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D E M O C R A T I C C O M M U N I Q U É

# Activism's Sweet Embrace: Political Advertisements, Audiences and Interpretive Strategies

Joshua D. Atkinson, Rasfanul Hoque, Blessy McWan & Jewel White

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*In this project, we conducted focus groups with college students at a mid-sized university in order to examine their interpretations of different political advertisements. Our interest emerged from heightened political tensions in the United States that have led to increases in political advertisements targeting people in general, but young people and students in particular. After viewing nine different ads, students were asked a series of questions to generate discussion. Overall, these discussions provided insight concerning the interpretive strategies that were used to make sense of the ads. We found that most of the students would only interpret the campaign ads as "political," while the others—including ads produced by activists—were interpreted as "issue ads" or "topic ads." What is more, most of the students (but particularly those who identified as conservative) found the candidate ads to be untrustworthy, or viewed them as negative. Many of these students explained their interpretations of the candidate ads as a response to the growing negativity and partisanship that they saw in contemporary elections. Such findings hold important implications for strategic approaches to audiences—for both traditional politicians, as well as activist organizations.*

**Keywords:** Activist media, alternative media, interpretive strategies, political advertisements, political communication

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The election of Donald J. Trump as the President of the United States in November of 2016 took those in politics, mainstream news, and academia by surprise. The question arose time and time again: How did a candidate with absolutely no experience in government manage to be elected to the highest office in the world? In many ways, this election should not have come as a surprise to political observers. Over the years, the Republican Party flirted with non-traditional political figures in presidential primaries (e.g., Herman Cain, Steve Forbes), or politicians who had not held elected office for many years (e.g., Fred Thomas, Newt Gingrich). However, such dalliances with non-traditional political actors within the main parties in the US have not been confined to Republicans only. The Democratic Party has similarly drifted away from “typical” or experienced political actors, as they most recently embraced individuals with no experience (e.g., Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez) and in 2016 nearly nominated for President someone who had only been in the party for a few months (Bernie Sanders). These flirtatious drifts in political preference over the years meant that someday, in all likelihood, a non-traditional political actor (like Trump) or complete party outsider (like Sanders) would eventually be elected to the Presidency. The question, then, should rather be: why have voters been so willing to entertain such political outsiders?

Past research concerning activist and alternative media has provided a few hints to answer this question. Indeed, such research has demonstrated that alternative media have started to influence mainstream political communication and voters’ preferences for candidates (Atkinson and Berg, 2019; Wojcieszak, 2009). For instance, research by Atkinson and Berg (2019), which focused on Tea Party and conservative alternative media, examined the construction of themes circulated through activist networks. The dominant theme of purity in Tea Party alternative media helped conservative activists to understand, or interpret, particular candidates as good conservatives or RINOs (Republican in Name Only). Long-time political figures like Rick Perry, when scrutinized by activists against this dominant theme, could never appear to be conservative enough. In addition, scholars like Bhat and Vasudevan (2019) and Rauch (2019) have demonstrated that there are growing intersections between alternative media and mainstream party politics, particularly on the political right. Their research explored the influential role of right-wing media, like *National Review* and *Breitbart*, in the Republican Party’s key platforms over the past fifty years. Others, like Grigoryan and Suetzl (2019) have explored such connections on the political left. In their research, Grigoryan and Suetzl illustrate how interactive and participatory forms of alternative media, like the Young Turks Network via YouTube, allowed for Senator Bernie Sanders insurgent campaign to bypass mainstream news and surprise the Clinton campaign in 2016. In fact, they claim that same alternative news network also provided Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez a platform for her challenge to ten-term incumbent Representative Joe Crowley. Such research demonstrates that narratives, themes, and meaning structures from alternative or activist media are increasingly trickling into mainstream political discourse and thinking—and in some cases, they have been present for decades, but have yet to be examined.

