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CENTER FOR INFORMATION, TECHNOLOGY, AND PUBLIC LIFE

# PUBLIC OPINION, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND THE IDENTITARIAN CITIZEN IN A DEMOCRACY

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# SOCIAL MEDIA AS PUBLIC OPINION - IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRACY

## **TODAY'S TALK**

Public opinion & social media  
Social opinion in the news & its effects  
Social opinion in political campaigns  
Understanding the public & building theory  
The identitarian public in a democracy



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# THEORIZING SOCIAL MEDIA AS PUBLIC OPINION

THE MEANING OF PUBLIC  
OPINION IS CONTINGENT

PUBLIC

RELATIONAL

TEMPORALLY ORIENTED



# THEORIZING SOCIAL MEDIA AS PUBLIC OPINION

THE MEANING OF PUBLIC  
OPINION IS CONTINGENT

PUBLIC

RELATIONAL

TEMPORALLY ORIENTED

NOT REPRESENTATIVE

NOT DELIBERATIVE



# THE PRESS & PUBLIC OPINION

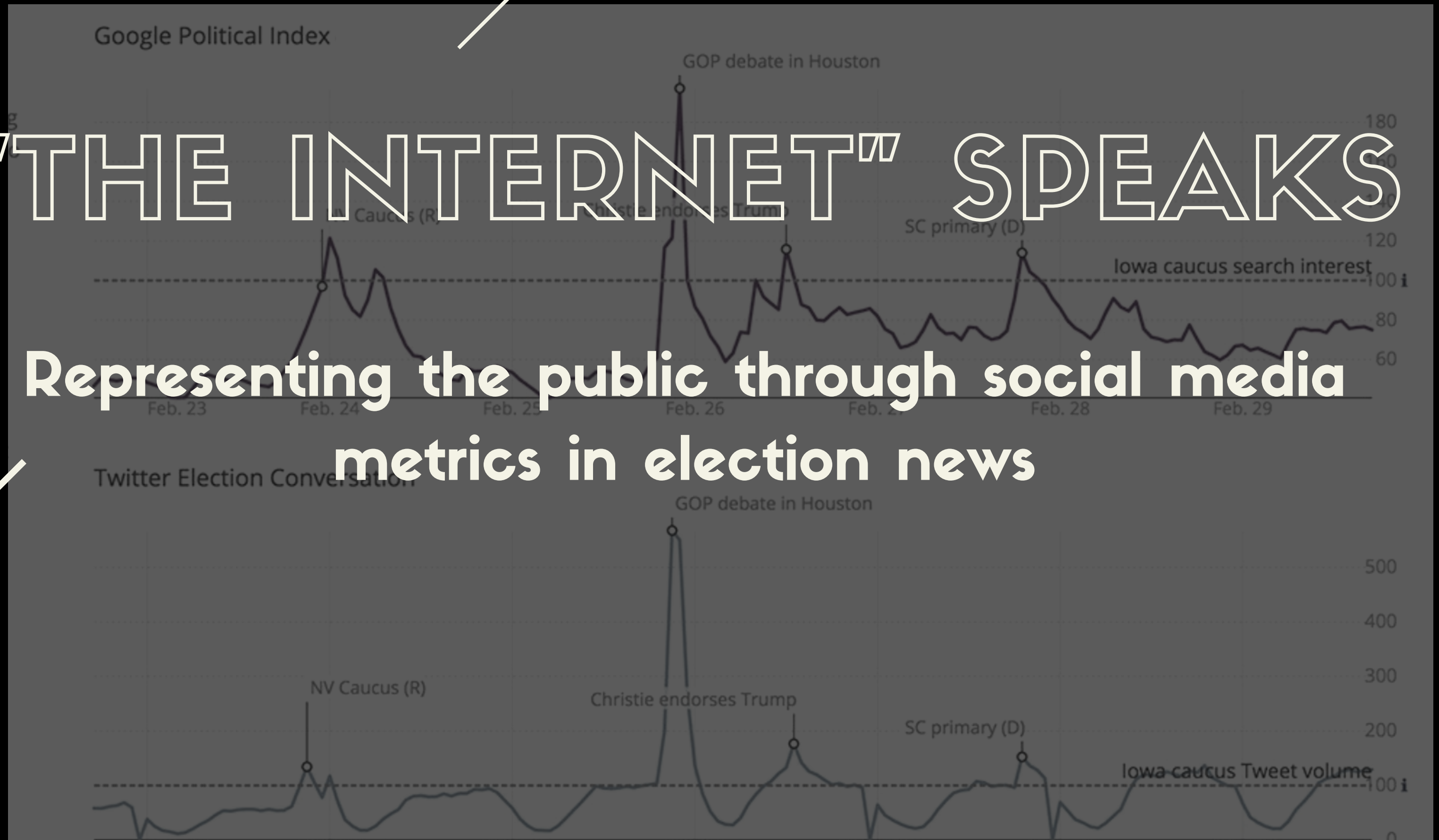


## STORIES UTILIZING POLLS:

- Easy & compelling storyline
- Require minimal editing
- Fit with news values
- Appeal to audiences
- Evoke "journalistic voice"
- Offer veneer of objectivity

# "THE INTERNET" SPEAKS

Representing the public through social media  
metrics in election news



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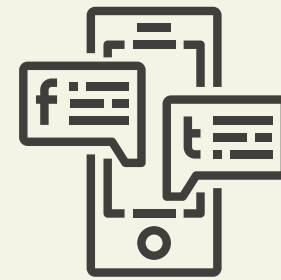
# MIXED METHODS

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## STUDY 1

Content analysis, N=770



## STUDY 3

6 x 3 between-subjects experiment, N=1148



## STUDY 2

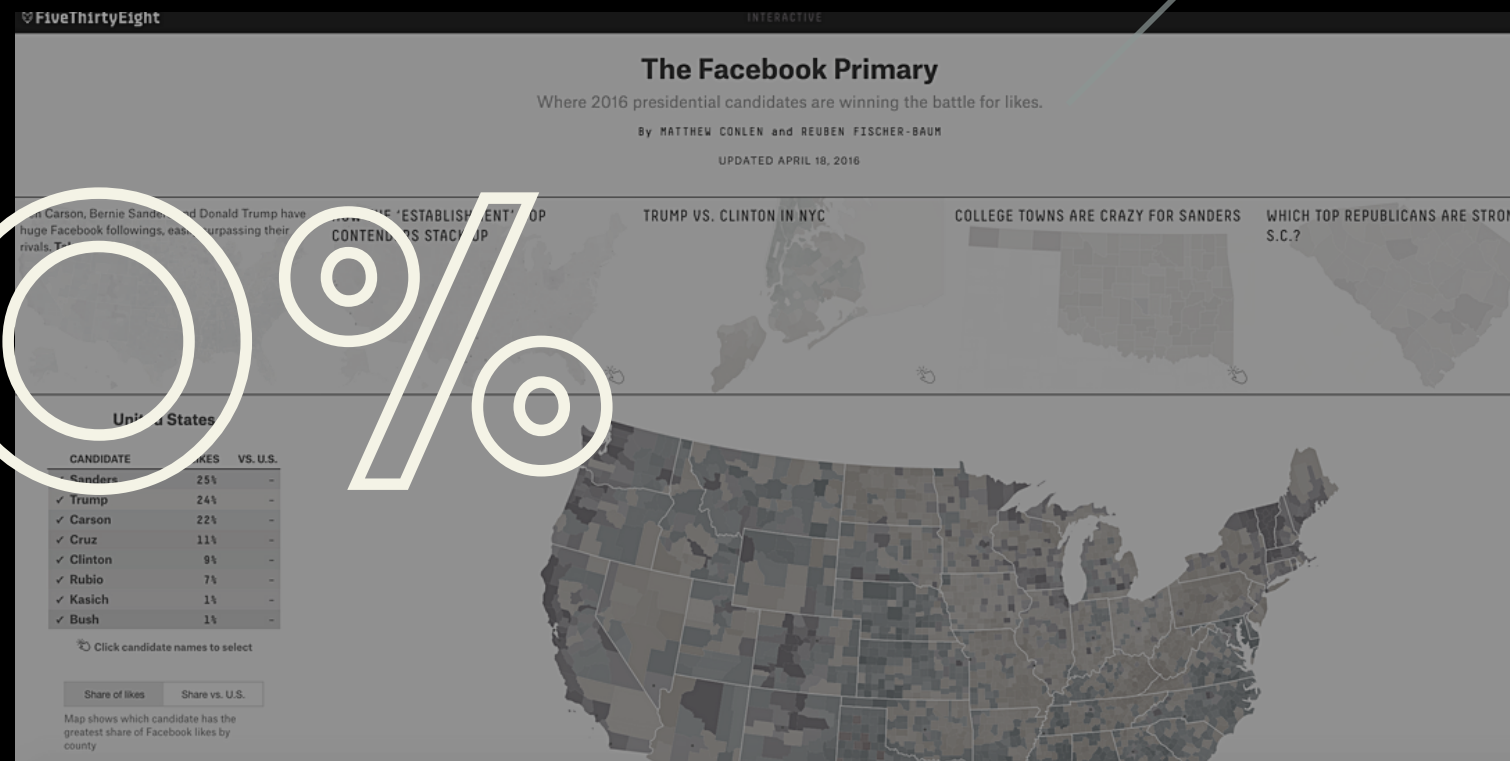
In-depth interviews with journalists, N=18

