NEW STUDY ON ENGAGEMENT WITH POLITICAL NEWS POSTS ON FACEBOOK: POSITIVE POLITICAL IMAGES EARN REACTIONS; COVERAGE OF ISSUES PROMPTS COMMENTS AND REACTIONS

Austin, TX – June 28, 2018 – Social media play an important role in generating traffic to news organizations' websites. With respect to politics, however, it is not clear what drives Facebook engagement. In the Center for Media Engagement's most recent study, researchers sought to investigate what works to generate more Facebook engagement by studying two aspects of political coverage: the positivity or negativity of news headlines and images, and the focus of news headlines on issues (e.g. education, the economy, etc.) or campaign strategy (e.g. polls and candidate maneuvering to secure votes).

In partnership with a national news organization and the social media testing platform Naytev, the Center for Media Engagement conducted 118 tests on Facebook that garnered 2,670,886 impressions during the 2016 primary and general election campaigns. Researchers analyzed what predicts clicks, comments, and reactions (e.g., like, love, haha, wow, sad, and angry).

Different combinations of political images and headlines were distributed as Sponsored Posts on Facebook. All images and headlines accurately reflected the news content contained in the article.

The findings show that negative images increased clicks, whereas positive images increased reactions. Study results also indicate that issue-focused headlines reduced clicks, but increased reactions and comments.

"These results are challenging because research shows that negative and strategic coverage can increase political cynicism. Our findings show that this content also generates clicks," said Talia Stroud, director of the Center for Media Engagement.

"A focus on engagement, such as comments and reactions, yields a different pattern," Stroud continued, "Coverage of issues and more favorable headlines boosts reactions, and in some cases, comments. It is our hope that journalists focus on this particular finding."

"The results suggest that newsrooms should be thoughtful about what types of engagement they value most," said Ashley Muddiman, research associate at the Center for Media Engagement and assistant professor in communication studies at the University of Kansas. "We also encourage newsrooms to test out different kinds of content to see what works best for their own audiences."

Other findings include:

- Commenting was unaffected by positive/negative images. The number of comments did not vary depending on whether a positive or negative image was used.

- The positivity or negativity of the headline made no difference in clicking, commenting, or reacting.

Though these findings may make it tempting to increase the use of negative images and strategy-focused headlines to boost clicks, there are additional considerations:

- Decades of scholarly studies suggest that strategy and negative political coverage can have a detrimental effect on news audiences, ranging from political cynicism to decreased trust in the media and political institutions.

- Facebook's algorithm prioritizes commenting and reacting in addition to clicks, meaning that focusing solely on clicks misses the full potential of the platform.

- If a newsroom's goal is to generate a more engaged social media audience, then positive images and issue content may be the way to go.

Note: This preliminary report is being shared prior to academic publication to encourage discussion and suggestions for revision.

The Center for Media Engagement, part of the Moody College of Communication at The University of Texas at Austin, provides research-based techniques for engaging digital audiences in commercially viable and democratically beneficial ways. Learn more at mediaengagement.org