Of particular importance for this essay is the concept of interpretive communities and interpretive strategies, which has been an important focus of past alternative media research. According to Rauch (2007), media are made alternative by the strategies that audiences use to read them. A program like the *Outnumbered* on Fox News, which would not typically be identified as alternative media in other definitions (e.g., Atton, 2002; Downing, 2001), can be

made alternative by the audiences' processes or reading. Essentially, the reading of texts creates for audiences the meaning that they are an alternative to more mainstream media. Later, the concept of interpretive strategies was utilized in key definitions for alternative media developed by Atkinson (2010): "...media are determined to be "alternative" if they adhere to one of three definitions that have been established in past Journalism and Media Studies literature: 1) alternative content, 2) interpretive strategies of audiences, and/or 3) alternative production" (p. 22). In addition, Atkinson, Chappuis, Cruz, Gilkeson, Kauert, Kluch, and Kimathi (2017) reveal that these processes of interpretation do not exist in isolation. In their research, they demonstrated that articles about popular culture found in alternative media titles (liberal and conservative alike) teach audiences to bridge meaning structures and ideologies to larger social issues beyond typically politicized issues, like taxes or healthcare. Through content analysis of alternative media articles about the premier of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, they illustrate different kinds of articles that teach audiences to read popular culture texts (like movies or music) with the same critical worldviews that they use to understand topics like taxes or environmental regulation. In this way, the interpretive communities associated with activists had the potential to expand.

Through our research, we seek to build on past literature concerning the role of interpretive strategies in activist media messages. In particular, we examine the ways in which non-activist students at a mid-sized university in the US read and interpreted politically oriented advertisements during an election year. Our research demonstrates that the interpretive strategies used by students informed their categorization of different kinds of ads. In particular, we discovered that most of the students categorized campaign advertisements as "political," while other ads—including those produced by activists—were interpreted in different ways. In many instances, campaign ads were interpreted in negative terms, while non-campaign ads were interpreted as more positive or beneficial. This categorization system created the potential for students to reject candidates and mainstream political actors—like elected officials—and embrace messages created by activist organizations. Such interpretive strategies can help to explain trends that have contributed to the rise and election of non-traditional political actors, or actors with few (if any) credentials within main political parties. In the following pages, we provide information regarding the concept of interpretive strategies and interpretive communities, followed by a detailed description of our research project.

### Interpretive Strategies

The concept of interpretive strategy was first developed by Fish (1980) in order to explain the differing critical evaluations of the book *Moby Dick*. Some critics lauded the book as one of the greatest ever written, while others dismissed it as trash. Fish wondered how two people could look at one text, and come to such radically different interpretations or evaluations. His solution was the notion of the interpretive strategy, which was developed from affiliation with particular interpretive communities. Essentially, people live in specific communities that teach values, morals, and meaning structures. In the case of *Moby Dick*, Fish notes that there were different schools of thought about literary criticism; each would constitute an interpretive community that taught distinct values and meanings. Such values and meanings became reading practices, in which audiences would pay particular attention to some aspects of the book, while ignoring (or downplaying) others. In this way, then, they focused on different aspects of the content in the book. As an example, one community of literary criticism might focus on narrative structure,

while another might stress the importance of metaphor. Adherents to these different communities would then focus on different aspects of the novel.

Later, Lindloff (1988) and Machin and Carrithers (1996) worked to adapt the notion of interpretive community to mass communication research. In both cases, the researchers examined the ways in which interpretive communities, and subsequent interpretive strategies, shaped the construction of mass media content and genres. Their research stresses that audience engagement with texts shapes the meaning making process. Eating food, drinking alcohol, and conversing with friends all shape the meanings associated with television programs and movies; such activities, then, play a large role in the construction of genres. When people go to a horror movie, it is expected that they will jump and scream, which would otherwise be taboo while attending a romantic comedy. Such jumping and screaming while reading the text is part of the meaning making for the audience, and shapes the overarching genre of “horror.” For Fish, Lindloff, and Machin and Carrithers, the process of reading is just as important to the meanings as the symbols and language used within a text—perhaps even more so.

This idea was later utilized in research conducted by Rauch (2007), in which she revealed specific reading strategies utilized by audiences to determine whether media were alternative or mainstream. In her research, Rauch conducted focus groups with activist audiences of alternative media, and began each by asking participants to watch an episode from *ABC World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*. After watching the initial episode, she asked the members of the focus group whether they would call the program alternative or mainstream, and to explain their rationale. Overwhelmingly, the members of the different focus groups stated that they did not believe that the program was alternative media. They explained that for media to be alternative, such media must entail the following: “a non-profit and non-commercial orientation; a commitment to social change through education; and a decentralized or non-hierarchical organization that encourages participation” (1001). In this way, then, media—like the programming on National Public Radio or Fox News—could be interpreted by audiences and activists as alternative. This is significant, as past research by Atton (2002; 2004) and Downing (2001) defines alternative media in terms of production or content. For Rauch, the meaning making processes of the audience is what makes media “alternative” to the mainstream.

