

Constructing Social Media, Constructing Fear: A Research Proposal

A Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for Graduation in the Honors College

By

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December 6, 2018

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**Literature Review**

Foreword:

As the amount of social media users increase, upwards of 66% of US adults in 2017, it can be expected that media corporations will follow. (Shearer and Gottfried 2017) Social media accounts for 35% of pathway to news (Mitchell et al. 2017) and considering 66% of online news content developers are owned by media conglomerates, it is likely to believe that many of the stories seen by users are recycled and reinforced. The relevance of this becomes clearer once noting that 33% of news is strictly crime focused. (Callanan 2012) Not only does social media provide users with content that has traditionally influenced a tinted sense of reality, but it also provides ample opportunities for follow-up actions. With 53% of social media news receiving a follow-up actions of sorts, it is likely to believe that follow-up actions may also be influential to a person's sense of crime. (Mitchell et al. 2017) Furthermore, the increase in access to news is accompanied with an increase in access to "fake news." 64% of US adults agree that fake news can cause great confusion, yet only 16% realizing the falsity of the news after sharing. (Barthel et al. 2016) In other words, misleading news stories have the potential to cause much harm by going unnoticed, thus the need for understanding the relationship of news and social media becomes that much more relevant. The purpose of this literature review is to address the following themes: the cognitive impact of news, crime, and social media usage, the symbolic underpinnings of news and crime, and the sociological impact of news and crime. After addressing all major exports of the literature, I will be connecting the dots in order to address the potential social impacts of crime infotainment and news through social media.

**Cognition:** *How we learn what we learn.*

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Cognition is fundamentally the process of learning and understanding what was learned. A result of cognition is perception, in turn, how people act. In order to unravel the complexity of understanding the impact of news and crime on cognition, the first step is to address if people can learn from the media, specifically television or news. While race does not appear to hold any difference in the ability to learn from television, socioeconomic backgrounds do. Prior literature has found that more often, people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds note television as a source of learning more than people of higher socioeconomic backgrounds. (Greenfield 1983) This works as initial foresight into understanding why people trust the news as well as assists in understanding that when people search for information, which is in of itself the process of learning. In other words, if a person watches television with the intent to learn, they are likely to retain information from that source. A person's motives for watching television is what prepares their cognition while watching television. Television consists of both content and context. In order for the content to be taken seriously, the context must match. (Greenfield 1983) Before addressing how content and context is shaped, first cognitive impacts of social media need to be further explored.

### **Social media and cognition:** Learning *what* we want

In the traditional sociological sense, a community is a group of people with a particular social structure that share a sense of belonging and the daily activities of said community. Social media consists of communities, or a collection of people with shared interests that communicate to each other. Moreover, these communities specifically consist of individuals. Understanding the motives of these individuals will assist in understanding how and why the content is developed for the larger community. The first, and arguably most crucial aspect to understanding social media users' motives is to understand their psychological wellbeing. This is important because it

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is crucial to develop an outline of social media users and whether they may be vulnerable. There is a linear association between the amount of time spent using social media and depression, but to be said the relationship is not clear. (Lin et al. 2016) That is, whether people gravitate towards social media use due to depression or whether social media use leads to increased depression rates is not clear. In either case, social media is an arena that is abundant of social comparison opportunities, with Facebook leading. (Vogel et al. 2015) Social comparison is simply described as self-evaluation based off others. In other words, social media is ripe for opportunities that allow the user to evaluate themselves and their identity based off the comparisons of how others control their social media presence. Social comparison is implicit, spontaneous, and may lead to reactions that alter the person's behavior. (Gilbert et al. 1995) Higher amounts of social comparison orientation positively relate to chronic sensitivity and awareness of others, while also displaying unstable self-concepts and experiences of uncertainty. (Vogel et al. 2015) Loosely, a person's increased vulnerability due to depression or social media use could potentially send them seeking for self-affirmation only to be put into a feedback loop of social comparison. It may also send users seeking for online communities that may assist in self-affirmation through having similar ideologies.

Online communities, like all communities, are influenced and built based off their power and institutional relationships. They work as a means to transmit global information, political and social ideologies, crisis management strategies, or just basic personal information like age or names. (Fernback 2007) Unlike traditional communities which provides a physical infrastructure for its member, online communities only require commitment through transfer of information. In other words, a person has to purposefully enter an online community, as in their motive is most likely to gain and transfer information. When users seek information they have two basic types

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of goals, directional goals and accuracy goals. (Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017) Directional goals send the user towards information that affirms their beliefs whereas accuracy goals send the user towards the most accurate and factual information. The context of the information being sought after is what dictates the user's goal. (Flynn et al. 2017) In short, if a user is seeking an objective viewpoint, they have the intent to learn through accuracy goals, conversely, those seeking to affirm their narrative will only seek information that does such. It is imperative to note that due to social comparison being implicit, directional goals are often the default. (Flynn et al. 2017) While much of the prior research about media learning and social media has been conducted with samples of younger populations or college students, a few points are representative of older users or users who speak English that reside outside of the U.S. Those points are that when users feel connected to those communities, they often spend more time within the community and again, this is due to the feedback loop that is natural to social media. (Burke, Marlow, and Lento 2010) An example of an online community being used to disseminate information can be found from many governments. In South Korea, Twitter is valued as a reliable and trustworthy way to relay information from the government. (Kim, Park, and Rho 2015) By the South Korean government engaging its citizens via Twitter in order to spread information, not only has the government proven Twitter as an effective means of disseminating information quickly but there is a reciprocated relationship of trust between the citizens and the government (Kim, Park, and Rho 2015). This does not necessarily mean that just the use of Twitter is enough to increase trust in the government, but rather that when Twitter is used in conjunction with transparency, is it able to increase trust in the government. It is important to note that content is under the same scrutiny of directional or accuracy goals in the same way as the user searching for that specific information.

