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Focus Group Discussions as Sites for Public Deliberation and Sensemaking Following Shared Political Documentary Viewing

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Abstract

This study examines the potential that *shared* political documentary viewing coupled with public deliberation via focus group discussion has for political sensemaking and civic engagement. Specifically, we examine college students' perceptions of sensemaking, future civic engagement, and benefits of participating in group discussion following the shared viewing of D'Souza's political documentary *2016: Obama's America*. Focus group participants reported that engaging in discussion served to clarify, affirm, and reinforce some initial impressions while opening their eyes to new insights and information. Focus group participation triggered a desire to seek out and hear additional diverse points of view and offered participants the opportunity to diffuse negative emotions and reflect upon media content. Participants reported that they enjoyed participating in this form of guided discussion, reported increased confidence in their abilities to engage in public political deliberation, and reported feeling a call to future civic action. Our findings show that political documentary viewing coupled with focus group discussions can be a productive site for public deliberation that can lead to enhanced sensemaking and positive future civic behaviors including intentions to extend discussions to personal networks and to research issues raised in the discussion or documentary. We address implications for deliberative pedagogy and focus groups as public deliberation.

Author Biography

Margaret Jane Pitts (Ph.D., Pennsylvania State University) is an Associate Professor of Communication and Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Communication at the University of Arizona. She uses principles of qualitative inquiry to investigate the role of everyday types of talk in quality of life and well-being across the lifespan. This includes the use of focus group discussions to answer questions about communication processes, but also to create spaces for meaningful public conversations. She teaches courses on qualitative research methods, interpersonal communication, and intercultural communication.

Kate Kenski (Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania) is an Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Arizona where she teaches political communication, public opinion, and research methods. Her book *The Obama Victory: How Media, Money, and Message Shaped the 2008 Election* (co-authored with Bruce W. Hardy and Kathleen Hall Jamieson; 2010, Oxford University Press) has won several awards including the 2011 ICA Outstanding Book Award and the 2012 NCA Diamond Anniversary Book Award. Her current research focuses on incivility in online forums and multimedia teaching strategies to mitigate cognitive biases.

Stephanie A. Smith (Ph.D., The University of Arizona) is an Assistant Professor in Virginia Tech's Department of Communication where she teaches courses in public relations. Her current research uses qualitative methods to examine professional and career development of entry-level employees.

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Keywords

Civic Engagement, Discourse, Deliberation & Political Conversation, Entertainment / Popular Media / Popular Culture, Participation, Sensemaking, Qualitative - Focus Groups, Deliberative Pedagogy

While the field of political communication has paid attention to the importance of entertainment media in the last decade (e.g., Hmielowski, Holbert, & Lee, 2011; Young, 2004), little research has focused on political documentary as an influential medium and source for public deliberation and meaning-making (Nisbet & Aufderheide, 2009). A few studies have shown that political documentary has the potential to influence public perceptions and behaviors. For example, Howell (2011) found that UK viewers became more pro-environmental after being exposed to a film depicting the negative effects of climate change. Stroud (2007) found that the viewers of the documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* were more likely to discuss politics with friends and family than were non-viewers. Related research has demonstrated that mass media generally, and political film and documentaries specifically, can enhance learning in the classroom (Krain, 2010; Sunderland, Rothermel, & Lusk, 2009) and influence the electorate (LaMarre & Landreville, 2009). Additional research has shown that combining media viewing with deliberative discursive engagement can further increase positive civic outcomes (Kern & Just, 1995; Rojas, Shah, Cho, Schmierbach, Keum, & Gil-De-Zuñiga, 2005). This may be in part due to the greater potential for collaborative sensemaking—the negotiated and discursive engagement in shared meaning making that happens during public deliberation (see Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). However, opportunities for collaborative sensemaking and public deliberation centered on a popular text are rare. Thus, we were interested in exploring focus groups as a potentially rich context for discursive engagement following the shared viewing of a political documentary (i.e., *2016, Obama's America*). We argue that when placed within the context of viewing popular political documentary, focus group discussions offer a meaningful site for public deliberation and collaborative sensemaking and as such should be added to the toolbox of deliberative pedagogy.

Focus Group Discussions as Sites for Sensemaking and Public Deliberation

Focus groups present a unique context for the examination of political discourse and public deliberation because they offer an open, but defined space for the collaborative, synergetic, and spontaneous pursuit of knowledge and/or sensemaking (Hartman, 2004; Johnson, 1996; Robles & Ho, 2014; Southwell, Blake, & Torres, 2005). We define *sensemaking* as the negotiated and discursive process of message production, interpretation, and the creation of meaning that occurs organically through talk (see Weick et al., 2005). Interesting insights and outcomes may emerge from focus groups as a form of deliberative engagement. First, participants do more than respond to questions posed by a moderator. They manage the communicative, task, and social goals and responsibilities inherent in group conversation. Second, participants use local conversational and contextual resources available to them (e.g., shared viewing of a political documentary) as they

work together to establish common ground from which to build their conversation (Lindegard, 2014; Robles & Ho, 2014). Third, focus group interactions have benefits that extend beyond the encounter. They can enhance community members' knowledge, influence them to participate in public dialogues, and heighten their communicative self-efficacy (Zorn, Roper, Broadfoot, & Weaver, 2006), all of which can be of significant civic benefit to individuals and the larger community.