Atkinson and Berg (2019) also hint at the notion of interpretive strategies, through their research concerning alternative media utilized by Tea Party activists. In that research, they analyzed content regularly used by activists affiliated with Tea Party organizations. They note that the dominant themes about “purity” in media, like RedState.com, helped those activists to interpret and understand conservative candidates competing for the Republican Party nomination in 2012. In this case, then, the frames and critical language utilized in those titles served as learned, inherited strategies that were taken for granted—and not the specific reading practices described by Rauch. In many ways, this was similar to the development of political and resistance identity constructed through reading alternative media described in past research (e.g., Atton, 2002; Meikle, 2002). For Atkinson and Berg, the lessons from RedState.com and other conservative titles helped the activists to scrutinize Republican candidates for political office. The process of “reading” a candidate (e.g., their speeches, performances in public, voting record) was guided by the themes they engaged with through alternative media. Essentially, the Tea Party organizations constituted an interpretive community, and their engagement with alternative

media taught them specific interpretive strategies to read and understand mainstream political communication.

The research conducted by Rauch, as well as Atkinson and Berg, help to illustrate the important role of interpretive strategies within activist communities. Indeed, Atkinson and Berg—as well as Atkinson et al (2017) help to illustrate the role of interpretive strategies in bridging activist communities and mainstream political campaign communication. However, as general audiences are increasingly being inundated by activist messages through broadcast media and social media, as well as the convergence of mainstream politics and alternative media, we looked to explore the interpretive strategies used by non-activists to make sense of those messages. As we set out to conduct our study, we asked the following research question: How do student audiences make sense of different “political” ads? We took particular interest in whether audiences differentiate between kinds of political ads (campaign ads and activist produced ads), or whether they conflate them.

### Method

In order to answer the guiding research question, we engaged in focus groups (e.g., Atkinson, 2017; Fontana and Frey, 2005) with non-activist students enrolled in a communication theory course at a mid-sized university in a state in the upper Midwest of the United States considered to be a “swing-state.” We recruited twenty-five students from Communication courses to take part in seven focus groups, which were held in October and November of 2018 (at the height of the midterm elections held that year). All of the students were offered extra credit in their courses for their participation. The students ranged in age from 18-23 years old. Thirteen of the students were male, and 12 were female. Nineteen of the students described themselves as white, while five noted that they were African-American or black, and one stated that they were Latino of Mexican heritage. Ten of the students considered themselves to be politically independent or centrist, while five noted that they were conservative (two of which were affiliated with the Republican Party), and 10 described themselves as liberal (six of which were affiliated with the Democratic Party). All of the focus groups that we put together were generally mixed in terms of gender, race, and political leaning or affiliation.

Overall, these focus groups were structured similarly to those conducted by Rauch (2007) in her study regarding the interpretations of alternative media. Before beginning the focus group, we asked each of the students to fill out a survey that addressed basic demographic and political information (e.g., age, ethnicity, political affiliations, political leaning). Afterwards, the students watched nine different advertisements; six were overtly “political” in nature, while three were public service announcements that did not address obvious political or politicized issues. Three of the overtly political ads were produced by activist organizations. One was produced by the group Animals Australia, which explained the cruelty associated with the production of meats like pork. Another was produced by Amnesty International and advocated for immigrants seeking political asylum. A final activist ad was produced by Greenpeace, and urged audiences to contact their legislatures and tell them to support legislation limiting plastic bottles. Three other ads were campaign ads made for the 2014 midterm elections, featuring candidates for offices in different regions of the country. In these ads, the candidates were described in positive terms exhibiting their connections to community and caring nature; all three ads adhered to Trent, Friedenbergh, and Denton’s (2015) advertising category of virtue ads. The final three ads were public service announcements that addressed the following issues: smoking, texting and

driving, and cyber-bullying. All of the students were given paper on which they could take notes and write additional materials.

After watching these ads, the students were asked a series of questions to generate discussion (e.g., What did you learn from watching these ads? What stood out to you in each of these ads?). In the first few focus groups that we conducted, we found that the students would create categories to discuss the nine ads that they had watched. These categories helped them to group ads together and describe what they had in common. In later focus groups, we then adopted this categorization into our questions; we asked the students to build a system of categories from the ads, and place each of the ads within one of those categories. They were asked to write them down or map them out on the sheets of paper that they had been given for note taking. In addition, we asked the students to fully define their categories and describe them to the group. Overall, each of the focus group sessions were roughly 30-45 minutes long. Once all of the focus groups were completed, we transcribed them and engaged in thematic analysis (e.g., Guest, 2012; Saldana, 2009) looking for patterns in the ways students described reading—and making sense of—the ads that they had watched.