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In summary, the default goal of social media users is to seek information that affirms their already existing beliefs. That raises the question of what happens when confronted with disagreements. In short, exposure to disagreement has shown to positively relate to people's ability to generate reasons to agree with their view point while also disagreeing with an opposing viewpoint. (Price, Cappella, and Nir 2002) That statement does not stand without scrutiny though. First, antecedent variables such as political knowledge, education level, and strength of political identification may all impact people's ability to generate responses as much if not more than general exposure to disagreement due to the intricate and complex relationship of the aforementioned variables. Second, disagreements with acquaintances, not friends or family, are positively associated with a person's ability to generate responses. (Price et al. 2002) In other words, the disagreement is most impactful when it is with a person right outside of the individual's support system. Lastly, television exposure is inversely related to a person's ability to generate responses for opposing views when controlling for the aforementioned antecedent variables. (Price et al. 2002) This translates to, the more television watched correlates with decreased reasoning abilities for opposing views, in short, as television exposure increases, so does belief perseverance.

Of course, all of this is contingent on whether or not the social media user is an active or passive user. So, who is an active user, that is who uses social media to actively seek information or communication?

**Social media and society:** *Who* is learning and *what* they expect.

As of 2017, 66% of US adults receive some of their news from social media, a 5% increase from 2016. Of those who use social media for news, 32% is received from YouTube, 45% from Facebook, and 74% from Twitter, which made a dramatic increase from 60% in 2016. (Shearer

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and Gottfried 2017) Simply put, social media is unarguably a mass medium for news delivery. More specifically, 55% of adults age 50 or older report social media as a news pathway, increasing from 45% in 2016, and 78% of adults under the age of 50 report social media as a news pathway. (Shear and Gottfried 2017) When controlling for race, 74% of people who are nonwhite report using social media for news and only 64% of whites report the same. When controlling for education, 69%, an increase of 9% from 2016, report having less than a bachelor's degree, conversely, those with a college degree have seen a drop to 63% from 68% in 2016. (Shear and Gottfried 2017) In terms of specific platforms, Twitter, Youtube, and Snapchat have all increased their news usership by 15%, 11%, and 12% respectively from 2016. To be noted, these increases are consistent with the respective company's effort to increase their news accessibility, such as adding news channels, or due to the president's frequent use of Twitter. (Shear and Gottfried 2017) Websites like Reddit and Facebook have shown negligible change with a 2% drop and 2% increase respectively but it is important to note that those two sites were the top two sites of news usership with a reported number of 68%, putting them behind Twitter as of August 2017. (Shear and Gottfried 2017) Just because social media is convenient, and mass utilized does not mean it is the only pathway to news.

Out of those who reported to get their news online, 36% reported getting their news directly from the news organization, 35% from social media, 20% from a search engine, 15% from a news alert, 7% from family or friends, and 9% from other pathways. (Mitchell et al. 2017) When considering the diversity of pathways, 65% reported to prefer using only one pathway. What may be the most crucial aspect to understanding pathways, is understanding follow-up actions and when they occur. Simply put, a follow-up action is any action that is taken subsequently to having exposure to the news such as sharing, discussion, or seeking more

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information. Family or friend email or text receive the most follow-up actions, at 73%, then search engines at 62%, social media at 53%, news organization alerts at 51%, and direct news organization at 49%. In terms of content that yields the most follow-up actions, community news is first at 68%, health news at 66%, science and technology at 62%, crime at 59%, and government and politics at 56%. (Mitchell et al. 2017) To be said, not all follow-up actions are made equal, per se. A follow-up action with friends and family may take suit as a “thank you” text back, a notification from a news organization may require the use of a search engine, or a follow-up action on social media may be reflective of the user voicing their opinion, seeking for affirmation or debate. It is imperative to note that news framing also impacts the response.

The framing of a news story has shown to have an impact on the framing of the response. Negatively framed news stories positively relate to the frequency of negative thoughts whereas positively framed news stories barely impacted positive thoughts. (Price et al. 1997) That statement does require fair scrutinization. First, Political parties are also impacted equally. Second, the study was of college students. Third, framing in of itself is not inherently negative nor positive but rather requires social context. Lastly, this study was tracking immediate responses following exposure to experimental news articles. The last note is relatively important when assessing social media. This is because follow-up actions through social media are done immediately following exposure to news. Everything up until now can be summarized in an admittedly reductionist view: Social media can be used to seek affirming information, subsequently send the user into a feedback loop due to framing or user vulnerability. Moving forward it is important to note that in order for the feedback loop to be established, certain roles need to be fulfilled.