# How do journalists incorporate social media into their reporting on public opinion?



McGregor, S. C. (2019). Social media as public opinion: How journalists use social media to represent public opinion. *Journalism*, 20(8), 1070-1086.

50%



## METHODOLOGICAL DETAILS

Significantly more so in stories containing metrics vs vox pop



57%



QUALITATIVE DATA

A NEW VOX POP

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In social media's Iowa caucus predictions, Twitter nails it

2.4k  
SHARES

Share on Facebook

Share on Twitter

+

WHAT'S THIS?

58%

QUANTITATIVE DATA

SOCIAL MEDIA METRICS

Hotels.com  
The Obvious Choice

< o o o >



Best Western Plus  
North Salt Lake  
From £101  
Book now



Pony  
North

Morning Mix

Clinton beats Sanders on Twitter  
during CNN Iowa town hall —  
barely

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# IMPLICATIONS FOR JOURNALISTIC PRACTICE

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## ROUTINIZED PRACTICES

DataMinr, vox pop

## THIRD-JOURNALIST EFFECT

Culling "public opinion" from their own  
Twitter

## MALLEABLE OPINIONS

Social opinion shaped by campaigns,  
foreign actors

## UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

Mostly use of existing methods, not novel  
ones

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# IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC OPINION

QUALITATIVE  
UNDERSTANDINGS

SHRUNKEN & DISTORTED  
POLITY

MARGINALIZED VOICES

POWER OF PLATFORMS



Polling



Exemplar quotes



Polls & exemplars



Social media  
metrics



Vox pop tweets



Metrics & tweets

# EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

# EXPECTATIONS



PERCEIVED PUBLIC OPINION

COMBINED DATA TYPES

PERCEIVED REPRESENTATIVENESS

PERCEIVED CREDIBILITY

# EXPECTATIONS

## PERCEIVED PUBLIC OPINION

Across all issues & data types, perceived public opinion is in the direction of the majority

## COMBINED DATA TYPES

## PERCEIVED REPRESENTATIVENESS

## PERCEIVED CREDIBILITY

# EXPECTATIONS

## PERCEIVED PUBLIC OPINION

Across all issues & data types, perceived public opinion is in the direction of the majority

