives. A Social Contract that outlines respective expectations of proper conduct
for students and Public Safety officers is set to be signed by both parties at the end of the semester. It is being advertised primarily on Facebook, and through email. Unfortunately, in this instance, social media failed to confront the larger issue. On the other hand, the bifurcation of results is representative of Millennial engagement: one does what one can, no matter the disconnect between on-the-ground action and the theoretical issue of concern.
REFERENCE LIST


Cao, Yingxia. 2010. Meeting the millennial college students: examining their social media usage and establishing effective strategies. In 35th Annual Conference at the California Association for Institutional Research, San Diego, CA.


Friedman, Thomas. “Sorry, Kids. We Ate It All.” New York Times (October 15, 2013) http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/16/opinion/friedman-sorry-kids-we-ate-it-all.html?_r=0&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1381986833-yD5YbstOUuk2yfTFg2P8HA.


Stein, Joel and Josh Sanburn. 2013. Why Millennials Will Save Us All (Time Magazine).


Waldman, Katy. “Jonathan Franzen’s Lonely War on the Internet Continues.” Slate (October, 2013) http://www.slate.com/blogs/future_tense/2013/10/04/jonathan_franzen_says_twitter_is_a_coercive_development_is_grumpy_and_out.html


When the Levees Broke. director: Spike Lee