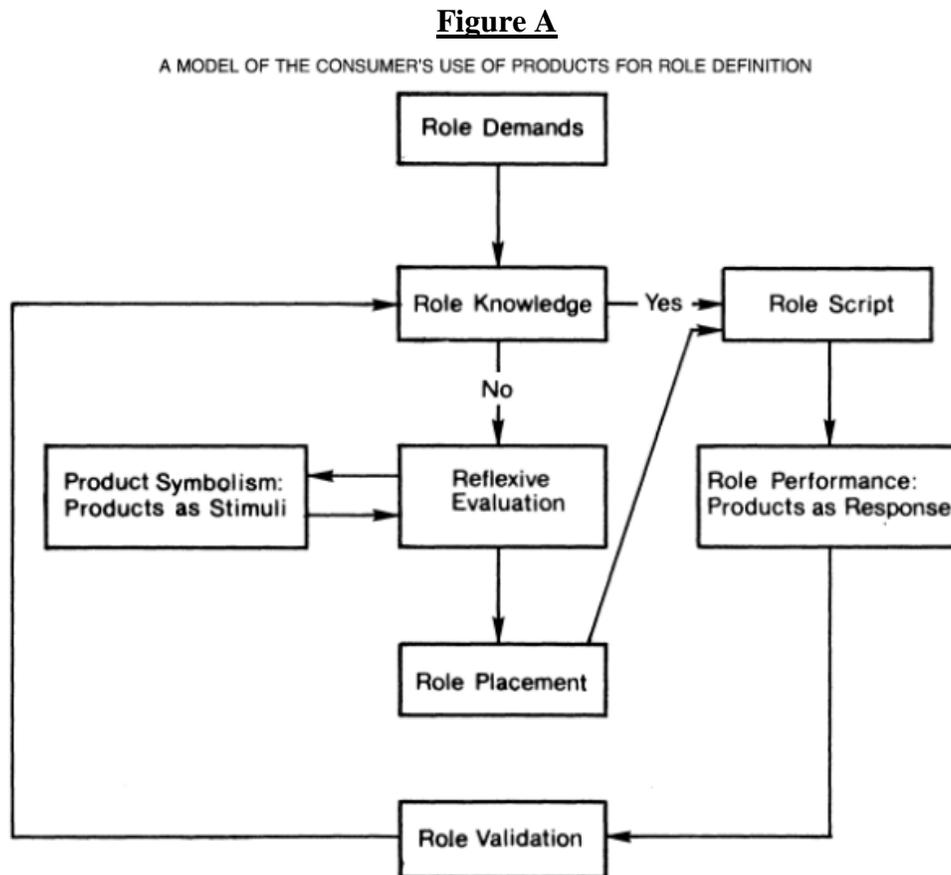
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A role, in the sociological sense, is a social position that comes with expected behavior. Roles are learned from experiences and interactions with others. According to Charles Horton Cooley, the self consists of “the imagination of our appearance to the other person, the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification.”

(Cooley 1902) In other words, the self comes from the individual’s perception, the perception of other’s judgements, and the subsequent feeling. Expanding on how people fill roles, there is a different self for specific roles. That is, there are expected behaviors associated with roles that require the individual to act accordingly, regardless of their personality. (Mead 1934) Products are also subject to roles.

Products have the ability to acquire cultural meaning, but only in the context of the contemporary culture. (Solomon 1983) When a product is used, it can be used as stimuli associated with status, class, or party, thus associated with the self and identity. In order to successfully establish that connection, the product must meet expectations set by the user. These expectations come from the reciprocated relationship between products and consumerism. As products require a role in order to be used in proper context, they in turn set an expectation of those with said products. As shown in Figure A, role demands set the stage for the required product, successful application of role knowledge leads to acknowledging the script, acting accordingly, receiving validation, and back to increasing role knowledge. Conversely, if there is a lack of role knowledge, there is a reflexive evaluation, like social comparison. At this stage, the self receives information from product symbolism, in turn role placement, then sent into the loop at the script phase. (Solomon 1983)

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Due to the nature of the model and the nature of how social media is used, it can be expected that consumer use of social media creates a feedback loop of expected product use and expected behavior associated with that product. As a social media user utilizes whatever platform, they are actively engaged in the associated role that has been defined from the online community, in turn, internalizing product and user feedback such as 'likes' or 'upvotes', or the interactions with other

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online users. This has in of itself developed a culture that is specific to the internet and the communities that inhabit the internet. These performances differ from the traditional Goffmanian performances. Whereas traditional performances are continuously subject to judgement and self-monitoring, cyber performances may be locked behind privacy walls. (Hogan 2010) This means that online performances are purposeful, they require active engagement and maintenance at the discretion of the performer, in turn making the behavior an exhibition. (Hogan 2010) Applying roles and Cooley's "looking glass self" concept to social media, the proposed outcome appears as following: The self imagines how it appears to through awareness of social media management. The self imagines others' judgements by actively participating in social media by checking 'likes' or comments and replies. Lastly, the self develops an emotional response which can be seen by the presence of social comparison. (Robinson 2007) While postmodernists persist that the online self is a disembodied version of a person, it can easily be dispelled. From prior literature addressed earlier, there are real-world impacts on thought and cognition. Although a person may be putting on an exhibition online, they still do face cognitive influence and in turn behavioral influence. To denounce the impacts of social media use as separate from real-world consequence is problematic and further denounces the impacts to institutions. These impacts can be found evident from the symbolic nature of news and crime and how the zeitgeist has reflected those symbols.

**Symbolic Interactionism:** *How* framing assists learning.

When breaking down news framing, the starting point is journalism itself. Journalism is not free from institutional influence. Ratings work to allow news corporations to follow what stories catch and keep viewers, in turn journalists seek those stories. This has sent the world of journalism in the direction of consumer interest more than investigative paths. (Mellado and

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Hellmueller 2015) Like researchers, journalist also have to spin their story in a way that appeases those who publish it. The role of journalists requires the individual to anticipate responses from their story and acts accordingly. In short, journalism is supposed to stand for objectivity but that is impractical due to institutional constraints. The term gonzo justice describes the media's logic that encourages journalists and correspondents to present crime as a mediated public spectacle.