Focus group discussions offer a forum for discursive participation and sensemaking that allows citizens and scholars to understand systems of meanings and experiences better through the production and analysis of talk (Rakow, 2011). For example, Kern and Just (1995) used focus group methodology as a simulation of the social and discursive construction of meaning among voters exposed to real-life campaign messages to determine how people construct political candidate images and arrive at voting decisions. Their findings revealed that it was not only exposure to mediated campaign messages that influenced their image of the political candidates but, more importantly, the focus group that provided a sensemaking arena for the discursive and social construction of candidate images. Kern and Just argued for the benefit of using focus groups as a think-aloud exercise and one in which the prominent discourses were drawn from individuals' prior political experience over media-produced messages. In other words, the media stimulus is only one part of the overarching discourse.

Similarly, Weick et al. (2005) described collaborative sensemaking as a means of thinking that is acted out conversationally. In this way, not only do focus groups give insight into the dominant political discourses among a group (Perrin, 2005), they also serve as a proxy for everyday types of talk, including the formation of public opinion (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). Focus groups offer the discursive context for "modeling and observing the process of political deliberation as it happens" (Perrin, 2005, p. 1055). Data generated from focus groups are analogous to everyday types of talk that occur within routine communicative contexts in which meaning is socially produced and reproduced (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). Under certain conditions, everyday talk can be a form of citizen deliberation (Zhang & Chang, 2014). When it performs in this function, everyday talk can also facilitate political efficacy by increasing participants' confidence in their capacity to make political and social change and also their confidence in the political system's responsiveness (Zhang & Chang, 2014). Thus, focus groups have the transformative potential to effect change, raise consciousness, and empower participants while at the same time uncovering both dominant and hidden discourses (Johnson, 1996).

We situate our study within Delli Carpini, Cook, and Jacobs' (2004) five principal characteristics that constitute deliberative participation: (1) discourse is the primary form of activity, (2) discourse itself is a form of civic and political participation, (3) it can include formalized context and procedures, but it also includes informal, unplanned exchanges among private individuals, (4) it includes face-to-face and mediated channels, and (5) it centers on issues of public concern at the local, national, or international level. While all of these are relevant to our context, we wish to highlight the second principal in particular, noting that “just talk” can be an important form of political or civic engagement (see also Gordon & Baldwin-Philippi, 2014) that may result in *civic learning*. Whereas civic participation might be a person casting a ballot, civic learning is described by Gordon and Baldwin-Philippi (2014) as what happens “when the participant tells a friend or neighbor about the poll, when participants write about it, argue about it, or debate it at a public gathering” (p. 760). Focus group discussions offer a unique format for this type of deliberative engagement that may also extend beyond the convened group and into their social network. Thus, focus group methodology may also provide an ideal method for deliberative pedagogy—the inclusion of deliberative discourse and decision-making as a tool for teaching and learning (Drury, Andre, Goddard, & Wentzel, 2016; Longo, 2013).

The New Political Documentary as a Context for Media Dialogue

Documentaries have the potential to evoke powerful emotions among their viewers and to move them to action (LaMarre & Landreville, 2009). Yet, in the era of the increasingly popular *new political documentary* (e.g., *Fahrenheit 9/11*), marked by its distinctive partisan and polemical rhetoric that tends to draw only like-minded audiences (Benson & Snee, 2008), new political documentaries are restricted in their ability to inspire civic engagement (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2008). Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles (2008) describe them as emotion-laden media spectacles that are meant to be “experienced” in the theater, but with few civic effects beyond that. Borda (2008) further suggests that because of their necessarily partisan slant, new political documentaries often miss the “opportunity to engage with a diverse audience who may represent a range of political views” (p. 56). Therefore, we questioned what would happen when people with diverse political views shared in the viewing of a new political documentary and then engaged in guided public deliberation.

Our question stemmed from earlier work demonstrating that when individuals are given the opportunity to view relevant media content (e.g., documentary film) followed by structured discussion, the “media dialogue” offers them significant benefits beyond viewing the content alone (Rojas et al., 2005). For example,

participants in Rojas et al.'s (2005) study who viewed and discussed media content demonstrated greater community insight, greater likelihood of discussing the issue, and greater likelihood of participating politically than those who only viewed media content. Finally, using political documentary as the central focus of the discussion provides "both a resource for talk and a safe way to offer perspectives during conversations about controversial issues" (Rojas et al., 2005, p. 94).