## Findings

Overall, our analysis of the focus group discussions provide insight concerning four important interpretive strategies utilized by the students: 1) campaigns = political, 2) analytical reading, 3) social value, and 4) honesty. The first three interpretive strategies were demonstrated by all of the participants in the focus groups, while participants who identified as conservative in the surveys utilized the last (e.g., honesty). It is the last interpretive strategy that proves to be quite important, as it creates two different visions of campaign ads for the students. The following pages provide information regarding these different interpretive strategies, followed by a description of the emergent categories developed by the students based on their reading of them.

### *Campaigns = Political*

The first interpretive strategy that was demonstrated from student discussions about the advertisements was the notion that campaigns or elected office were integral for something to be “political.” Essentially, this was demonstrated in the categories the students developed for the nine ads that they watched. As noted earlier, the students were asked to build a categorization system, and then place each of the ads into a specific category. For the most part, the notion of something as “political” was tied to campaigning for an elected office—despite the fact that there were additional “political” ads produced by activist organizations. Indeed, the Greenpeace ad implored audiences to contact elected officials or legislators; that ad, however, was never categorized as “political.” Almost all of the students constructed one category that would be called “political”, in which they would place only the three campaign ads.

One of the students in the fourth focus group illustrated the interpretive strategy commonly utilized in the categorization system by most of the students. In this instance, the group was asked what made an ad political, to which the student responded: “I think when a lot of people think of political things, they think of government. Of things that directly relate to government as opposed to kind of, other things. Things that the government effects.” In the fifth focus group, another student made the same connection when they noted that an ad is political when “they mention some type of political word, like ‘Senate’ or ‘Congress.’” Similarly, another student in the seventh focus group explained that something is political “when [the ad] comes out and says

they're running for Senate.”

The categories that were developed were heavily influenced by this particular strategy of interpretation. For instance, in the sixth focus group, one of the students categorized the advertisements in the following way: sad, call to action, and politics. The category of “sad” was based on the reliance on strong emotional appeals to create a sense of sadness for the audience (treatment of animals, plight of immigrants), while the category of “call to action” emerged from the producers description of “something that needed to get done” (quit smoking, remove plastic bottles from beaches and oceans). Finally, the “political” category included the campaign ads, for many of the reasons described above. Another student in the same focus group constructed the following categories: kids, animal cruelty, emotions, and political. The first category involved the different ads that featured children in some way (the anti-smoking, and cyber-bullying PSAs), while the second category was based on harm to animals (the ads produced by Greenpeace, and Animals Australia). The third ad was defined in terms of the use of strong emotional appeals in some ads (the Amnesty ad about immigration and the texting and driving PSA). Like the case above, the “political” category included the campaign ads since the candidates were running for elected office.

In the seventh focus group, one of the students categorized the ads in the following way: Animal danger, dangers in society, and political ads. The first category emerged from the student's focus on animals in some of the ads, while the second category was constructed from their attention to the dangers that are faced by people in modern society (cyber-bullying, texting and driving). Finally, like in other focus groups, there was a category of “political,” which focused on candidates and campaigns. Similarly, another student in that same focus group used these categories: health, global problems, safety, and political ads. The categorization utilized by this student followed the same patterns noted above.

What is particularly interesting is that not all of the students defined “political” in this way. In a few cases, students described the notion of “political” in a broad way that would include the activist produced ads (as well as, potentially, the public service announcements). In one case during the fourth focus group, one of the students explained what made an ad “political”:

I think anything that will cause political, social, economic or legal changes. So if it effects the way the government is run, how citizens go about their lives, or how corporations and other business outlets are handled. I think that makes [an ad] political.

This student was not alone in such a definition. However, what we found interesting was that this student (and the others who shared similar definitions) created a category called “political” and then placed the three campaign ads therein; they did not include any of the activist produced ads—or PSAs. What is more, throughout the discussion, after they provided their broad definition, each would always refer to the candidate ads as “political,” but not any of the other ads. In this way, then, they still adhered to the same interpretive strategy demonstrated by all of the other students who had described politics in terms of campaigns.