(Altheide 1992) This is done through the presence of gonzo rhetoric. This appears as first, crime is an imminent threat. Second, there is a primary villain that presents the dichotomy of good and bad. Third, there is an emphasis on the perceived failures of past efforts to control crime. Fourth, a substitution for older policies are presented, often these policies are more punitive in nature. Lastly, charismatic presenters deliver the information in a way that normalizes the rhetoric.

(Maratea and Monahan 2013) Much of this is dependent on the outlet's framing.

A news outlet's ideological stance is not set by how they support policy or parties, but rather how they criticize others. (Budak, Goel, and Rao 2016) Surprisingly, only 33% of major US news outlets are partisan and of those, they are 50% liberal and 50% conservative. (Budak et al. 2016) When comparing two major outlets, the New York Times and Fox, opinion pieces become far more partisan. Fox News opinion pieces are 63% net-right leaning, 6% net-left, and 31% neutral. With the exception to gun rights, drugs, republican scandals, and education, New York Times is more moderate than Fox in all other coverage areas. Scandals receive the most slant in terms of criticism on either side. (Budak et al. 2016) In all fairness though, most news content reflects neutrality. (Dilliplane 2011) Much of this is contingent on the perception of the viewer.

Keeping directional and accuracy goals in mind, the consumer of news, specifically matters of crime, is going to interpret the information based on their prior experiences. The substitution thesis suggest that media replaces first-hand experiences as a source of knowledge. The

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resonance thesis suggest that the media is consistent with real-life experiences, thus enhances the fear of crime. Either perspective is context-dependent on the viewer or the content being viewed, in-turn both can exist simultaneously. (Weitzer and Kubrin 2004)

**Symbolic Interaction:** *How* the context for fear of crime has been established.

To begin with, even researchers have had trouble maintaining consistency with defining ‘*criminals*.’ (Edelstein 2016) Not having consensus not only leads to problems with methodology, but the interpretation of that research can severely impact policies and how politicians or news correspondents speak about the matter. While serial killers receive much media coverage, habitual offenders remain to be the biggest threat in terms of chances of being victimized. (Edelstein 2016) The United States has spent its time since the late 1970’s having its welfare state become absorbed by its security state, that is funds that were once put into welfare are now being put into the criminal justice system. (Chevigny 2003) This has led to less expenditures that could decrease crime through improving the conditions that breed crime and in turn, building an institution that is reactionary towards crime. This frames crime as a rational choice, thus worthy of punishment. (Chevigny 2003) Media and state framings are significantly related to public concern of drugs and crime. More specifically, concerns of drugs are increased as state initiatives increase but are barely impacted by media initiatives. The fear of crime on the other hand, is significantly increased as state and media initiatives increase, but not actual crime rates. (Beckett 1994) As the amount of time spent viewing crime news or crime reality television, crime infotainment for short, is positively related to the fear of crime. (Callanan 2012;

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Dowler 2003) Not all content is the same to be fair. Gory films carry a very different context than news. That said, news is seen as a valid source for police policy by more people than first hand-experiences. (Greer and Reiner 2012) To be noted, that can be attributed to mass media having a further reach than crime, which is arguably a good thing. Nevertheless, by media framing crime as a rational choice and deserving of punishment, the fear of crime and victimization increases with exposure.

### **The Fear of Crime:** *Who is afraid of Whom?*

Exposure to crime infotainment or news coverage positively relates to fear of crime. (Barthel, Mitchell, and Holcomb 2016; Callanan 2012; Dowler 2003; Intravia et al. 2017; O’Keefe, Garret J. and Reid-Nash, Kathaleen 1987; Rosenberger and Callanan 2011; Sotirovic 2001; Weitzer and Kubrin 2004) The same relationship does not appear significantly with exposure through newspapers, insinuating that it is the format of television that bears the weight of impact. (O’Keefe et all. 1987) The same format, if not an abbreviated format, exists online. 66% of internet news sites are owned by media conglomerates with 33% of their news coverage being crime-related. (Callanan 2012) This gives weight to the notion that stories, and formats are recycled. Mainstream news outlets use patterns of reporting that is consistent with either the punitive or preventative policies regarding crime. The more punitive the framing was, the more fear of crime the viewership displayed. (Sotirovic 2001) More educated, liberal, or viewers with personal experiences with crime tend to also display more complex ways of thinking about crime. When controlling for demographics, ideology, and motivational goals, media that was complex positively influences complex thinking, conversely, consumption of simple media discourages complex ways of thinking. (Sotirovic 2001) Republicans are twice as much likely to support punitive policies than rehabilitation for criminals. In general, as fear increases, so the

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chance of supporting punitive measures. (Rosenberger and Callanan 2011) As for the demographics specifically, much of the literature is consistent.

Women, people of color, specifically African Americans, and younger viewers all show higher rates of fear of crime in relation to their exposure to crime news or infotainment. (Dowler 2003; Intravia et al. 2017; Rosenberger and Callanan 2011; Sotirovic 2001; Weitzer and Kubrin 2004) Most relevantly and alarmingly, social media consumption is significantly related to the user's fear of crime.(Intravia et al. 2017) That statement does not stand on its own though. First, consumption of general news and crime stories were not found to be significantly related to fear of crime. Second, that study does not reflect specifically *why* social media has this impact but does propose a few reasons. The context surrounding the story (e.g., comments could reflect fear, follow-up actions) could potentially impact fear considering those follow-up actions come from “real-world” people rather than news correspondents or journalists. Lastly, the atmosphere of fear could be a result of the online environment and the vulnerability of the user. (Intravia et al. 2017) Nevertheless, there is a relationship which is alarming and requires further research for better understanding. The understanding of fear of crime cannot simply stop at who is afraid but needs to extend to *whom* is framed as ‘scary.’

