Agenda Setting in the Digital Age: The Impact of Mass Media and Social Media on the Topic of Sexual Harassment

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Agenda Setting in the Digital Age: The Impact of Mass Media and Social Media on the Topic of Sexual Harassment

Melissa True Gibbs

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Agenda Setting in the Digital Age: The Impact of Mass Media and Social Media on the Topic of Sexual Harassment

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Master of Arts

The news media plays an important role in communication. The function of the media in a free society is to inform the public, be a watchdog of government, provide a voice for the voiceless, and help determine which issues should be discussed in the community. The power of the mass media to guide the social agenda and influence the public’s perception of what issues are important has been questioned in the digital age. This study examines traditional agenda-setting in the digital era to understand how the theory functions in a computer mediated society. The #MeToo movement acts as a case study for this research. This investigation uses a trend analysis to evaluate whether the public agenda on sexual harassment and #MeToo was set by mass media or social media. This research compares the coverage of sexual harassment and #MeToo in professional online news sites in the U.S. with tweets using the key words and hashtag on Twitter in the United States for ten weeks in 2017. Relying on the agenda-setting theory as a framework, this study clarifies the relationship of mass media and social media in driving public opinion. The findings of this work reveal how the expansion and influence of social media has changed the dynamic of mass communication. Despite those changes, the mass media still plays a prevailing role in setting the public agenda—even in a digital environment. The findings conclude that the mass media set the agenda on the subject of sexual harassment, and social media amplified that agenda. These findings demonstrate the strong role that mass media continues to have in setting the news agenda in conjunction with social media, and consequently, on civic opinion and awareness.

Keywords: agenda setting, mass media, social media, sexual harassment, #MeToo
One of my favorite quotes comes from the 1992 movie *A League of Their Own*. Dottie, played by actress Geena Davis, has just quit playing baseball for the Rockford Peaches. When the team manager, Jimmy—played by Tom Hanks—asks her why she’s leaving, her answer is because it was too hard. His response to her is something that has resonated with me through the course of researching and writing this thesis: “Of course it’s hard. It’s *supposed* to be hard. If it wasn’t hard, everyone would do it. The hard is what makes it great.”

The path to completing this thesis was hard. It is one of the most difficult things I have done in my life, but it was also one of the most rewarding things I have accomplished. It wasn’t easy going back to school 20 years after receiving my bachelor’s degree. This academic endeavor stretched me, tested me, and at times pushed me to my breaking point. And the fact that I had to do it in the middle of a pandemic only complicated things. My research was delayed because the world shut down, and I could not get the information I needed to complete my research. This postponed my graduation. The obstacles I faced and the difficulties I encountered were at times more than I thought I could handle. But with help from my Father in Heaven, encouragement from loving family members, direction from my professors, and the support of caring friends, I made it through the hard times. And now that it is finished, I can say it was a great experience.

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I would like to dedicate this work to the brave women across the country who came
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their stories and brought awareness to the problem.
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Introduction

On February 24, 2020, one of Hollywood’s most influential movie producers, Harvey Weinstein, was found guilty in a New York court of criminal sexual assault and rape (Full coverage: Harvey Weinstein is found guilty of rape, 2020). Two weeks later, on March 11, 2020, he was sentenced to 23 years in prison for the crimes (Ransom, 2020). As the case in New York wrapped up, another case across the country was just beginning. Prosecutors in Los Angeles said they would seek to extradite Weinstein to California where the media mogul had been charged with four counts of rape (Levenson, 2020).

The road to the verdict and sentencing was a long one. Weinstein was arrested and charged in New York almost two years before he was sentenced (Full coverage, 2020; Ransom, 2020). It was more than six months before Weinstein’s arrest that a major social movement against sexual harassment and sexual abuse exploded, which eventually led to his undoing (Ransom, 2020).

The voices of the social movement’s victims were the stimulus of Weinstein’s arrest, sentence, and eventual downfall. The women who spoke out and broke their silence about the sexual harassment and assault they had endured brought to light a problem not just in Hollywood, but the world. The voices of those women were echoed in both mass media and social media, which brought the topic of sexual assault and sexual harassment to the forefront of the social and political agenda. This study will evaluate whether it was mass media or social media that was the catalyst in setting the agenda of this issue.

Literature Review

The year of 2017 may have been the time of reckoning for sexual harassment in America. Before reaching its boiling point, the heat on the problem of sexual harassment had been slowly
and steadily rising for years. One of the first mentions of the matter came from actress Ashlee Judd in 2015. She authored an essay in Variety magazine detailing being sexually harassed by an unnamed media mogul (Setoodeh, 2015). The following year, television commentator and journalist Gretchen Carlson filed a sexual harassment suit against Fox News CEO Roger Ailes (Nicolaou, 2018). A string of accusations arose in 2017 against well-known men like Bill O’Reilly and Bill Cosby (Blumell & Sternadori, 2018; Steel & Schmidt, 2017). But it was an article that was published in October of that year in The New York Times about mega-influential Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein (Kantor & Twohey, 2017) that brought the issue to a roaring boil. The controversy exploded and came full circle all at once, because it was revealed that the man Judd referred to in the 2015 Variety article was Weinstein (Nicolaou, 2018).