## COMBINED DATA TYPES

Across all issues, combined quantitative & qualitative data does **not** produce stronger estimates

## PERCEIVED REPRESENTATIVENESS

## PERCEIVED CREDIBILITY

# EXPECTATIONS

## PERCEIVED PUBLIC OPINION

Across all issues & data types, perceived public opinion is in the direction of the majority

## COMBINED DATA TYPES

Across all issues, combined quantitative & qualitative data does **not** produce stronger estimates

## PERCEIVED REPRESENTATIVENESS

Individual social media posts are seen as **more** representative than: polling, polling + interviews, and social media metrics

## PERCEIVED CREDIBILITY

# EXPECTATIONS

## PERCEIVED PUBLIC OPINION

Across all issues & data types, perceived public opinion is in the direction of the majority

## COMBINED DATA TYPES

Across all issues, combined quantitative & qualitative data does **not** produce stronger estimates

## PERCEIVED REPRESENTATIVENESS

Individual social media posts are seen as **more** representative than: polling, polling + interviews, and social media metrics

## PERCEIVED CREDIBILITY

Across all issues & data types, perceived credibility is consistent

# WHAT'S NEXT

## NEWS USE & SOCIAL MEDIA USE

No differences by news use or use of social media on either DV

## MOTIVATED REASONING

Agreement led to stronger perceptions of credibility for tweets, tweet metrics, and tweets + metrics

## METHODS DISCLOSURE

Post-hoc methods disclosure for those in social media conditions, does it change confidence in perceived public opinion?

# "TAKING THE TEMPERATURE OF THE ROOM"

**How political campaigns use social media to  
understand and represent the public**

McGregor, S. C. (2020). "Taking the temperature of the room" how political campaigns use social media to understand and represent public opinion. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 84(S1), 236-256.

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# **SOCIAL OPINION IN CAMPAIGNS**



## SOCIAL MEDIA AS PUBLIC OPINION & DEMOCRATIC THEORY

- Value on input from engaged publics
- Potential to drive increased engagement?
- Consequences of a more, and differently, malleable public opinion