Keeping in suit with analyzing crime infotainment, the late 1980's and early 1990's brought massively successful shows like *Cops* and *NYPD Blue*. Shows like *Cops* typically do not overrepresent suspects as people of color but do overrepresent violent crimes. Furthermore, suspects that are people of color are more likely to be shown as unarmed victims of excessive force by police more than suspects that are white. (Oliver 1993) This sets a precedent that will be further explored that insinuates people of color typically are framed as deserving of punitive measures for committing crimes. The lack of sympathy suspects of color receive can be seen in

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not just reality crime shows but also widespread print from a major news organization, Time Magazine. Unarguably Time is a major publication with much social and political clout. As discussed earlier, mainstream news media without a doubt as an influence on people's perspectives which in turn influence political and social behaviors. Time has traditionally shown a significant bias that frames people of color and marginalized groups as "predators" and the most likely to commit violent crimes. (Barlow et al. 1995) In fairness, that analysis came from content from 1953, '58, '75, '79, and '82. Nonetheless, the underlining message is still very relevant. News media typically frames people of color as violent offenders while being nearly devoid of the same imagery for white suspects. News in a more contemporary time, specifically post-September 11, 2001 does not rely so much on the "black criminal" as much as there is a disproportionate amount of suspect imagery. Specifically, African American, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and Arab suspects are more likely to be shown than white suspects. (Behm-Morawitz 2013, Saleem et al. 2015) Latinx people receive proportionate coverage regarding crime rates but do not receive proportionate coverage for other roles. (Behm-Morawitz 2013) Another layer is also who is most likely to be imaged as a victim.

In news coverage from LA, crime reports and homicide perpetrators are relatively represented proportionately but when it comes to homicide victims, whites are significantly overrepresented and Latinx victims are significantly underrepresented. Moreover, the news in LA is also likely to overrepresent police as white while significantly underrepresenting Latinx people as police. (Dixon 2015) All of what has been presented shares a similar theme, and that is implicit association and biases.

Typically, when people consume underrepresented imagery of people of color as victims, it leads to an implicit bias that people of color are more deserving of punitive measures. This is in

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part from the lack of sympathetic imagery. Akin to the functions that led to African American suspects priming punitive behaviors, post-9/11 news coverage in the US has led to implicit biases that Muslim, Middle Eastern, or Arab people are associated with terrorism. (Saleem et al. 2015) With that said, it should also be noted that there are processes that lessen the influences of news. Although people from more homogenous white areas are significantly more likely to accept the negative stereotypes perpetuated in the news, people from areas with higher populations of African Americans are somewhat less likely to accept those same negative stereotypes. (Gilliam et al. 2002) This means less real-world interactions with people typically leads to subscribing to stereotypes, conversely first-hand experiences do serve the function of dispelling harmful and illusory notions.

In part, fear of crime is influenced from an increase media consumption, specifically news or crime infotainment. As more people flock to social media for their news, they may be left vulnerable to negative rhetoric or have access to narrative affirming information regardless of accuracy. Considering the news world is owned by practically the same corporations recycling the same stories, this means that having a consistent agenda could come with a consistent viewership. This is achieved from framing stories in an expected way, making said information as accessible as possible, taking user-feedback and making corrections, and then releasing new information back into the feedback loop. A positive note, real-world experiences could work as a buffer for those aforementioned functions of news. As alarming as all of that is, a question remains: How does “fake news” play into all of this?

**Fake News:** *What* causes confusion.

Considering all that has been presented, it is easy to understand that as a person learns, they also behave accordingly. An increased fear of crime may influence prospected housing or

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employment, voting patterns, policy support, and general interaction with others. 64% of US adults agree that fake news can cause a great deal of confusion over basic facts of current events. Only 39% felt very confident in recognizing fake news and 45% felt somewhat confident. 57% of republicans, 64% of democrats, and 69% of moderates claim that fake news is confusing. Lastly, 23% of those interviewed admitted to sharing fake news, 14% of those did it knowingly and only 16% realized afterwards the story was fake. (Barthel et al. 2016) This is alarming. First, fake news has a detrimental impact on people's ability to perceive reality. This in of itself is deserving of further research. Second, this study requires much of scrutiny and replication. This is due to the implications of how fake news can impact a society and social desirability needs to be addressed. It is likely to believe people do not want to admit their learning sources are fake. Nonetheless, if many people can be so vulnerable to confusion then there is reason to believe that misinformation can become '*weaponized*' and used for class, status, or party conflict. It is important to distinguish between fake news and satirical news or conspiracies. Fake news is intentional, verifiably false, and has the potential to mislead readers. For example, The Onion is known to be satire, thus if someone took the proverbial 'bite out of the onion' that does not constitute as fake news. Data collected from browser extensions, meaning computers were being used rather than cell phones, shows that fake news is most likely to be found on social media and direct browsing at rates of 41.8% and 30.5%, respectively. This differs from top news sources, with their articles being found from direct social media and direct browsing at rates of 10.1% and 48.7% respectively. (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017) This means that when someone is scrolling through social media, they are more likely to encounter fake news than a credible news source but also means people searching for news are more likely to search for more trusted sources. This is key because there is a difference between news consumption through social media and

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direct browsing. Specifically, social media users could be passive consumers of news while direct browsers are more committed to consuming news. Heavier consumers of news are more likely to believe ideological framing of news. (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017) Presumably direct browsers are searching for news consciously and with intent. This is not to infer direct browsers of news are heavier consumers per se, but that intent cannot be ignored. This importance can be seen from the 2016 US presidential elections. Pro-Trump fake news was three times more present than pro-Clinton fake news and on average, received more shares through Facebook. (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017) This supports the notion that fake news is most prevalent on social media because the widespread sharing of fake news is made possible by follow-up actions like sharing, a process that is not necessarily present on top news source sites. Fake news is not new but is of a rising concern due to increases in social media usage. More specifically, there still needs to be much research done about fake news and crime in today's United States.