### *Analytical Reading*

The second interpretive strategy that we uncovered was a strong media literacy that informed an analytical reading of the advertisements. In the case of campaign ads, such reading often created



a sense of trepidation, or even skepticism. Essentially, the students demonstrated the vocabulary and ability to critically evaluate media content that they consumed (e.g., Potter, 2010). This media literacy, as an interpretive strategy, was based on students' past experiences with advertisements and political campaigns. Such a critical examinations of media texts has been demonstrated in past research concerning alternative media audiences, who develop a deep, cynicism concerning the role of advertising and commercial media in society (Rauch, 2014); similar, critical views were expressed by students in this research. For the most part, they viewed themselves to be mostly immune to those negative impacts, as they were capable of critically examining such mediated messages (see Rauch, 2010). Whether they were, in fact, actually immune to such messages was not evident in the discussions. Over the years, all of the participants had built an understanding of the ways that advertisements function in society. In particular, their years living in a swing state in US politics had provided them with particularly sophisticated insight into campaigns and campaign ads. In this way, they were able to see the same commercial practices and advertising repeated in their lives. As one of the students explained: "I'll play this game that, 'Oh, look! Another political commercial! I guarantee I can tell you whatever he's about to say.'" All of the students demonstrated the ability to discern different forms of evidence, the use of emotional appeals, and the role of imagery in evoking particular responses from the audience. In addition, the students were quite aware of the economics of advertising and business, and understood how those factors influence media content. Throughout the focus group, the students would discuss the effectiveness or style of the ads, often critiquing the use of emotional appeals or the development of arguments. In particular, their media literacy was the foundation for analytical reading of advertising in general, as well as tactics and practices associated with political campaigning.

In terms of the first, many of the students noted that they were aware that advertisers used strong emotional appeals in order to persuade, or even manipulate, audiences. In one focus group discussion, a student noted the following in regard to business, advertising, and economics: "...because I know it's a business. [Advertisers] do what they can do to get the most money with the least amount of cost. And it's an issue, but it just doesn't effect me, I guess." In addition to their understanding of advertising as a business, the students were often aware that one of the chief business practices involved the use of images and communication to "get you involved emotionally." In one instance, a student noted that these emotional appeals are used to "pull on your heart strings," while another referred to these practices as "advertising tricks." Many of the students even lamented the notion that such emotional appeals were utilized to create a sense of guilt for audiences. As one student explained:

[The ads] were really driving with the guilt, I think. Everyone had a story to tell and it was not necessarily a happy story or a happy way a problem could be solved. It wasn't like "listen, you're doing this, you need to fix it, cause there's animals dying, there's people dying, there's kids getting in crisis from texting and driving." So, they have a very negative outlook I think.

Similarly, another student said of all of the ads: "...they all kind of have like a guilt trip with them. It's just kind of sad." For many of the students, advertisements could be manipulative, persuading people to purchase or do things that they may not have otherwise done. However, many of them, like the one quoted above, felt that they were immune from these advertising

“tricks” and manipulations, which corresponds with past research concerning third person effects (e.g., Andsager and White, 2007).

The students also demonstrated analytical reading of political campaigning. Like noted above, such reading emerged from two repeated experiences students had over the years living in a political “swing-state.” First, many of the participants had observed extremely negative campaign advertising over the years. These observations led many of them to understand that political campaigning, and political campaign ads, are often “nasty” and grounded in character attacks. For instance, one of the students explained the following when discussing campaign ads:

But a lot of times, when [campaign ads] are bashing on other people—I don’t really care for that. I don’t want to hear why we should hate somebody. I would rather everyone hear why we should enjoy somebody or something like that. So I don’t like political videos if they bash other people.

Many of the students understood that campaign ads were not inherently negative or “nasty,” but as campaigns progressed during election season there was a tendency for the messages to become negative. In addition, many of the students also felt that the negativity of the campaigns and campaign ads carried over into relationships. Multiple students described instances in which they felt that friends or family became too involved in particular candidates, or they were too invested in seeing a candidate defeated. In one of the focus groups, a student explained the following:

There are some people who even I know personally who take it too seriously, and they ruin friendships and ruin relationships. I mean it’s good to know what’s going on, but I don’t think I’ll ever get too involved to where it ruins my life or anything like that. Like I said, it ruins friendships, and could easily be prevented.

For the most part, students had observed that campaign rituals involved the eventual use of negative attack ads like those described by Trent, Friedenberg, and Denton (2015). This observation created a sense of trepidation, or even dread, concerning campaign ads specifically and political campaigning in general.

