

# Bridging the Divide

## Session 2 of 2: Maintaining Political Discourse on Social Media

### The Bonner Community Engagement Curriculum

#### Overview:

Participation in deliberative political discourse with others of diverse political backgrounds has become more and more challenging, especially in the digital age and the prevalence and challenge that social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and others open, constructive political dialogue. This training aims to inform and give participants a chance to learn vital deliberative dialogue and discourse skills, the importance of those skills, and how they may be able to apply them to their everyday lives, especially in online dialogue. This second session is specifically geared continuing the skills learned in the first session and applying them to the tendencies developed across online discussions through social networking platforms that inhibit healthy political discourse from occurring.

#### Category:

Civic Engagement, Diversity, Professional Development, Interpersonal Development, Personal Development

#### Level:

Suitable for all levels (introductory to advanced). Recommended to do at least twice as a training per class cohort.

#### Recommended

#### Bonner Sequence:

This training is recommended for all levels of a Bonner Program, but has introductory and personal growth material that may be useful and necessary for underclassmen.



The brief time of this session should allow it to be facilitated during class meetings.

This training is recommended as part of

the Dialogue Across Diversity and Inclusion 4x4 model, Stage 2: Understanding or Stage 3: Application and Discussion.



All Levels

Dialogue Across Diversity and Inclusion 4x4 Student Developmental Model			
Stage 1: Exposure	Stage 2: Understanding	Stage 3: Application and Discussion	Stage 4: Adaptation
			

### Goals of this Training:

The goals of this training are as follows:

- To teach participants how they can teach themselves to become more conscious of the kind of information they are surrounding themselves with.
- To show participants that the kind of content they view on social media significantly influences their political stances and leanings.

### Materials:

- Personal computers, tablets, phones, or anything that can access social networking sites (participants will be evaluating their own social media pages)
- Paper (enough for each participant)
- Pens
- "Assessing My Digital Self" Handout on page 9 (enough copies for each participant)
- Enough copies of the article for each participant for reading activity, or the link prepared to email digital copies to participants
- Slideshare Presentation: <https://www.slideshare.net/BonnerFoundation/bridging-the-divide-78932872>

### Preparation:

The preparation necessary for this first session of the overall training is as follows:

- Find a good space with computer and projector accessibility for the powerpoint of this training session.
- Read through the article provided on pages 10-14,
  - "Did Social Media Ruin Election 2016?" by Sam Sanders; this article observes the nature of political discourse on varying social media platforms and how they could have possibly affected the perception of the electorate. It comes from a point of view that enforces self-reflection and self-involvement in facilitating this phenomenon.

- Become familiar with all script aspects of this training guide; they are all denoted in italics and quotations.
- Read through some of the attached references to this training guide under “Credits” before starting. Specifically, “How Social Media is Ruining Politics” by Nicholas Carr, “The Political Environment on Social Media” by the Pew Research Center, and “How Important is Discourse to Social Change? Case: Microblogging Community Tumblr” by Caroline Hargreaves. These will all give the facilitator an insight to the scholarship behind this training.
- Gather all materials above. Make sufficient copies of “Assessing My Digital Self” Handout on page 9, and the article on pages 10-14, respectively, for the Reading activity.

### Brief Outline:

This second session is intended to go in conjunction with the first session of the overarching training on deliberative political dialogue. These activities focus on self-reflection and evaluation, as well as critically thinking about how social media has changed our society’s political discourse. This session should last approximately 60 minutes.