### **Research Focus**

#### **Question**

The question at hand is: What is the relationship between social media as a news pathway and the fear of crime? While this question is extremely broad, it is in part due to the lack of cohesion amongst criminologists to specifically define certain phenomena and behavior. This question approaches an inquiry into the impacts of crime news and infotainment as if social media is a traditional means of information delivery, no differently than how television was viewed in the literature of the early 1990's or before.

#### **Rationale**

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As noted earlier, 2/3 of American adults utilize social media as a news pathway, and that percentage has shown an increase over the years. (Shearer and Gottfried 2017) That is reason to believe as social media becomes even more normalized, so will it as a news pathway. Some of the proposed impacts included influences on behavior like voting patterns, interpersonal interaction, or even interaction with institutions. Also considering the potential impacts of misinformation, a critical thinker may find all of this very alarming. To understand these potential impacts, one must ask themselves: if television has had the impact on the criminal justice system that it has had, and if social media exacerbates the impacts of television, what could that potentially mean for how the criminal justice system will be impacted? In other words, there is a specific function or set of functions that leads to implicit association and biases. Traditional pathways like TV have influenced consumers by providing a lack of sympathy roles for people of color. Social media may use a different function than imagery, and that being follow-up actions. Potentially, follow-up actions may be more trustworthy to the individual because it could be friends or family sharing the information.

### **Data and Methods**

#### **Sampling**

The usage of social media as a means of news collection is becoming more prevalent. Understandably, finding social media users will not be complicated but to successfully find the data that would show the relationship between social media usage and the fear of crime, the focus must be narrowed from just social media users in general. The ideal type for the population will be social media users that with intent, search for news through social media. Simply put, the population could be any one who follows news outlets or actively searches for them. This distinction is made to mitigate the risk of sampling people who only have exposure to news due to family or friends sharing. More specifically, whatever impacts that exposure may be a

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spurious relationship due to potential reactions or framing from the sharer. I do not believe this distinction would have a significant impact because the amount of social media users who only have news exposure due to just sharing is probably negligible.

When sampling, the methods would have to be a mixture of targeted stratified and purposeful sampling. Sampling would be purposeful due to the distinction made earlier and for the intent of collecting specific data. The purpose of this research is to find the relationship between social media usage and the fear of crime. Past literature has found that higher exposure to crime infotainment, including news, positively correlates with higher rates of fear of crime. For that reason, sampling would have to include purposeful selection of participants who use social media for exposure to crime infotainment. Targeted stratified sampling will also be used. Ideally, I would prefer for this research to be conducted in a manner that is as representative as possible. Due to past literature already finding which groups of people are the most likely to have a high correlation between exposure to crime infotainment and fear of crime, the characteristics are already outlined. For example, one stratified group will be based on gender. Prior research has found that women show higher rates of fear of crime per exposure than men. When considering sampling, ideally the gender of the participants should be representative of the population, so the results are not skewed. This same process will apply to sampling races and political leaning due to differences in fear of crime. Again, improper sampling could either show results that are exacerbated or lessened.

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**Recruitment and Screening**

Groups	% of US	# people in sample
<b>Race</b>		
White	61	30
Black/ African American	13	7
Hispanic/ Latinx	18	9
Asian	6	3
Other	2	1
<b>Political Lean</b>		
Right	35	18
Left	51	25

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The participants will be recruited from across social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Reddit as those are the four major social

Moderate  
**Gender**  
Male  
Female

14	7
49	24
51	26

media platforms. Those platforms also allow for instantaneous follow-up actions. The ability for follow-up actions is key. Addressing prior literature, follow-up actions allow users to double-down on their opinions while also receiving instant feedback or disagreements from other users. The participants will be urged to recommend others, so in a sense snowballing will be somewhat used. In accompaniment to filling specific groups that are representative of US demographics, this will be done through a stratifying the samples into groups.

### **Figure B**

Ideally, I would be able to recruit 100 participants for a population and select 50 for sampling. The 50 selected will have to be representative of US demographics. Figure B outlines the number of participants required for representative demographics. This will require screening. All participants after initial recruitment will be asked to identify their race, gender, and political lean. Participants will be placed appropriately based on their responses and the need to fill specific groups. Representative demographics is more of a priority than having a large sample size. In case of not having 50 interviewees, the numbers for sampling will be reduced proportionately. The appropriate formula for correction is as follows:  $(\text{Sample})/(\text{Population}) * (\% \text{ of US demographics})$ . Although traditionally participants are not placed into multiple strata, this is done to observe intersectional factors.