Context and Rationale for Study

The current study uses Dinesh D'Souza's *2016: Obama's America* (Molen, Sullivan, & D'Souza, 2012) as the subject of the focus group discussions. *2016* belongs to the category of documentary film identified by Benson and Snee (2008) as the *new political documentary*. The era of the new political documentary was signaled in 2004 with the release of Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* and represents a distinct style of partisan and polemic, yet ostensibly independent, political documentary (Benson & Snee, 2008). *2016* is unapologetically partisan, agenda-driven, and sensational—all the markers of new political documentary. National Public Radio's (NPR) interpretation of *2016*'s thesis was that "[t]he film proposes that President Obama is weakening the country—deliberately," also contending that "[m]any critics have blasted the conspiratorial tone of the film, which D'Souza calls a documentary" (NPR staff, 2012, August 31). Film critic Bill Goodykoontz noted that *2016* was "as strident and heavy-handed a political polemic as any Michael Moore film" but also observed differences between the filmmakers, stating "Moore wants to poke you in the eye with his films, start a fight. D'Souza's film is much more an exercise in preaching to the choir" (Goodykoontz, 2012, August 24). Although it is noted for its controversial and unabashedly conservative representation, we chose *2016* because it emerged de facto as the prevailing political documentary in prelude to the 2012 presidential election. As such, it had the power to shape public discourse and political knowledge, becoming part of the "vernacular of American politics" (Benson & Snee, 2008, p. 19).

The combination of new political documentary screening followed by focused discussion in a structured yet open environment may tap into the dominant socio-political discourses among young voters through deliberative and discursive participation (Delli Carpini et al., 2004; Levine, Fung, & Gastil, 2005; Lindegaard, 2014; Perrin, 2005). Specifically, focus group discussions may yield insight into the sensemaking process of young voters regarding new political documentary (see Robles & Ho, 2014). Sensemaking is particularly salient in this study as both Weick and colleagues (2005) and Maitlis (2005) have noted that sensemaking processes are triggered when people experience ambiguity and uncertainty and seek to create rational accounts that help them gain clarity or understanding about an event. The

documentary *2016* necessarily presents an uncertain future for the United States and is thus likely to stimulate sensemaking processes. Further, engaging in focus group discussions may also lead to benefits for participants and their social networks, such as enhanced civic learning, political engagement, and feelings of communication self-efficacy (Rojas et al. 2005; Southwell et al., 2005; Zorn et al., 2006). In order to test these assumptions, we posed the following research questions:

RQ1: What role do participants perceive focus group discussion plays in their sensemaking about the political documentary?

RQ2: What intentions for future civic engagement do participants report as a result of engaging in a focus group discussion after viewing a political documentary?

RQ3: What additional benefits (beyond sensemaking and civic engagement) do participants report as a result of engaging in a focus group discussion after viewing a political documentary?

Method

This analysis reports on one part of a larger study on shared political documentary viewing among young adults. The full study examined young adults' responses to the film, their interpretations of the arguments made in the film, and how the film may have influenced their political opinions. In this analysis, we draw primarily, though not exclusively, from participants' discourse prompted by questions posed by the moderator toward the end of the session about the role of the group *discussion* in sensemaking and intentions of future behavior. For the purposes of our analysis, we operationalized sensemaking as participants' discourse that reflected collaborative meaning-making, such as the consideration of multiple perspectives and the development of clarity and confidence in participants' own positions through discussion, as well as participants' direct accounts of sensemaking.

Participants

Fifty-six (41 female, 15 male) university students were recruited from communication courses and offered a small amount of extra credit to participate. Participants were at least 18 years of age. Participants were primarily Caucasian ($n = 41$), but also included 7 Black/African-American, 5 Asian, and 3 Hispanic participants. For political party affiliation, 22 self-identified as Republican or Republican-leaning, 14 participants self-identified as Democrat or Democrat-

leaning, 11 as independent, 7 as not affiliated with any party or political group, and 2 as “other.” Almost half of the participants were majoring in communication ($n = 26$). Other majors included a range from political science, psychology, and public health (3 participants each) to microbiology, public administration, nursing, business (2 participants each), and more.

Participants engaged in one of seven focus group sessions. On average, there were 8 participants in each focus group with a range of 5-13. Three sessions were attended by participants who primarily self-reported as Republican or Republican-leaning; two sessions were composed primarily of Democrats or Democrat-leaning; two sessions were mixed (independent, not affiliated, Democrat, and Republican). Our groups were intentionally created to include both politically homogenous and politically mixed groups in order to tap into the meaning systems (dominant discourses) that might underlie each group, but also to offer opportunities to create dialogue among varied political affiliations to see what kinds of discourses emerged. Five sessions took place in the fall of 2012 prior to the presidential election, and two focus group sessions were held post-election in spring of 2013. Focus groups were held on weekday evenings to accommodate student schedules and lasted approximately three hours (including the screening). With regard to the analyses that underpin this report, there were no apparent differences between groups in terms of their sensemaking, perceived future political engagement, or perceived benefits of engaging in the discussion.

Focus Group Interviews

Following a brief period of informal chat to facilitate rapport, the research team provided introductions, welcomed participants, and broadly described the goals of the study. Next, we offered participants a light dinner and screened the 89-minute political documentary *2016: Obama's America*. We gave participants a pen and a notepad and encouraged them to take notes during the film on anything that interested them and/or that they might wish to discuss. We also asked participants to write down their thoughts immediately following the film. We offered participants a brief break after the film to reflect, write, and refresh. On two occasions, we divided the participants into two separate focus groups following the break using a predetermined list based on political affiliation. Participants were not informed about why they were selected into which group.