Overall, analytical reading stood as an important interpretive strategy utilized by all of the students in their efforts to read and understand the different ads that they watched at the beginning of the focus groups. In particular, strong media literacy constructed from experience and observations of advertisements and political campaigns made them aware of some negative aspects associated with each. Although they did not see advertising or campaigning as inherently evil or negative, they understood that there could be negative aspects with each. They understood that advertisements often utilized emotional appeals in order to persuade or sell which could be manipulative in nature. They also felt that political campaigns could become negative or focus on character attacks. In this way, then, the students believed that it was important to be mindful of these forms of communication in society or else they might be taken advantage of.

### *Social Value*

The next important interpretive strategy that we discovered through our thematic analysis was a perception that activists have significant value in society. Like analytical reading noted above, this interpretive strategy seemed to be utilized by most, if not all, of the students in the focus groups. Unlike analytical reading, however, this sense of value developed from generalized beliefs about activists, rather than experiences or observations in the past. There were two primary beliefs about activists that were instrumental to the development of this notion of value: activists want to make the world a better place and they are passionate. Taken together, these generalized beliefs created the perception that activists held important value to society.

In reference to the first foundational belief, the students often noted that they felt that activists worked to promote social change. In multiple cases, the students referred to the activists who would have produced the Greenpeace and Amnesty International ads as “fighters” or “fighting to create change.” In one instance, the focus group turned to a conversation about what makes someone an activist. In that conversation, one student noted that it was a desire to create change that made the producers of particular ads activists: “Even these groups say they just want to make a good change in the long run... I think what they’ve been doing is the best they can do to help the society to be better.” In addition, other students noted that activists were people “who wanted to get something done” or “make a difference” or “creating awareness.” What is more, one of the students in the first focus group noted that the activist ads (Greenpeace, Amnesty International, and Animals Australia) were more “serious” than the other ads that they had watched. Similarly, in the second focus group, one of the students called the activist ads more “important” than the others.

In reference to the second foundational belief, students discussed the “passion” that drove many activists. That is to say, they believed that activists were motivated by their deep concern about problems that they saw going on around them in society. In many ways, this made them quite different from other, commercial advertisers. Business-oriented advertisements were designed to make profit, or get people to buy products that they may not need. In addition, such passion made the activists different from candidates for office; those campaign advertisements were aimed at winning votes, or winning an election. Profit and victory were seen as less altruistic or caring than the passionate work of activists. This notion of passion was best expressed by one of the students in the fifth focus group that we conducted, when they discussed what made someone an activist:

Somebody who is passionate about something—about anything in their life that they will go out of their way to promote, to act upon, and to encourage. So, whether that be good or bad, you could be a good and a bad activist, but somebody that’s passionate about something and wants to create change.

Overall, the two foundational beliefs held by the students about activists constructed the perception that such advocates for change had a social value. In this way, then, the activist ads that were viewed in the focus group were seen as efforts to create change or fight for people or creatures that were disadvantaged. These beliefs were general and did not seem to arise from experiences or observations that they had made in the past. This stood in contrast to the analytical reading noted above, which emerged from media literacy that came from the students’

observations of campaigns and ads over the years. The two general beliefs allowed for the students—conservative and liberal alike—to view the activists ads as having some social value. Considering that the groups who produced those ads could easily be labeled as liberal, it is interesting that conservatives would see those ads as having some “value” in society. It should be noted, that those conservative students did not agree with the ads, but rather suggested in their commentary that the discourse had some social value.

### *Honesty*

The final interpretive strategy utilized by students to make sense of the different advertisements involved the honesty of political candidates—or more precisely, the lack of honesty on their part. Unlike the previous two interpretive strategies that were largely used by most of the students, this one was only utilized by students who identified themselves as conservatives in the written survey taken prior to the focus group. Students who identified as liberal, independent, centrist, or non-political did not display the same view of political candidates as inherently dishonest, or untrustworthy. These questions of honesty emerged when conservative students discussed the three ads that featured candidates for political office. All three of these ads were from the northwestern US. Two of the ads featured a male state senator running for re-election, while the third was about a woman running for the US Senate.

This question of honesty emerged from suspicions concerning the intentions of political candidates or politicians who hold some elected office. Such suspicion was made evident from a discussion in the second focus group. In that instance, one of the students explained the following:

I mean politics—not every politician is [dishonest], but some of them, they want to get that ad time. They want to get your vote. And they want to get your attention. Sometimes it's not always for the right thing.

In the fifth focus group, another conservative student made a similar statement. In this instance, the student noted that these honesty issues were less about one or two individual political candidates for office (e.g., bad apples), and a cultural problem in “politics”:

I just feel as if it's so ingrained in our culture. Like, lying is such a big thing. So why am I supposed to believe these people? Like, how—why aren't you just emphasizing things? So when it comes to telling personal experiences, I just have a hard time believing them. So it's just not effective to me.