1) Introduction	suggested time 10 minutes
2) Assessment of the Digital Social Self	suggested time 20 minutes
3) Article Reading Activity	suggested time 10 minutes
4) Reflection	suggested time 15 minutes
5) Conclusion and Takeaways	suggested time 5 minutes

### Part 1) Introduction

Suggested time: 10 minutes

Facilitator must:

1. Begin powerpoint presentation at the introductory slide with “Session 2” in the title. Leave the presentation on this slide until debrief of activity 2.
2. Welcome participants and thank them for their time.
3. Introduce yourself as the facilitator.
4. Give the title of the training and read the following to present the purpose of it:
 

*“Welcome to Session 2 of the Bridging the Divide Training. Today we will be evaluating our personal social media accounts and how they are able to influence our political stances and thoughts. We will discuss how it has changed the nature of political discourse today and what we can do to make a greater claim on our discourse.”*

5. Set expectations of participation for the group.
6. Establish ground rules. Please establish the following to start out; it is suggested that these rules are written out on a large sticky note for future reference in the training.
  - *Please allow participants to suggest more ground rules that they would like added. Physically write these out on a common space (white board or large sticky*

### **Ground Rules**

Be respectful of every individual in the room and what their differing backgrounds may be.	Realize and accept that we may leave this room without a resolution to problems that may arise.
Agree to come into this with an open mind and the goal of understanding; do not attempt to persuade.	Ask questions and use "I" statements to draw from personal experiences; try not to represent larger groups.
Be curious and open.	Consciously move beyond stereotypes and assumptions.
If you want to be heard, be sure to listen.	Share speaking time.

*paper) so that they are present and available for reference during the training session.*

## **Part 2) Assessment of the Digital Social Self**

Suggested time: 20 minutes

1. Hand out to each of the participants the corresponding worksheet to go with this session, "Assessing My Digital Self," (page 9 of handouts)
2. Read the directions that are provided on the worksheet out loud to the participants and take any questions if they have them. Give them 10 minutes to finish this worksheet. This is the script for providing instructions:

*"Open up your personal computers or tablets to your most active social media platforms. Go through your posts for the last 2 months and take note of the kind of content you post. Then, for each of the corresponding statements, check the yes or no box if they apply to you currently or in the past.*

*Try to be as completely honest as you can. You will not have to share these results if you would not like to. This is just an assessment for yourself."*

\* If a participant does not have any kind of social media, ask them to still respond to the following questions based on their experiences watching the news on television or how they have experienced political discussions in their lives.

3. Once participants have completed their assessment chart, draw their attention to the power point to discuss some preliminary discussion questions and researched statistics published by the Pew Research center on social media and political discourse. With some of the prompting reflection questions, keep responses to a minimum so that the training may not run overtime.

Ask for a show of hands for responses on the the following questions which are also located on the powerpoint.

**(Facilitator asks from questions on powerpoint):**

**Change slide** *"Do you enjoy social media for political debates?"*

**Change slide** *"Or are you frustrated with social media's mix with politics?"*

- As facilitator, get a feel for the responses that these questions get and then read the following scripted piece:

*"The Pew Research Center conducted a study released in 2016 that gathered significant information on the Political Environment on Social Media based around its content, the nature of conversations, and uses by certain individuals. There is mixed feedback as to its usefulness or increasingly frustrating nature of the way that people present their political opinions online. Political conversations on different social media platforms are a normal occurrence now, but may be extremely difficult to navigate considering the relationships and friendships you may hold online as well as the frustration of opposing political stances. When they are this way, it makes for having healthy political discourse all the more difficult online as it is in person."*

- Facilitator, continue with the script:

*"Now that you are done with your own self-assessment, and we have seen what kinds of thoughts we have on social media and politics. Here are some of the observations the Pew Research Center found:"*

**Change slide and read the script below:**

*“More than one-third of social media users are worn out by the amount of political content they encounter.” [to participants] Pay attention to how many people find it to be stressful and frustrating to discuss politics with people that they disagree with and how many people realize that they find out they have less in common politically than they thought. [to participants] Are you worn out by the content you encounter?”*

**Change slide and read the script below:**

*“Many users see social media as an especially negative venue for political discussions, but others see it as simply ‘more of the same.’” [to participants] Pay attention to how many people find political discussions to be more angry. [to participants] How would you describe political discussions online?”*

**Change slide and read the script below:**

*“Majority of users find it stressful to talk politics on social media with people they disagree with politically.’ [to participants] Do you find it difficult to talk politics on social media with those you disagree with?”*

**Change slide and read the script below:** *“Posting offensive content is the main reason people block or remove others from their feeds because of politics.’ [to participants] Have you ever blocked someone or removed them from your feed because of politics?”*