At the commencement of each discussion, the research team established the following ground rules for engagement: Participants were asked to avoid interruptions, were encouraged to express even incomplete thoughts, were asked to encourage other participants to share their thoughts and observations, were

encouraged to offer alternative perspectives and to ask questions of others when clarity was needed, and were asked to speak to each other and not to the moderator (see Krueger, 1994). One moderator facilitated each focus group session with the aid of one or two note-takers per session. Note-takers sat unobtrusively in the back of the room, strategically placed to observe and record participants' verbal and nonverbal cues. Each session was audio-recorded for later transcription. The moderator used a semi-structured interview guide, including 14 questions that covered participants' perceptions of the film, their future political engagement as a result of watching and discussing the film, and perceptions about participating in such a discussion.¹

Note-takers transcribed the audio files verbatim and included nonverbal indicators in the transcript from their notes. Transcripts include minimal conversation analytic notations² to capture discursive nuance (see Atkinson & Heritage, 1996). Participants were assigned an alphanumeric code to increase confidentiality. The code was three units specifying (1) the political party affiliation (R = Republican; D=Democrat; I=independent; N=not affiliated with a party; O=other), (2) the focus group session, and (3) the participant number. For example, I3P2 identified as independent, participated in focus group session three, and was "participant two." The research team reviewed each transcript for accuracy and edited where necessary.

Analytic Strategy

To answer our research questions, we used qualitative data analysis procedures outlined in Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) and Saldaña (2013). We used a

¹ Contact the first author for a copy of the interview guide.

² Transcription Notations

(.)	A period enclosed in parentheses indicates a micro-pause with each period increasing the length of pause.
(1s)	A digit enclosed in parentheses indicates a pause in seconds.
:	A colon embedded in a word indicates elongation of the sound.
---	A dash indicates a cutoff.
...	Horizontal ellipses indicate words are omitted from an utterance.
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.	Vertical ellipses indicate turns at talk are omitted.
[discussion]	A word in single brackets indicates replacement of a vague reference for specific (e.g., the word "it" was replaced by the word "discussion" for the purposes of clarity in the manuscript).
[[yeah]]	A word in double brackets indicates overlapping talk.
((laugh))	A word in double parentheses indicates vocalization or other details of the conversational scene.

process of first- and second-cycle coding to answer each research question. Our process of first-cycle coding began by searching transcripts utterance by utterance for solicited and unsolicited contributions by participants that (1) demonstrated their collaborative sensemaking, (2) referenced their participation in and perceptions about the focus group, and/or (3) indicated their level of political engagement outside of the context of the focus group. After identifying utterances or linked-turns-at-talk corresponding to the above, we assigned a descriptive label, or code, that reflected the broad meaning of that chunk of discourse in a few words or short phrase. This allowed us to capture both individual-level responses and interactional data (see Duggleby, 2005). During the first cycle of coding, we generated a list of free-standing codes relevant to each research question. During the second cycle of coding, we organized free codes by placing similar units of coded data into categories and assigning a broader thematic label that holistically captured the discursive content within the category. Themes were identified through recurrence and consistency across focus groups. We then examined each category in depth, looking for consistency, fit, and accuracy. We sought to ensure trustworthiness (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in our analytical process and findings by coding both independently and collaboratively. We met frequently to discuss emerging ideas and conclusions, to triangulate perspectives, and to discuss and negotiate areas of disagreement (see Clayman et al., 2009). Our analysis revealed distinct themes for each research question. Specifically, we identified four themes in response to RQ1, two themes in response to RQ2, and two themes in response to RQ3. All are addressed below.

Findings

Collaborative Sensemaking

The first research question asked: What role do participants perceive focus group discussion plays in their sensemaking about the film? In the main, participants reported that collaborative sensemaking served to deepen, affirm, or reinforce their initial impressions or opinions. Participants indicated that it was through the mechanisms of the focus group discussion that they engaged in sensemaking. Specifically, their sensemaking was triggered by actively watching the film (e.g., note-taking, attending to details to have a discussion), having time delegated to process messages from the film, and being exposed to new arguments from peers. We identified four themes in response to RQ1.

Discussion Affirmed and Reinforced Impressions. One theme that emerged consistently across groups was that discussion served to deepen and confirm participants' initial sensemaking regarding the film. For some participants,

discussion served to strengthen their original position through deeper consideration of arguments. Participants reflected that discussion “enhanced my original opinion” (I4P4), “positively reinforced my opinion” (D3P4), or “more or less reinforced them” (R6P2). Discussion also affirmed that participants were not alone in their sensemaking and interpretations about the film. I3P2 said that the discussion “just kind of affirmed ... [that] some of the arguments didn’t make too much sense to me, and now we’ve talked about it, like no one did either.” Another outcome of the discussion was increased assurance in one’s own decisions: “I mean I kinda already stood my ground before this [discussion] but it kind of just makes me happier the way I am voting” (R4P5).

Discussion Offered New Insights and Information. Participants reported that through the discussion, they became aware of new arguments and gained insight from other participants. Consideration of new insights became part of their collaborative sensemaking process.

I think a lot of you guys brought up good points that I didn’t notice at first and that’s a great thing, so what’s so great about discussions for me is I get to notice a lot more things about the uh the film because after watching it once you can only, you know, take in so much that--- your brain won’t retain everything obviously so talking about it with a group of people helps you (...) focu--- or get more out of it to me. (R4P1)

Discussion brought out “some of the inconsistencies” (R2P7) in the film and offered “more knowledge on things” (D3P3) that might have otherwise been missed. Finally, there was a sense that “it’s cool to hear everybody’s opinions,” as N3P7 noted even though they “come at it from different angles...things that stick out for some people don’t necessarily stick out for other people.”