Over and over again, throughout the focus groups, conservative students would consistently describe candidates in this way: as liars or dishonest. This proved to be significant; it was different from the discussions and responses of the liberal and centrist students. In those cases, the liberal and centrist students would acknowledge that political campaigns often turn negative or even nasty. In fact, those students praised the nature of the campaign ads prior to discussion, as all three adhered to Trent, Friedenberg and Denton's (2015) category of virtue ads. In those cases, the students felt that candidates themselves were not inherently bad or dishonest. The conservative students, conversely, saw it a different way. It was not the nature of political campaigns that was rough, negative, or nasty; rather, it was the candidates themselves that were

the problem.

Ultimately, the students who participated in our research utilized three key interpretive strategies to read and make sense of the different advertisements that they watched. All of the students conflated the notion of “politics” with campaigns and candidates for political office, while they de-politicized all of the other ads. In addition, these interpretive strategies created a significant sense of trepidation concerning political campaigns, and even serious distrust for political candidates on the part of conservative students. Conversely, all of the students seemed quite willing to accept—or at least respect—the advertisements produced by different activist organizations. These interpretive strategies influenced the ways in which all of the students categorized the ads that they viewed. What is more, these interpretive strategies constructed the “political” campaign ads featuring candidates for elected office in very different ways.

The most interesting advertisement that the students viewed featured a woman running for the US Senate in the Pacific Northwest, which helps to illustrate important points raised above. The ad starts with a woman explaining that she had an ultra-sound that detected a birth defect with her unborn child. Initially doctors told her that there was nothing that could be done and that her child would not survive. As tears stream down her face, she explains that the candidate for US Senate—a medical doctor—came to her and told her that she could perform a surgery that would save her baby. At that point, she notes that the doctor has the qualities to make a good Senator, and if all of Washington were like her the country would be a better place.

What makes this ad so interesting is the way in which it was read one way by students at first, and then another. Most of the students initially thought that the ad was about abortion; it wasn’t until half-way through it that they were able to discern that it was a campaign ad. One of the students explained this as they described their reactions to the ad:

I wasn’t expecting that [ad] to be political—like a super political [ad] at first. So it was kind of surprising there at the end when she’s like, “Okay, vote for me.” I assumed her to just be a doctor. I thought there was going to be an abortion. Or something else like that at first.

Similarly, another student noted the following: “...you’d think that it’s an abortion commercial, and then it’s like—wow! This person is a doctor trying to run for something in politics.” Such commentary was typical across all of the focus groups. However, once students realized that it was a campaign ad, there was significant division in how it was read and understood. Among the liberal or centrist students, there was a sense that this was a “good” campaign ad. For the most part, these students felt the ad had risen above the more negative strategies and attacks common of political campaign materials. For instance, one student in the second focus group explained the following:

She was crying about her baby and everything, and it turned out to be more positive. It seemed like they tried to get your attention by taking a negative connotation, and trying to flip your idea with a positive tone... I liked that.

The ad, then, was a positive experience and defied the observations that were the foundation of

the trepidation many students developed from their analytical reading of political campaigns.

Conversely, the conservative students read this Senate ad in a considerably different way. Rather than seeing it as positive, as it had addressed positive virtues of the candidate, they questioned her honesty. Many asked whether or not she was being fake simply to win votes. In the third focus group, one of the conservative students noted the following:

I feel like, on the trust [ad] with the doctor. I feel like it took a weird turn only because she is talking about how she is a doctor. And then they use that as why she—why you should vote for her. Because she does things with integrity. And she cares for the people. I don't think it really has a lot to do with what she would do. What she was running for.

Another conservative student claimed, "I just can't stand commercials [like this]. I just feel like they're kind of fake. Just because they bring forth their best quality. But are they really like that?" In these cases, the positive spin of the ad did not matter. For these students, it was assumed that the doctor was not at all interested in the well-being of babies or patients, but only concerned with winning votes; they saw her as a liar, and the ad as a lie.