**[to participants]** *“Can what we just assessed with ourselves, and what we learned from this research be a positive or negative thing for political discourse?”* (If no initial answers, prompt participants to recall the TedTalk by Malcom Glover and how it prevents us from making connections and seeking common goals.) **Leave slide until debrief of reading activity.**

4. Gather the attention of participants for the final activity.

### **Part 3) Article Reading Activity**

Suggested time: 10 minutes (or longer, dependent on facilitator)

1. The facilitator has the choice of either printing out the article for each participant to have or share a physical copy, or distribute the article link to them via email prior to the training session so as to save paper.

**“Did Social Media Ruin the Election 2016?” By Sam Sanders pages 10-14;**  
This article observes the nature of political discourse on varying social media

platforms and how they could have possibly affected the perception of the electorate. It comes from a point of view that enforces self-reflection and self-involvement in facilitating this phenomenon.

#### **Part 4) Reflection**

Suggested time: 15 minutes (or shorter, dependent on facilitator and article chosen)

Once participants are done reading the article, provide the following reflection questions (**Change slide on powerpoint to the "Reflection Questions"**)

*"What are your initial thoughts or questions on the article you just read?"*

*"Is there anything that stood out to you specifically in the article?"*

*"Do you agree with the article? Or do you have an opposing opinion about the article?"*

*"Thinking about how you conduct yourself on your own social media accounts, do you find yourself often perpetuating these cycles?"*

*"What can you do to be a more understanding online citizen?"*

*"How can you take what you learned in the past two trainings into your daily life?"*

*"How can we have the same deliberate political conversations online like we can in person?"*

#### **Part 5) Conclusion and Take-Aways**

Suggested time: 5 minutes

1. Thank participants for their attention and focus in the session. Allow them to ask any follow-up questions or leave any last minute comments to the rest of the group.
2. Provide them with any additional resources the facilitator may deem necessary.
3. Read the following before participants are dismissed out of the training:  
*"As you go on and continue to utilize the skills you have learned in your everyday encounters, remember your main objectives to understand and listen to others, and the vital role it plays in maintaining a healthy democracy."*

#### **Credits:**

Developed in 2017 by Jasmine Rangel, Bonner Alumna from Berry College. The following are references that helped guide the making and compilation of this training:

- **“Reaching Across the Red/Blue Divide”** framework from Maggie Herzig, John Sarrouf, and Essential Partners Inc.; <http://bonner.pbworks.com/w/file/113243707/Red-Blue%20Divide%20Guide.pdf> ; [www.whatisessential.org](http://www.whatisessential.org)
- <http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/10/25/the-political-environment-on-social-media/> **“The Political Environment on Social Media”** Research conducted by the Pew Research center on several aspects of social media’s involvement with politics. Several of these areas researched include type of content, candidate’s engagement with social media platforms, as well as the kind of tone with conversations online over political issues.
- <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/05/how-platforms-are-poisoning-conversations/524031/> **“How Platforms are Poisoning Conversations”** by Maeve Duggan. This article observes and elaborates on the implications that a growing political presence on social media has on people and what their opinions are of this new politically prevalent social media content.
- <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/09/2016-election-social-media-ruining-politics-213104> **“How Social Media is Ruining Politics”** by Nicholas Carr. Offers an interesting perspective on how social media has been utilized thus far and what some observable affects have been due to the rise in its use and engagement with politics.
- <http://www.npr.org/2016/11/08/500686320/did-social-media-ruin-election-2016> **“Did Social Media Ruin Election 2016?”** by Sam Sanders. Article observing the nature of political discourse on varying social media platforms and how they could have possibly affected the perception of the electorate. It comes from a point of view that enforces self-reflection and self-involvement in facilitating this phenomenon.