Discussion Left Participants Wanting to Hear More Sides. Group discussion also created a desire to hear even more diverse perspectives to continue to deepen their thinking, particularly voices from others who might not share their same political ideology. For example, one participant hoped to hear from someone who was “super pro-Obama and like super against this movie and ‘cause I would have been really interested to hear what they had to say...I think it would have added a lot more to the discussion” (I4P4). The exchanges from two focus groups that occurred simultaneously, but separately, are good examples.

Focus Group 6	Focus Group 7
R6P2: ... I would be very (..) much interested to see how like	I7P4: [[But I think maybe one or two more people would]] have

<p>somebody who's Democratic were to perceive that kind of movie</p> <p>R6P1: yeah how they're talking about it</p> <p>R6P2: yeah strong with their beliefs</p> <p>R6P8: I mean I feel they'd want more of a debate though</p> <p>R6P2: yeah it would get pretty heated ((laughter))</p> <p>R6P2: but I wouldn't want to and I would be like fly on the wall and I could listen but like [[N6P3: yeah]] I'd be interested to like see</p> <p>R6P1: hear their opinions</p> <p>R6P2: hear their opinions</p>	<p>people would have been interesting yeah</p> <p>I7P2: [[I guess it would have been funny to hear R6P8]]</p> <p>I7P2 & I7P4: [[chuckle]]</p> <p>D7P1: and what also I would have liked to like hear what they had to say cause we [[I7P4: yeah]] actually have class with um two of the gentlemen in the other one [[M: uh huh]] and they were like grunting and like making all these noises</p> <p>.</p> <p>.</p> <p>.</p> <p>I7P4: it would be interesting to hear everyone I mean you know (.) I mean you know if we were to break up and then come back together for like ten minutes</p>
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Discussion Gave Time to Diffuse and Reflect. The inherent structure of the focus group also promoted reflection. For example, a handful of participants noted that it was the time designated to reflection and discussion that assisted in sensemaking and not the discussion itself. This is evidenced in the following exchange from focus group five:

N5P3: Well I don't think it's so much the discussion [coughs] as much as the fact that I've had time to kinda digest this material rather than like get it--- like I'm not into politics at all so I was kinda of having a tough time myself (..) following all this ... and I think after I kinda sat down for like you know went to the bathroom for and took like ten to fifteen minutes to really think about it just (..) I started to like really question it rather than be like "ok ok ok" like the whole way through (.) and not really take time to challenge ... I mean I definitely (..) um sensed like if you asked then and after how I felt about the video like I'd be like "oh yeah screw that I'm not voting for Obama" but now I'm like "Alright, now I'm good. Now I get to do my

research” ... I think definitely more time to process made me (..) uh change my mind rather than the discussion

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D5P4: Definitely um what you’re saying about the group I mean (.) totally right after I’m like “oh damn I need to like rethink my morals”... but after you know (..) I sat down ((shaking a plastic cup with ice)) and coll--- collected my thoughts and it really (..) doesn’t matter at all. (.) I mean the discussion really opened up some issues that (.) um everyone could agree on that (.) could--- could disagree but it really you know (..) made it--- made me think about where--- where is this info coming from or did you just make up your own...

[3s]

N5P1: Yeah I think the reflection time was well needed (.) ‘cause you gotta take a step back and just rethink your priorities in the video and how it affected you.

For some, embedding time to reflect between watching the film and discussing it activated processes of internal deliberation. Reflection and discussion also helped to diffuse emotions. Several participants remarked that they experienced a host of negative emotions (e.g., fear, anxiety, helplessness, anger) after watching the film. Participants reported that discussion and reflection offered an opportunity to manage emotions and calm down:

I think like right after it was (.) like a really big impact? Like it was like “Oh my gosh I’m really scared. I can’t believe like he’s doing all this.” (.) But I think to like discuss it? (.) It kind of calms you down and you’re kind of like not as like (..) “holy crap” kind of thing. It’s just like okay like (..) there’s, like you said, other people who agree and there’s other people who disagree and it kind of like I guess brings you back to earth. (D2P4)

Another participant expressed feeling that “at the very end of [the film] you’re like completely against Obama...but then like once you talk about it a little more it makes ... like the strength kind of goes away a little bit” (R2P7).

Future Political Engagement

The second research question asked: What intentions for future civic engagement do participants report as a result of engaging in a focus group discussion after viewing a political documentary? Many participants described feeling a “call to

action” for themselves and others after viewing and discussing the film. Two related themes emerged. We note, however, that there were a few individuals who responded that their own level of political engagement was unlikely to change as a result of their participation, because their political engagement was already high, as in the case of R1P1 who noted, “I already do, so it’s the same.”

A Call to Action for Research. Participants stated that the film and discussion compelled them to “investigate” (R6P5), “do my research” (N5P3), or like D5P4, “research a few issues” before deciding on a presidential candidate. I7P4 found the discussion “really interesting” and shared that:

It made me want to actually (.) go out and (..) learn what was actually going on versus just like what the movie was [saying]--- so I think it just made me want to know more (1s) I don’t think it necessarily changed my opinion ... it just made me want to get educated more and actually figure out (..) what is actually going on.