### **Interview Methods**

As for the specific method of data collection itself, that will be conducted through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. After recruiting participants, they will be all be sent consent and

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privacy forms. These forms will guarantee participants' privacy and that their data will not be shared and secured. Furthermore, it will guarantee anonymity for the participants. Each participant will choose their own pseudonyms. All data will be secured in lockable storage or on an encrypted jump drive and will be only accessed during working sections of the research and analysis stages. All data will be maintained and discarded in accordance to local and federal regulations post-study.

Regarding collection of the data itself, the semi-structured and in-depth interviews will be outlined in an interview guide, as found in addendum A. The interviews will be conducted preferably in public places that are not obtrusive but can be conducted at homes to accommodate participants if needed. Due to the wide range of sampling and potential location of the participants, it should be expected that phone calls or face-to-face online services such as Skype or Facetime may need to be used. The interviews will begin with the researcher covering the privacy and consent forms and notifying the participant that the interview will be recorded. Next, the interviewer will outline how the interview is supposed to go and notify the participant that field notes will be taken but should not be obtrusive. Simply, the interviewer will be facilitating a discussion between themselves and the participant. This discussion will be designed to pull out as much information about the participant, their social media usage, political affiliation, and their fear of crime. The participant will be asked background information. This will assist in 'loosening' up the participant and help in establishing rapport for the interviewer, so they may attempt at retrieving the most accurate and honest information they can. Next, the participant will be asked about their social media usage. More specifically, what platforms they use, how often they use them, what news sources they follow, and how much exposure to the news they receive through social media. Participants will then start to describe their political affiliation. This

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section of the interview will be used to flush out potential relationships between social media usage and the fear of crime. It may be possible that some participants use social media to reaffirm beliefs, thus the fear of crime may be a result of their political affiliation rather than exposure to crime infotainment. In other words, it is likely to believe that a participant may not have much exposure to crime infotainment regardless of social media usage. The participant could support punitive policies not because they are afraid of crime but rather because they frame crime as personal choice deserving of punishment. The difference is important when analyzing the relationship between social media usage and the fear of crime due to similar reactions but different intents. The final major section of the interview will be assessing the participants' fear of crime. Here, the interviewer will ask questions that attempt to distinguish the difference between fear of crime and punitive attitudes, although they could be the same. More specifically, the interviewer will probe into how much risk the participants perceive in terms of victimization from a crime. Simply, does the participants' perception of victimization match the reality of crime rates? Should the participant perceive they are more likely to become victims of crime than actual crime rates suggest, they are understandably fearful of crime as their perception does not match reality. This is akin to the qualitative methods used when measuring exposure to TV news and fear of crime but replacing TV news with social media news.

### **Methods of Analysis**

The primary interviewers (PI) would transcribe the interviews using software like Atlas.ti or InqScribe. The interviews will be transcribed with both inductive and deductive methods. The PI's will make a codebook based off theoretical and practical themes. Undergraduates will then be trained on the coding process and the transcription software, so they are able to code themes appropriately. PI's will be doing 20% of the primary transcripts so consistency with student work

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may be monitored more closely. The next stage will consist of PI's analyzing primary codes and add memos based on themes and trends. These memos will be used to make another codebook that will assist PI's in performing an inductive coding of the data. This will be done using the transcription software. PI's will also be aware of disconfirming cases. Prior to data analysis, PI's will insert relevant information from the field notes.

Once all coding is complete, the data will be analyzed. PI's will be looking at trends and themes. The disconfirming cases will also be examined and described. The findings will be organized in a logical sequence, to include exceptions as they are just as fruitful.

### **Critiques and Limitations**

The first limitation that needs to be accounted for is social desirability. Regardless of the participants' characteristics, it is likely to believe that people will provide answers that make them appear as 'rational' as possible. That is not saying that honest answers could be 'irrational,' but rather not filtered through social expectations of attitudes and behaviors. Another limitation may be inconsistent meanings of fear and crime. More specifically, considering that the discipline of criminology has inconsistent definitions of the two, it is reasonable to expect that participants may view crime differently from one another. This makes the results harder to code and less representative. The purpose of this research is to establish a baseline for the relationship between social media usage and the fear of crime, ergo these limitations would be near-fatal for a quantitative study but not necessarily a qualitative collection of data. The next limitation will be found in the sampling. Although the ideal sample would be representative of the US population and large enough to be generalizable, participation may be hindered due to geographic location or access for participants interviewed not in person.

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The purpose of this research would be to explore potential relationships amongst social media users and news media. With the increasing amount of social media users seeking news through different platforms, the functions of learning need to be understood. Learning from news media could function in ways akin to traditional news pathways such as television, or there could be new functions at work such as follow-up actions. It is no new news that politicians and media conglomerates use news to deliver their ideologies in purposefully framed manners. The social implications of these functions could lead to behavioral and attitudinal changes towards social institutions. As research has been conducted to understand how television relates to fear of crime, moving forward in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the relationship of social media and fear of crime deserves the same attention, if not more due to the increasing relevancy of social media as a news pathway.

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**Addendum 1:** Interview Guide

**INTRODUCTION**

[Greeting] My name is \_\_\_\_ and I am with \_\_\_\_\_. I am conducting some research for a project. We will be covering a few topics like social media usage, news and crime, and political affiliation.

I will be asking a few questions but this is best done as a conversation. Please give me your full and honest opinion on the topics as if we have been friends for a long time.

I will be recording and taking minor notes, but no need to focus on that. The recording will be transcribed, and it will be deleted after I have completed analyzing it. Your opinions will not be recorded with your name and I ask that you choose a pseudonym that I use in my reports.

I also have a consent form for you to sign prior to starting. This ensures your privacy.