## Handouts:

The handouts for this training are as follows:

- **“Assessing My Digital Self” pg. 9**
- **“Did Social Media Ruin Election 2016?” By Sam Sanders pg. 10-14**
- **Facilitator’s PowerPoint Guide for Training (All sessions)**





# Assessing My Digital Self

---

**Directions:**

Open up your personal computers or tablets to your most active social media platforms. Go through your posts for the last 2 months and take note of the kind of content you post. Then, for each of the corresponding statements, check the yes or no box if they apply to you currently or in the past.

*Try to be as completely honest as you can. You will not have to share these results if you would not like to. This is just an assessment for yourself.*

Statements	Yes	No
I regularly post content that pertains to some social justice or political issue.		
I have blocked someone or unfriended someone because they posted something I did not agree with.		
I have participated in a heated political debate on one of my own or someone else's social media posts.		
Most of my friends generally agree with the social justice or political content that I post.		
I feel like I cannot discuss political issues with some people based on their social media posts on certain topics.		
I feel as though those I follow on social media are from a wide range of political backgrounds.		
I do not feel that there is anything wrong with who I follow or do not follow on social media.		



# Did Social Media Ruin Election 2016?

By: Sam Sanders

---

I've noticed two distinct ways social media have changed the way we talk to each other about politics. Clearly, they have changed a lot, maybe *everything*, but two fairly new phenomena stand out.

One happens on Facebook all the time. Just about all of your friends are posting about the election, nonstop. And there are a few who brag about deleting friends, or who urge friends to unfriend them over their political leanings: "Just unfriend me now." Or something like "If you can't support candidate X/Y, we don't need to be friends anymore." Or "Congrats, if you're reading this, you survived my friend purge!" Etc. You know how it goes. This public declaration, if not celebration, of the end of *friendships* because of politics.

And then on Twitter, there's the public shaming of those who dare disagree with or insult you. (I am guilty of this.) Someone tweets at you with something incendiary, bashing the article you just shared or the point you just made, mocking something you said about politics, calling you stupid. You quote the tweet, maybe sarcastically, to prove it doesn't affect you. But it does! You tweeted it back, to all of your followers. It's an odd cycle. A rebuttal of nasty political exchanges by highlighting nasty political exchanges.

This is our present political social life: We don't just create political strife for ourselves; we seem to revel in it.

When we look back on the role that sites like Twitter, Facebook (and Instagram and Snapchat and all the others) have played in our national political discourse this election season, it would be easy to spend most of our time examining Donald Trump's effect on these media, particularly [Twitter](#). It's been well-documented; Trump may very well have the [most combative online presence](#) of any candidate for president in modern history.

But underneath that glaring and obvious conclusion, there's a deeper story about how the very DNA of social media platforms and the way people use them has trickled up through our political discourse and affected all of us, almost *forcing* us to wallow in the divisive waters of our online conversation. And it all may have helped make Election 2016 one of the most unbearable ever.

## A problem with format

Fully understanding just how social media have changed our national political conversation means understanding what these platforms were initially intended to do, and how we use them now.

At its core, Twitter is a messaging service allowing users (who can remain anonymous) to tweet out information, or opinions, or whatever, in 140-character bursts. For many critics, that DNA makes Twitter antithetical to sophisticated, thoughtful political conversation.

"Both the technology itself, and the way we choose to use the technology, makes it so that what ought to be a conversation is just a set of Post-it notes that are scattered," Kerric Harvey, author of the *Encyclopedia of Social Media and Politics*, said of Twitter. "Not even on the refrigerator door, but on the ground."

She argues that what we do on Twitter around politics isn't a conversation at all; it's a loud mess.

Bridget Coyne, a senior manager at Twitter, points to several features the company has added to those 140-character tweets: polls, photos, video, Moments and more. She also told NPR that the 140-character limit reflects the app's start as a mobile-first platform, and that it's different now. "We've evolved into a website and many other platforms from that." And she, like every other spokesman for any major social media platform, argues that sites like Twitter have *democratized* the political conversation, helping give everyone a voice, and that's a good thing.

But even accepting that point, and respecting every new addition to Twitter's list of tools, we find a way to keep arguing. Even the candidates do it.