This sentiment was also expressed by I4P9, “the discussion might uh--- definitely prompted us to go do research more.” A participant in the same focus group warned not to take the information in “this documentary at face value” when discussing it with others, but instead:

you would want to research, you know, how much of this is actual like (..) him not just (.) blowing steam at us and, you know, go back and make sure that all the numbers are correct and then once you have a more informed decision, then you can talk about it in a rational manner instead of just being like “oh you’re not voting for Obama, you’re stupid.” “Oh you’re not voting Romney, you’re stupid.” (R4P6)

A Call to Action to Engage in Discussion. Several participants also noted their desire to “go out and tell everyone about all this I have just seen” (R6P7). Their call to action was not toward more research, but rather toward sharing what they learned through the film and discussion. Participants’ drive to engage in more political discussion after watching and discussing the film ranged from feeling like R6P1, “a lot more informed” and ready to “engage in, like, political conversation” to feeling more likely to talk about politics after viewing the film “‘cause it’s fresh in my head so I’m probably going to go tell them everything I just saw” (R2P7). I2P8’s comments paralleled: “I would be more likely to talk (.) talk about [politics] after seeing something like this (..) you know it is fresh in our minds because it’s something that we learned and we want to share something with someone.” Participants acknowledged the immediacy of their plans to go out and talk to

specific people (e.g., participants' mother, grandfather, and roommates were all mentioned) after the discussion. But, one participant in particular, though she was not alone, also noted that the film might create a sort of ripple effect of political discussion:

I feel like a lot of people are gonna watch that and feel like how we feel though. I think it's gonna be good because like when the reelection comes around like people--- that since this has been out people are gonna be able to watch it

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.

I think there's a lot of people that are upset about all these things that he's done and this will go around and people are gonna start watching and I think they'll be a--- a big change in the way people view him. (2s) like we're about to go tell a bunch of people [[R6P2: yeah I'll tell my grandpa to watch it]] and then they're gonna tell people and they're gonna tell people. (R6P1)

Finally, for some participants, the film and discussion seemed to be enough to inspire them to engage in a political discussion, which was unusual for them. For example, I1P5 expressed that her mother is going to “be really shocked that I’m actually saying something about politics” because “I really do not go into politics too much.” Some agreed that the discussion “definitely” influenced their likelihood of talking about politics (i.e., focus group four) while others (i.e., focus group six) added that they were more likely to talk about the video itself, but not politics specifically.

Benefits of Focus Group Participation

Research question three asked: What additional benefits (beyond sensemaking and civic engagement) do participants report as a result of engaging in a focus group discussion after viewing a political documentary? Two themes emerged in response to RQ3. Participants described the experience as enjoyable and reported increased confidence in their own sensemaking and conclusions. These findings are particularly relevant for those considering the use of focus group discussions as a tool for deliberative pedagogy.

Participants Enjoyed Discussing Political Documentary. Participants voiced surprise at how much they enjoyed and personally benefitted from participating in the group discussion. Despite participants' proclivity to avoid discussing politics in general, the focus group provided a context in which such discussion was expected

and encouraged. Participants across focus groups voiced their appreciation for the opportunity to express and hear multiple opinions in a controlled environment. For example, I7P3 explained that the discussion was “comfortable this way ‘cause like we have class together [I7P2: mmhmm] so we know each other and stuff.” R5P5 explained that he was already “comfortable with what I (..) believe [and] already knew where I kinda fell [politically],” but that “hearing other people’s opinions was really fascinating to me (..) what everyone else thought about it.” The excerpt below, taken from focus group seven, highlights this theme.

D7P1: I actually felt the discussion or that this entire extra credit was going to be like a lot (..) less enjoyable [[group: yeah]]
I7P4: but it was really interesting [[very interesting documentary]]
R7P5: [[I was sitting there like “oh this--- I’m like actually really happy I’m sitting here” I was like “this is really interesting”]]
((laughter interrupting))
I7P4: [[I was very into it]]
D7P1: [[So I think the three hours was definitely like well worth it]]
I7P4: Yeah it [[went by fast]]
I7P2: [[it went by fast yeah]]
I7P4: but I think it would have been, maybe I get that you guys want to break the groups up to like (..) have it smaller and so we can talk more but I think it would have been interesting to maybe have like one more guy or like I feel like our group was smaller than that group so maybe do it like really evenly or I don’t know
D7P1: ‘Cause we are having fun

Participants Experienced Increased Confidence through Discussion. In addition to simply enjoying the rare opportunity to engage in a meaningful political discussion, some participants also experienced an increase in confidence and comfort in their own opinions. Several participants noted feeling relief that the group shared many of the same opinions as the individual. For example, I2P11 found the discussion beneficial “because I feel like I’m not alone with being scared. So it’s like ‘ok that [reaction] was natural, that’s fine, let’s move on from that.’” She then added that it was “actually really refreshing” to know “immediately” that the group agreed. Focus group discussion allowed perception-checking (e.g., I am not alone in my thinking), while at the same time bolstering confidence in participants’ interpretation of the film.