# STUDYING CAMPAIGNS



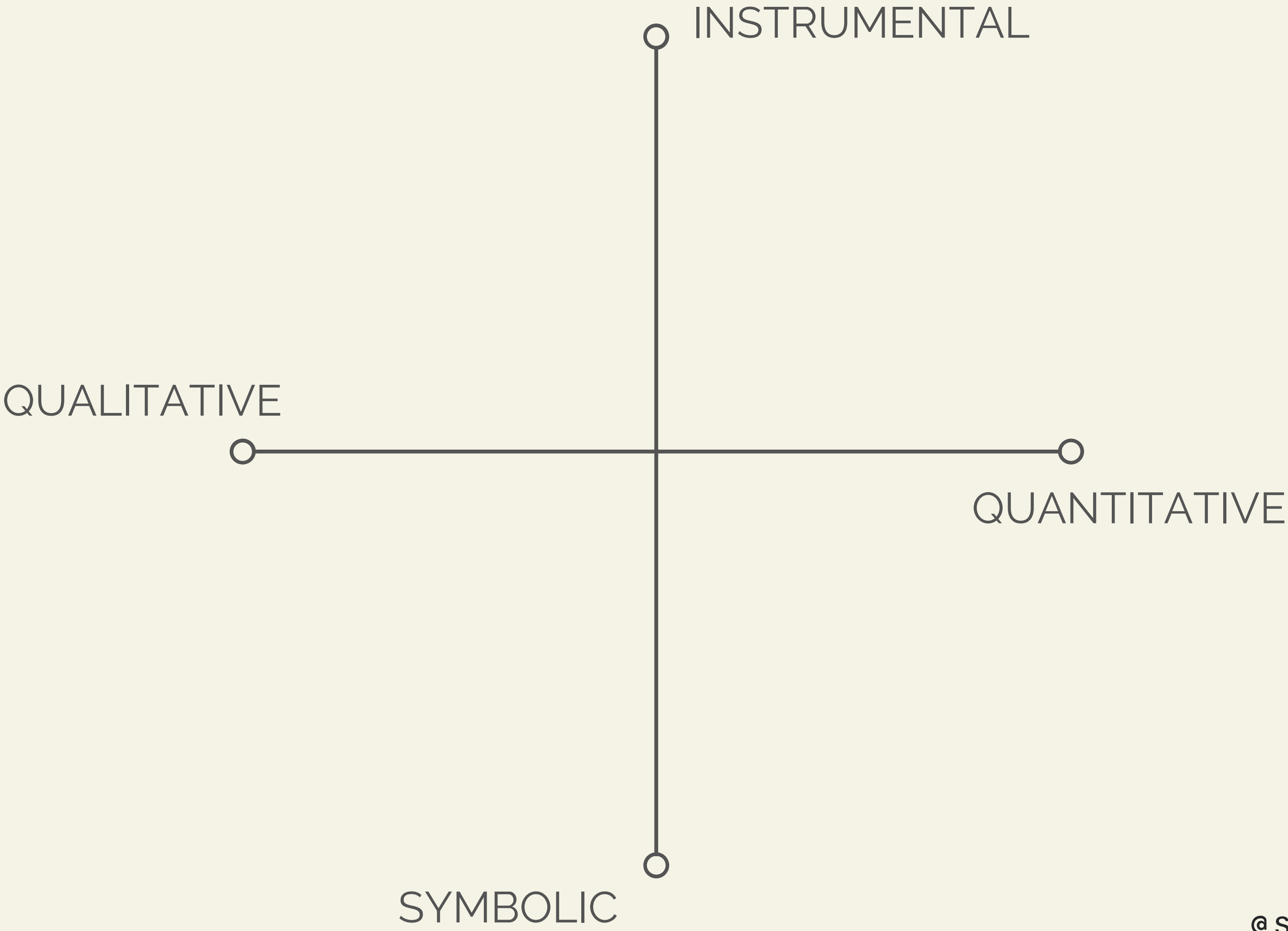
## CAMPAIGNS IN 2016, ONGOING 