Shortly after The Times article was published, tens of thousands of women used #MeToo to speak out online against sexual harassment, sparking a social media campaign that went viral and eventually turned into a movement. During this time, men in positions of authority who abused their power in the entertainment and other industries were fired for sexual harassment and sexual misconduct. It has been more than three years since the #MeToo movement exploded across the country, giving new meaning to those two words.

Origins of the #MeToo Movement

#MeToo is a social movement against the sexual harassment and assault of women in the workplace. The movement erupted in the fall of 2017 and is a platform for women who have been victimized at their jobs (Frye, 2018; Griffin, et al., 2018).

Inception of the #MeToo Movement

On October 5, 2017, The New York Times ran the first story that ushered in the #MeToo movement. Coverage of two other events involving other men in prominent positions and
accusations of sexual harassment, including Bill O’Reilly (Steel & Schmidt, 2017) and Bill Cosby (Blumell & Sternadori, 2018), were published earlier that year. But it was after the article about film producer Harvey Weinstein that the #MeToo movement exploded. In The Times article, several women who worked in the entertainment industry, including celebrities, accused Weinstein of sexual harassment and sexual assault (Cobb & Horeck, 2018; Kantor & Twohey, 2017). The article’s publication date was what was marked as the beginning of the #MeToo Movement (CBS, 2017; Griffin et al., 2018; Khomami, 2017). After the Weinstein article was published, many celebrities, sports figures, lawmakers, and other people in powerful positions, were accused of sexual harassment and misconduct. Ten days after The Times article was published, the #MeToo went viral. On October 15, 2017, actress Alyssa Milano encouraged women to tweet out the phrase if they were victims of sexual harassment, assault, abuse, or violence (Griffin et al., 2018; Khomami, 2017). Milano (2017) shared, “If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote “me too” as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.” Griffin et al. (2018) noted that the next day more than 609,000 tweets used the #MeToo. Within 24 hours, Facebook reported 4.7 million people used the #MeToo, with more than 12 million posts, comments, and reactions (CBS, 2017; Khomami, 2017).

“Me Too” Before Hashtags The day after Milano’s tweet went viral, she gave credit to another woman for the phrase “me too.” Milano (2017) tweeted, “I was just made aware of an earlier #MeToo movement, and the origin story is equal parts heartbreaking and inspiring.” Milano (2017) also included a link to the website of Just Be Inc., founded by Tarana Burke. Burke, an American social activist and program director for the Brooklyn-based group, Girls for Gender Equity, coined the expression “me too” and began using the phrase as early as 2006 (Frye, 2018;
Garcia, 2018; Santiago & Criss, 2017). Burke said the words first came to her nearly 10 years before she actually began using the phrase. Frye (2018) and Garcia (2018) have both documented that in 1997, Burke was a director at a youth camp. During that time, a 13-year-old girl opened up to her about how she was being sexually abused by her mother’s boyfriend. Burke was speechless and could not find the words to speak to the girl. Burke said, “I couldn't even bring myself to whisper . . . me too” (Santiago & Criss, 2017, para. 16). At that time, Burke did not take any action and sent the girl to speak with another counselor. A decade later, Burke founded a nonprofit organization to help victims of sexual harassment and assault. Her goal was to offer resources and support to victims of abuse. She used the words “me too” as the slogan of her operation (Frye, 2018; Garcia, 2018; Santiago & Criss, 2017).

#MeToo’s Impact on Powerful Men

This social movement led to a deluge of new allegations against men who were public figures and celebrities followed by the swift downfall of many of those accused due to rapid terminations from their jobs. Two of the men caught in this torrent were well-known television journalists Charlie Rose and Matt Lauer. Within eight days of each other, Rose and Lauer, two of the most powerful men in television news, were fired for sexual harassment and impropriety at their respective networks. Rose, the co-host of “CBS This Morning,” was fired from CBS on November 21, 2017 (CBS, 2017; Katz, 2017), and Lauer, a co-anchor for the “Today” show, was fired from NBC on November 29, 2017 (Ortiz & Siemaszko, 2017). Almost exactly two months to the day of the first Weinstein article printed in The New York Times, Time magazine named “The Silence Breakers” as its 2017 Person of the Year. “The Silence Breakers” issue recognized the women, including Ashley Judd (and some men), who came forward with their stories of sexual harassment and assault that helped spawn the #MeToo movement (Zacharek, et al., 2017).
On December 6, 2017, some of “The Silence Breakers” were featured on the cover and in articles of the magazine because they were “the voices that launched a movement” (Zacharek et al., 2017, p. cover).