One particular exchange between Hillary Clinton and Jeb Bush (remember him?) illustrates this new political reality. On Aug. 10, 2015, Clinton's Twitter account posted a graphic with the words: "\$1.2 trillion, the amount 40 million Americans owe in student debt." Jeb Bush's campaign replied, tweaking Clinton's own graphic to read "100%, The increase in student debt under this Democratic White House."



Those two tweets seem reasonable enough. But there was more. In response to the Bush campaign's response, Team Clinton scratched out the words in Bush's redone graphic, added its own scribbled letters, and etched a large "F" on top, for the "grade given to Florida for college affordability under Jeb Bush's leadership." The campaign tweeted the image with the caption "Fixed it for you." And *then*, the Bush account replied once more, turning Clinton's "H" logo, with its right-pointing arrow, by 90 degrees, sending the arrow point skyward, with the word "taxes" printed behind over and over. That caption was "fixed your logo for you."



It was an exchange nearing petty; these two candidates were trolling each other. But for the most part it seemed totally normal in a campaign season like this one, and in the digital age in which we live. Establishment political figures like Bush and Clinton (or at least their young staffers) had co-opted the language of social media and mastered the formats, with all the snark and back and forth that come along with it, and with an extra incentive to adopt some of the meanness Trump has exhibited online.

There may be even more problems for Twitter than what real live people are doing on the app. A [recent study](#) conducted by a research team at Oxford University found that during the period of time between the first presidential debate and the second, one-third of pro-Trump tweets and nearly one-fifth of pro-Clinton tweets came from automated accounts. Douglas Guilbeault, one of the researchers in the study, told NPR that hurts political discourse. "They reinforce the sense of polarization in the atmosphere," he said. "Because bots don't tend to be mild-mannered, judicial critics. They are programmed to align themselves with an agenda that is unambiguously representative of a particular party. ... It's all 'Crooked Hillary' and 'Trump is a puppet.'"

So, if Twitter is a bunch of Post-it notes thrown on the ground, we now have to consider which of those notes are even *real*.

The company would not offer its own estimate on the number of bots on its app, or any on-the-record rebuttal to the study's findings, besides the following statement: "Anyone claiming that spam accounts on Twitter are distorting the national, political conversation is misinformed."

Even if there are questions about the number of bots on Twitter, the tone of the conversation there increasingly can't be denied. A recent [study from the Anti-Defamation League](#) found "a total of 2.6 million tweets containing language frequently found in anti-Semitic speech were posted across Twitter between August 2015 and July 2016," with many aimed at political journalists. And a Bloomberg [report](#) found trolling on the service is keeping the company from finding a buyer.

## Facebook and the "echo chamber"

Facebook fares no better in garnering scathing critique of its influence on the political conversation. At its core, it's a platform meant to connect users with people they already like, not to foster discussion with those you might disagree with.

Facebook's News Feed, which is how most users see content through the app and site, is more likely to prominently display content based on a user's previous interests, and it also conforms to his or her political ideology. [A Wall Street Journal interactive](#) from May of this year shows just how much your feed is affected by your political leanings.

The company also faced rebuke from conservatives when it tried to share trending news stories on users' home pages; they said the shared articles reflected a liberal bias. And after trying unsuccessfully to begin filtering out fake news stories from users' feeds, Facebook has been increasingly accused of becoming a hotbed of fake political news. The most recent allegation comes from a BuzzFeed report, which found that a good amount of fake — and trending — Donald Trump news is coming from business-savvy millennials. [In Macedonia](#).

In response to these critiques, Facebook pointed NPR to a September post from the company's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, in which he said, "Whatever TV station you might watch

Retrieved from: <http://www.npr.org/2016/11/08/500686320/did-social-media-ruin-election-2016>

or whatever newspaper you might read, on Facebook you're hearing from a broader set of people than you would have otherwise."

In that same post, Zuckerberg also pointed out studies showing that increasingly, more young people are getting their news primarily from sites like Facebook, and that young people have also said it helps them see a "larger and more diverse set of opinions." And Zuckerberg said the company is trying to do a better job of sifting out fake news.

Late last month, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg said Facebook had helped more than 2 million people register to vote.