Whenever you are ready, I can turn on the recorder and we may start.

\*Confirm recording has started\*

Any questions?

OK, let's start.

## Questions

**First, Tell me about yourself. Tell me about your childhood, where you grew up, how your family life was, your education, etc.**

### Social Media Usage:

- 1) How much time do you spend on social media daily?  
-On cellphone, computer? Where physically do you use social media?
- 2) Which platforms do you use the most?  
-Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, etc.?
- 3) How do you choose those platforms?  
-Friends and family use them, easy to use interface, contains wanted content?
- 4) Do you find social media as valuable tool for finding news?  
-In general, do you use social media to find news?
- 5) What types of news would you say you look for the most?  
- Local, business, international, whatever shows up, etc.?
- 6) What types of news articles do you see the most of on social media?  
- Local, business, international, etc.?
- 7) How do you select which articles you choose?  
-Interested, relevancy, 'shock-factor,' etc.?
- 8) How do you decide which platform to trust the most?  
-Friends and family use them, you've heard bad news about some, good news about some, etc.?
- 9) How often do you share or comment on the posts you see?  
-Every time, only when tagged, when shocked, etc.?
- 10) Why do you share?  
-Shocked, interested, family and friends would be interested, reflects your views, etc.?
- 11) How often do you experience agreements on social media?  
-That can be likes, shares, retweets, in general any type of action that allows you to know someone agrees?
- 12) How often do you experience disagreements on social media?  
-That can be through direct comments, 'sub-tweeting' or passive aggressive callouts, etc.?

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- 13) What are your perceptions of other's opinions on social media in general?  
-How informed are those opinions? How do you decide which opinions are trustworthy?
- 14) How often do you seek discussions on social media?  
-Specifically, do you seek debates? Agreements?

### **News habits:**

#### **\*Depending on flow of conversation, continue with political affiliation or crime.**

- 1) Can you tell me about your relationship with the news in general?  
-Watch it often, never, only when it's on, etc.?
- 2) How often do you consume news?  
-Daily, multiple times a day, weekly, etc.?
- 3) Which sources do you prefer?  
-Fox, CNN, BBC, MSNBC, etc.?
- 4) How do you get your news?  
-TV, newspaper, radio, social media, etc.?
- 5) Which pathway do you think you use the most?  
-TV, newspaper, radio, social media, etc.?
- 6) What are the first things that come to mind when thinking about news?  
-No probe. Seeking whatever association may exist for the participant.
- 7) How do those topics make you feel?  
-Frightened, optimistic, neutral, etc.?
- 8) How do you think news outlets choose what to cover?  
-Ratings, relevance, distraction, etc.?
- 9) How educational do you find the news in general?  
-Is it a good source for credible information, more for entertainment, etc.?
- 10) How neutral do you find the news to be?  
-Some more than others, all has bias, etc.?
- 11) Which outlets or sources do you think are most biased?  
\*Only ask if participant believes there is a bias.

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### **Political affiliation:**

- 1) Can you tell me about your political views in general?  
-Are you politically active, only vote for the president, etc.?
- 2) How would you identify your political identity?  
-Party, leaning, etc.?
- 3) Where do you learn about politics?  
-Self-taught, family, school, news, etc.?
- 4) How do you collect that information?  
-Passively through exposure, actively through searching?
- 5) How do you decide which political party best represents your beliefs?  
-Upbringing, aligns with your thoughts, location, etc.?
- 6) Where do you think most of those beliefs originate from?  
-Family, news, experiences, etc.?
- 7) How much confidence would you say you have in your politic representatives?  
-A bit, some, none, etc.?
- 8) If any, what fixes do you think politics need?  
-Corruption laws, campaign finance laws, more political parties, etc.?  
\*Expect to flush out participant's answers and get more than one fix.
- 9) Can you describe how you view law in general?  
-Do you think the legal system works well? What are the strongest parts? The weakest parts?
- 10) Do you think laws are appropriately addressing crime?  
-How do you feel about current immigration laws, drug laws, campaign finance laws, etc.?
- 11) If any, what laws do you think need reformation?  
-Immigration, drug, tax, etc.?  
\*Expect to flush out participant's answers and get more than one law that needs reformation.

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### Crime:

- 1) Tell me about your experiences with crime.
  - Don't incriminate yourself per se, but would you say you are the type of person who would never commit a crime, you would only commit a "victimless" crime like speeding (or drug possession), you've committed intra-personal crimes, etc.?
- 2) How much do you perceive crime to be an issue?
  - Personally, socially, certain areas more than others, etc.?
- 3) How do you have exposure to crime?
  - News, personal experiences, TV and movies, etc.?
  - What types of crimes as well?
- 4) How do you perceive the safety of your neighborhood/community?
  - Safe, dangerous, some crime, etc.?
- 5) How do you think people decide to commit crimes?
  - Of course, people make a choice, but specifically where do you think that choice comes from? Learned behaviors, circumstances, culture, they simply decide to, etc.?
- 6) What types of crimes do you think that applies to?
  - Violent, drug, white collar, etc.?
- 7) How do you think the crime rates are now compared to the past?
  - Do you think crime is increasing, decreasing, remaining the same?
- 8) What types crimes do you think are more frequent than others?
  - Violent, drug, white-collar, etc.?
- 9) What types of crime are bigger threats to society as a whole?
  - Violent, drug, white-collar, etc.?
- 10) What types of crimes are the most sensationalized or broadcast just for rating?
  - Violent, drug, political, robberies, etc.?