I wouldn't have left and gone and told all my friends how I thought that movie was biased (.) you know I just wouldn't be as confident in my inclination to think that but when everyone says the same thing it is really enlightening ... to just talk about the things we even like and don't like about it [3s] I think we had a lot of the same opinions which is interesting. (O3P8)

In another example, D3P4's comment, "I felt more confident [because of the discussion] but I didn't understand the point of um the brother" triggered further group discussion about the role of Obama's brother in the film. The group reopened an earlier discussion thread and worked together to help bring understanding to D3P4.

Discussion and Implications for Public Deliberation and Pedagogy

Our primary motive in this analysis was to explore focus groups as sites for meaningful public deliberation and sensemaking within the context of new political documentary viewing. *2016: Obama's America* presented an uncertain future for Americans and introduced students to novel arguments and information that triggered intense emotions across focus groups regardless of political affiliation. Through the mechanisms of the focus group discussion, students engaged in internal and external (public) deliberation, collaborative sensemaking, and reflection to resolve emergent negative emotions and uncertainties. Our findings show that creating opportunities for collaborative group discussion grounded in popular political media texts can foster participants' perceptions of competence, interest, and desire for future engagement.

Broadly, our study contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of "media dialogue" in stimulating political sensemaking and civic engagement (see Rojas et al., 2005). Specifically, our findings demonstrate how shared viewing of political documentary followed by guided public deliberation via focus group discussion create ground for the practice and engagement of political discourse and collaborative sensemaking and set a potential course for future civic engagement. Participants expressed that by engaging in a guided group discussion about their sensemaking regarding the documentary, they enjoyed and gained confidence in communicating their own political observations and opinions (RQ3), they acknowledged consideration of multiple viewpoints and used discussion to clarify, affirm, and sometimes reinforce impressions (RQ1), and they reported feeling a call to action toward future political engagement through issue-based research and/or interpersonal communication (RQ2).

These findings support the argument that focus group discussions offer more than just a context for data collection (Lindegaard, 2014; Robles & Ho, 2014; Zorn et al., 2006). They also serve as a useful practice in deliberative pedagogy (see Drury et al., 2016; Longo, 2013)—education that is deliberative in form and style (Shaffer, 2014). Focus groups as deliberative pedagogy open avenues not only for student engagement, but for engagement in the greater community, “cultivating space for diverse ideas and marginalized voices to be heard and valued in the classroom, on campus, or in the community” (Shaffer, 2014, p. 3). This form of deliberative pedagogy (i.e., screening and focus group discussion) created the space and opportunity for like- and different-minded individuals to view a popular media spectacle collectively and engage each other meaningfully afterwards. Our findings are consistent with those endorsed by deliberative pedagogy. Namely, focus group discussions open opportunities for collaborative engagement with a diverse community of others resulting in “knowledge [that is] more genuinely co-created through reflective public action” (Longo, 2013, p. 2). Deliberation through focus group discussion can serve, therefore, as one of many tools for deliberative pedagogy whose use “facilitates the consideration of diverse ideas, provides students with a framework for critical thinking, and ultimately prompts citizens to engage in choosing actions and approaches to addressing public problems” (Drury et al., 2016, p. 1). The inherent structure of the focus group method, including rules for civil discursive engagement, a defined time and space for participation, a stimulus to ground discourse, presence of multiple perspectives, and opportunity for reflection and rapport-building, lends well to this type of deliberative pedagogy.

In addition, participants reported arriving at a more complete and complex understanding of their own political opinions through the mechanisms of the focus group discussion, specifically reflection and collaborative engagement, than they would have arrived at without discussion. Participants reflected that discussion confirmed and reaffirmed their own impressions. Moreover, group discussion offered a forum for sharing and building upon individual and group beliefs. This was evidenced in the cases where discussants re-opened conversational threads later in the discussion in order to satisfy group sensemaking needs. Participants reported arriving at their “final” perspectives only after attending to, considering, and integrating others’ perspectives into their own. Across focus groups, participants demonstrated appreciation for the difference and diversity in perspectives available to them. They lauded the group discussions for their ability to offer compelling new insights and information while simultaneously lamenting that they did not hear even *more* diverse perspectives from participants. Participants demonstrated willingness and openness toward hearing even more diverse perspectives, including the voices of participants who may hold different political viewpoints than their own.

Participants also reported gaining increased confidence regarding their own sensemaking and their ability to articulate their thoughts through collaborative engagement and perception checking. Moreover, this occurred outside of the moderator's immediate influence where discussants appeared to co-orient toward each other to achieve consensus on group sensemaking, ambivalent at times about the role of the moderator (see Robles & Ho, 2014). Such discussions also appeared to serve more of a social than task function, permitting participants to collude with each other on their affective responses rather than taking a clear political stance. For example, discussions helped participants to reduce anxiety and uncertainties that resulted from viewing the film through processes of offering accounts and sensemaking (see Maitlis, 2005). That is, although participants across political party affiliation initially expressed experiencing fear and anxiety at the conclusion of the film, those emotions were dampened and made manageable through collaborative sensemaking. One important implication, then, is the need to create deliberate and structured opportunities for collaborative community discussions that center on shared and engaging texts (e.g., political documentary) and occur in a protected and receptive environment.