### **It's not just the social networks**

Social networks are built the way they're built, but how we've used them this year says just as much about our shortcomings as about any particular network's flaws.

Data tracking trending topics and themes on social networks over the course of the campaign show that for the most part, America was less concerned with policy than with everything else. Talkwalker, a social media analytics company, found that the top three political themes across social media platforms during the past year were Trump's comments about women, Clinton's ongoing email scandal, and Trump's refusal to release his tax returns.

"Social media may have played a role in creating a kind of scandal-driven, as opposed to issue-driven, campaign," said Todd Grossman, CEO of Talkwalker Americas, "where topics such as Trump's attitude towards women, Trump's tax returns and Clinton's emails have tended to dominate discussion as opposed to actual policy issues."

And Brandwatch, another company that tracks social media trends, found that on Twitter, from the time Trump and Clinton formally began their campaigns for president, aside from conversation around the three presidential debates, only two policy-driven conversations were in their top 10 most-tweeted days. Those were Trump calling for a complete ban on Muslims entering the United States, and Trump visiting Mexico and delivering a fiery immigration speech in Arizona in the span of 24 hours. Brandwatch found that none of Clinton's 10 biggest days on Twitter centered on policy, save for the debates. (And even in that debate conversation, topics like "nasty woman" and "bad hombres" outpaced others.)

### **Looking to the future**

So we end this campaign season with social media platforms seemingly hardwired for political argument, obfuscation and division. We are a public more concerned with scandal than policy, at least according to the social media data. And our candidates for higher office, led by Trump, seem more inclined to adopt the combative nature of social media than ever before.

It's too late to fix these problems for this election, but a look to the social networks of tomorrow might offer some hope.

Snapchat has emerged as the social network of the future. Data from Public Opinion Strategies find that more than 60 percent of U.S. smartphone owners ages 18 to 34 are using Snapchat and that on any given day, Snapchat reaches 41 percent of all 18- to 34-year-olds in the U.S. Any hope for the social media discourse of the future may be found with them. Peter Hamby, head of news at Snapchat, says the platform is a "fundamentally different"

experience than other social media platforms, in part because, he says, on Snapchat, privacy is key. "I think that people want to have a place where they can communicate with their friends and have fun, but also feel safe," Hamby said.

He also said he is working on figuring out what young people want in a social network and how to make it better. And, he said, social media users increasingly want to rely on their social networks to make sense of the flood of political opinions, reporting and vitriol they're being bombarded with. "One thing that me and my team have tried to do," Hamby told NPR, "is explain the election. ... Because a lot of stuff you see on the Web, and TV, is pretty noisy."

In asking whether social media ruined this election or not, I had to ask myself how my actions on social media have helped or hurt the country's political dialogue — what my contribution to all that noise has been. I'd have to say that even when I've tried to help, I'm not sure I've done enough.

Last month, I shared an article about something political on Twitter. Two women got into an argument in the replies to my tweet. I could tell that they didn't know each other, and that they were supporting different candidates for president. Every tweet they hurled back and forth at each other mentioned me, so I got notifications during every step of their online fight. At one point, they began to call each other names, with one young woman calling the other the "C" word.

I stepped in, told the two that they maybe should take a break from Twitter for a bit, do something else (or at least remove me from their mentions). Both responded. They apologized to each other and to me, and they both promised to log off for a bit. One mentioned trying to play a role in creating a nicer world after the election.

I left it at that, but should I have done more? Should I have urged the two to message each other privately, try to talk politics civilly, maybe think about ways to have enriching, productive conversations online (or better yet, in person)? Should I have asked myself if the words I used in sharing the original article helped lead to the argument? Should the three of us have made it a teachable moment?

Instead, they retreated from their battle positions for a few hours at best, never getting to know the stranger they insulted. And I moved on, and just kept tweeting.

But I had to, right? Making the social Web nicer always takes a back seat to just trying to keep up. There were more tweets to see, more stuff to read, more Internet Post-it notes to throw along our social media floor.

If social media ruined 2016, it's because of that: We haven't stopped long enough to try to sort it all out.