2020

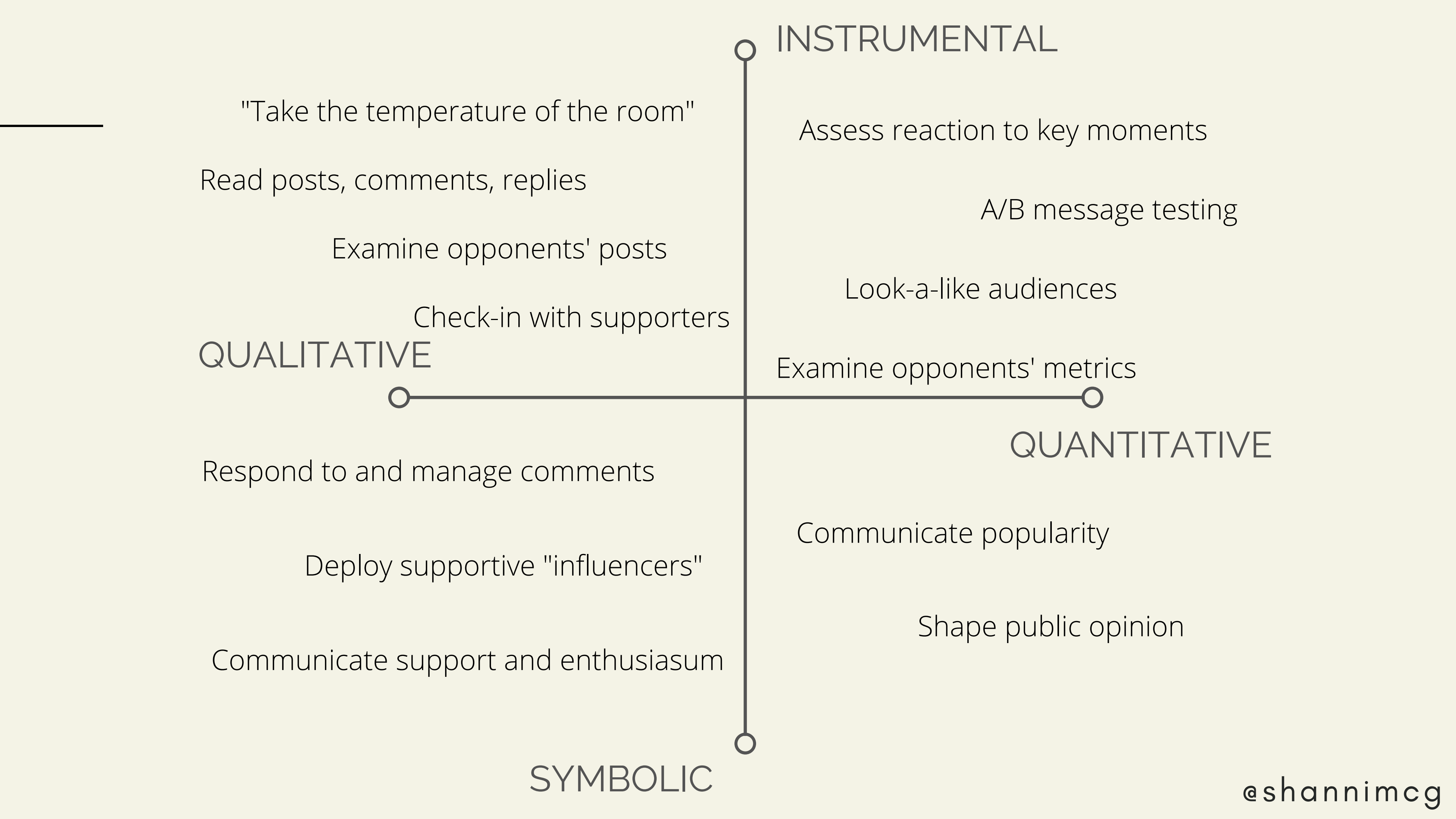
In-depth interviews with campaign professionals:

digital directors

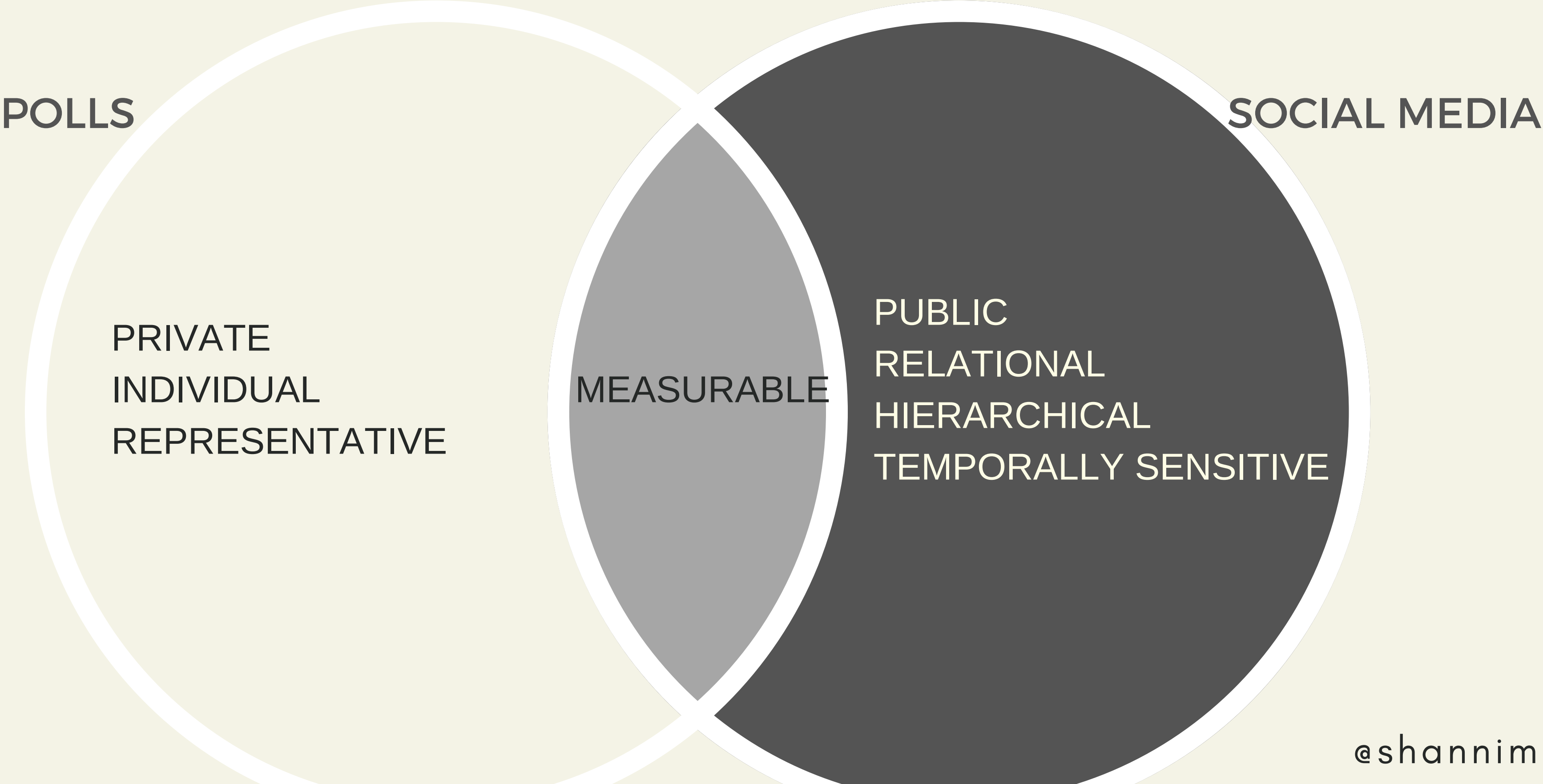
communication directors

deputy campaign directors





# Epistemological & normative assumptions of public opinion



An aerial photograph of a city skyline, likely New York City, is visible in the background. The image is overlaid with a pattern of puzzle pieces, some of which are missing, creating a fragmented effect. The central text is contained within a dark rectangular area.

# Identitarian citizenry

Who? Why?



MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA ARE CENTRAL  
TO CONSTRUCTING AND CONVEYING  
IDENTITY OF PARTIES & CANDIDATES

AS WELL AS THE GROUPS OF  
CONSTITUENTS THEY SEEK TO  
REPRESENT, NOT JUST INFORMATION  
ABOUT THE POLICIES THEY WILL  
PURSUE

Kreiss, D., Lawrence, R. G., & McGregor, S. C. (2020). Political identity ownership: Symbolic contests to represent members of the public. *Social Media+ Society*, 6(2).

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# IDENTITY OWNERSHIP

In the course of electioneering, candidates perform their own identities to align with groups whose support they seek and voters associate parties & candidates with particular social groups

ISSUES / TRAITS /  
SOCIAL IDENTITY



# CANDIDATES AS "PROTOTYPES"



# MAKING IN- GROUPS SALIENT



# MAKING OUT- GROUPS SALIENT

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[Sign Up](#)



**In 2016, counties hosting  
a Trump rally saw a  
**226% spike**  
**in hate crimes****

BERNIESANDERS.COM

SOURCE: WASHINGTON POST

**Bernie**



# A democracy (?) of partisanship



Politics is for power

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Thank you

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