Finally, set within the context of shared political documentary viewing, focus group discussions allowed for the emergence of deeply embedded, conflicted, or even ambivalent (see Zaller & Feldman, 1992) rational structures. That is, some knowledge or personal meanings may not be "explicit or salient" to an individual, but rather held implicitly or out-of-awareness and may only surface through the emergent processes of collaborative sensemaking (Lindsay & Hubley, 2006, p. 439). By asking participants to share their perceptions with the group, they were obliged to identify and articulate their own thoughts even if they were incomplete or ambivalent. As Zaller and Feldman (1992) remarked, people do not necessarily hold preformed political attitudes, but rather "they carry around in their heads a mix of only partially consistent ideas and considerations" (p. 579) that are subject to contextual influence. Asking participants to consider and articulate their perceptions in a group forum gave salience to, and likely activated, their own sensemaking.

This particular finding points to the productive influence of a "reflective cue" (Manosevitch, 2009) easily embedded in the focus group structure. Similar to Zaller and Feldman's (1992) "prospective" or "stop-and-think" probes at the outset of political survey questions which induce more careful consideration of attitudes than normally assessed via survey, a reflective cue is a "statement suggesting the importance of thinking about issues" that is embedded within the viewing context and directs individuals' deeper attention to the stimulus (Manosevitch, 2009, p.

192). Recall that participants were informed at the outset they would be participating in a discussion about the film and were encouraged to take notes on the paper provided about anything that interested them or that they might wish to discuss. These instructions likely served as a reflective cue. Reflective cues are theorized to increase cognitive effort in information-processing resulting in deeper (and less automatic) engagement with media stimulus (i.e., sensemaking). Manosevitch (2009) also demonstrated that exposure to a reflective cue prior to consuming political media could result in stronger cognitive orientations toward democratic citizenship. This was reflected in our findings with respect to RQ2 wherein participants reported feeling a call to action to engage in more research on issues raised in the documentary and/or a call to action to engage in future political discussions among their interpersonal networks. Participants also reflected that viewing the political documentary gave them talking points from which to begin a discussion with a member of their interpersonal network. Thus, benefits of viewing political documentary and engaging in collaborative discussions may well extend beyond those derived during the discussion. Indeed, embedded reflective cues may stimulate purposive information-processing that contributes to participants' sustained learning and sensemaking necessary for civic engagement (Gordon & Baldwin-Philippi, 2014).

Embedding a reflective cue within the context of shared political documentary viewing also may have activated a process of internal reflection, described by Goodin (2000) as "deliberation within." Deliberation within is a necessary part of the deliberative process that entails taking in and considering multiple viewpoints, arguments, and counter-arguments, but not necessarily voicing them. Weinmann and Vorderer (2015) have theorized that viewing political entertainment media can stimulate deliberation within, and, under the right conditions, such internal deliberations might even approximate interpersonal deliberation. However, in order for meaningful deliberation within to occur, people have to attend to the mediated discourse actively and process the material in a sophisticated way (Weinmann & Vorderer, 2015). A reflective cue may prompt just that. Focus group participants acknowledged that because they were expected to engage in a discussion post-screening and offered the opportunity to jot down notes if desired, they attended more closely to details in the documentary than they would have if they viewed it individually. This process may have stimulated deliberation within and may partially account for the finding among some participants that it was the opportunity for reflection, and not the discussion itself, that led to political sensemaking regarding the film and diffused emotional responses. It is important to note, however, that through the mechanisms of the focus group discussion, deliberation within was later outwardly expressed giving us unique insight into the deliberative process between stimulus and discussion.

While we are enthusiastic about the implications for deliberative practice offered above, we recognize that there are drawbacks to creating focus groups among college students on a university campus. First, as in this study, some participants may know each other. While familiarity may help to establish a sense of rapport and comfort in discussing the topic, previous classroom experiences may also create expectations for what particular members might say or think. Second, the physical environment and awareness that the moderators were faculty members likely also structured the conversations in ways that are unique to the university context. We also note that media stimulus within the new political documentary genre may necessarily create polemic discourses and reactions that may not emerge in response to less biased media. Creating opportunities to view and/or consider alternative perspectives via media representation could stimulate additional sensemaking.

Conclusion

We conclude that focus groups offer a rich site for public deliberation, especially when paired with political documentary viewing. Participants in this study demonstrated that collaborative discursive engagement about the political documentary *2016: Obama's America* activated their process of sensemaking and resulted in a more complex and/or clear understanding of their own position. Our findings also demonstrate that focus group discussions are a promising tool for deliberative pedagogy. Specifically, participants reported enjoying this form of public deliberation, gaining increased confidence in and willingness to engage in future political discourse, feeling a call to action to engage in additional research, and left participants wanting to hear even more viewpoints. Moreover, we have shown that when young adults are given the opportunity to deliberate publicly about political topics and are given the grounds upon which to do so in a conducive environment, they will. By providing them a defined space for articulating and forming opinions, and centering those discussions on a shared popular culture experience, they may begin to build the confidence and communication skills necessary to engage more fully in their political worlds (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2015). This is especially important for young adults who may not have other opportunities to voice their thoughts and engage in their own political sensemaking.

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