## Discussion

The focus groups that we conducted demonstrated key interpretive strategies utilized by the students in the reading of political advertisements. One of these strategies, analytical reading, was more of an explicit strategy (e.g., Rauch, 2007), while the others were inherited or learned strategies (e.g., Atkinson & Berg, 2019; Atton, 2002; Meikle, 2003). These interpretive strategies prove to be important—as well as advance literature concerning alternative and activist media—in three valuable ways. First, the student discussions demonstrate that there were interpretive strategies utilized by the students to read and understand the advertisements that they watched. These interpretive strategies helped them to craft the different categories that they developed, similar to the shaping of genre described in past research (Lindloff, 1988; Machin and Carrithers, 1996). Although there were significant differences in the ways that they categorized the activist produced ads and PSAs, there was uniformity in their categorization of the campaign ads; all such ads were marked as "political." Most importantly, the other ads—including those produced by the activist organizations like Greenpeace—were not seen as political. In many ways, then, such ads were depoliticized, as they were not campaign oriented, or associated with elected, government offices. Campaign ads became somewhat problematic messages for the students, as they were marked by the simultaneous skepticism regarding advertising, as well as trepidation or dread of campaigns for elected office.

Second, most of the students seemed willing to embrace activist messages or at least read those messages as genuine or guided by passionate concerns. For the most part, this interpretive strategy reflects a long-held general belief that activism has proven necessary for the promotion of equality (e.g., Lucas, 1980; Tilly, 2002), and that alternative media promote democratic discourse (e.g., Lievrouw, 2011; McMillian, 2011). Such positive meanings associated with both seem to have contributed to students' view of the activist produced ads in particularly positive ways—even when the positions or goals of the activist organizations were in opposition to their own political beliefs. It was quite interesting that many of the conservative students viewed the pro-immigration and pro-refugee advertisement produced by Amnesty International in such a

positive light. However, as noted above, they did not necessarily agree with the message; rather they believed that the message came from genuine passion and concern about immigrants and refugees in the world.

Finally, the focus groups revealed diverging interpretive strategies utilized by the students to read and make sense of the campaign ads. The more liberal and centrist students read those ads and understood them in terms of the trepidation that generally arose from the analytical reading that the students had demonstrated. The conservative students, however, read and understood those advertisements using more specific interpretive strategies that associated candidates and the government with meanings like “dishonesty” or “liar.” Such meanings like these have long been associated with content and information circulated through conservative or right-wing alternative media (Atkinson and Berg, 2019; Wojcieszak, 2009). Past research has demonstrated that ideas like these have circulated through right-wing alternative media sites in Europe and the United States that influenced conservative discourse and entered mainstream news through conservative politics in recent years (e.g., Benkler, Roberts and Zuckerman, 2017; Marwick and Lewis, 2016; Smith, 2007). Although we never asked questions of the students regarding their affiliation with activist organizations or use of alternative media, it is a distinct possibility that conservative students were applying what they had learned from the so-called echo chambers of right-wing alternative media.

Ultimately, the focus group research that we conducted provided limited insight concerning college students’ interpretive strategies at one university in a Midwest swing state. Despite such narrow focus, the research that we have conducted helps to support past research that has explored the increasing intersections between activism, alternative media, and mainstream political communication (e.g., Atkinson and Berg, 2019; Atkinson et al, 2017; Benkler, Roberts and Zuckerman, 2017; Marwick and Lewis, 2016; Smith, 2007). In addition, the focus groups also help to address one of the guiding questions for this research noted at the beginning of this essay: why have voters been so willing to entertain such political outsiders? In the case of the students with whom we engaged in the focus groups, those messages that were “political” were interpreted as problematic, regardless of political affiliation of the students. Liberal or centrist students viewed political campaigning, in general, with a sense of unease, while conservative students viewed political actors as dishonest and untrustworthy. Activist ads, however, were interpreted in more positive ways by all of the students. In this way, then, it would seem that traditional political actors seeking office are at a disadvantage; students like those in the focus group would view their mediated messages with skepticism, or blunt antagonism. Conversely, non-traditional political actors, particularly those seen more like activists, would be viewed in a positive manner—even if those actors and their messages stood in opposition to the students’ political affiliations. It should come as no surprise, then, that people continue to embrace non-traditional political actors like Donald Trump or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. The findings of this research can potentially add to the emerging literature concerning the increased role of activism and alternative media in mainstream politics. This would correspond with those studies that have determined that activist language and media has increasingly bridged into mainstream political communication (e.g., Atkinson and Berg, 2019; Atkinson et al, 2017; Bhat and Vasudevan, 2019; Grigoryan and Suetzl, 2019) and the convergence of mainstream and alternative media (e.g., Kenix, 2011; Rauch, 2019). Future research needs to examine the origins of these interpretive strategies more closely, and determine whether alternative media have in fact

contributed to them—and if so, how expansive are such interpretive communities.

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