**Sexual Harassment**

The #MeToo movement was the impetus that gave many women the courage to come forward with traumatic stories of sexual harassment and abuse. Many of those harrowing stories of sexual harassment and sexual assault were exposed and shared by the mass media. These topics are at the heart of the #MeToo movement, on which this study focuses.

**What is Sexual Harassment?**

Sexual harassment is exhibited in several ways. It is defined as unwelcome sex-related behavior that is perceived as offensive or threatening by the victim (Fitzgerald, et al., 1997). Nonverbal sexual harassment may include staring, ogling, looking up and down a person’s body, facial expressions, derogatory gestures, or electronic or written correspondence (Crocker, 1983; Grauerholz, 1989; Keyton et al., 2001; Pek & Senn, 2004). Verbal sexual harassment is defined by Crocker (1983) and Walsh-Childers et al. (1996) as verbal sexual advances, statements about appearance, sexually suggestive comments, degrading comments about sex or women’s bodies, and “jokes” about rape. Physical sexual harassment occurs when personal space is invaded, or when there is unwanted touching such as pinching, patting, or grabbing (Crocker, 1983; Keyton et al., 2001; Rospenda, et al., 1988; Walsh-Childers et al., 1996).

**Sexual Harassment Among Women.** Sexual harassment was, and continues to be, a problem for many women in the United States (Fitzgerald, 1993; Ho et al., 2012). A survey conducted in the U.S. in 2018 by the nonprofit group, Stop Street Harassment, found that 81% of women had experienced some form of sexual harassment during their lifetime (Kearl, 2018).
Verbal sexual harassment was the most common form of sexual harassment. The results of the survey revealed 77% of the women reported being verbally sexually harassed, 51% of respondents said they had been physically sexually harassed, and 41% reported sexual harassment by phone, text, or online (Kearl, 2018).

Research revealed that the majority of sexual harassment victims are women and the perpetrators are usually men (Gutek, 1985; North, 2016; Pryor et al., 1993). Gruber (1998), North (2016), and Pryor et al. (1993) all argue that this phenomenon was attributed to the patriarchal system in American culture. Fitzgerald (1993) and Gruber (1998) found that women in male-dominated occupations encounter more sexual harassment than women who are employed in other professions.

**Sexual Harassment in the Workplace.** Sexual harassment in the workplace is a form of sex discrimination. It is characterized as the unwanted sexual attention and discrimination based on the sex or gender of employees by their colleagues or superiors (Taylor et al., 2018). The United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (n.d.) defines sexual harassment as “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature” (para. 2). Harassment becomes illegal when the behavior “affects an individual’s employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual’s work performance, or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment” (EEOC, n.d., para. 2).

There are diverse types of sexual harassment in the workplace. Courts have recognized two categories of sexual harassment, known as *quid pro quo* (something for something) and *hostile environment* discrimination (Lengnick-Hall, 1995). “Quid pro quo” refers to situations in which a superior promises a subordinate employee a tangible job benefit, such as a raise or promotion, in exchange for sexual favors, or as a threat if sexual favors aren’t performed (Walsh-
Childers et al., 1996). “Hostile environment” may include circumstances where an employee is subjected to an unsolicited behavior like sexual advances or degrading sexual comments that impede an employee’s ability to perform their job or that “makes the workplace environment inhospitable, intimidating, or offensive” (Walsh-Childers, et al., 1996, p. 560).

Sexual harassment among women is pervasive in the workplace. The problem of sexual harassment of women in the workforce has been documented in several studies (Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Keyton et al., 2001; Schneider et al., 1997; Taylor et al., 2017). Fitzgerald et al. (1988) reported that surveys showed that 50% or more of women experience some form of sexual harassment during their career. The EEOC (2018) reported that 85% of charges filed for sexual harassment in the workplace in 2017 came from women.

Sexual harassment in the workplace is a manifestation of power in a work relationship. Sexual harassment by men has been regarded as an attempt to control the women in a company or an organization (Gruber, 1998; North, 2016; Taylor et al., 2017). According to researchers, the behavior creates organizational cultures that keep women subordinated, which can also curtail their advancement (Harrison, 2018; North, 2016). Taylor et al. (2017) found that sexual harassment alienated women and made them feel uncomfortable in the workplace.

**Consequences of Sexual Harassment**

Sexual harassment in the workplace has many adverse effects on the individual and the company or organization. Negative effects of workplace sexual harassment include: decreased job performance and productivity, decreased job satisfaction, less commitment to the organization, undermined confidence, more symptoms of depression, increased anxiety, and higher job turnover (Bergman et al., 2002; Clarke et al., 2016; Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Harrison, 2018; North, 2013; North, 2015; Schneider et al., 1997; Taylor et al., 2017). Many victims of
sexual harassment said that the experience had a psychological impact on them (Bergman, et al., 2002; Gibbons, 2014; Harrison, 2018; Ho et al., 2012; Lengnick-Hall, 1995; Schneider et al., 1997). Research by Ho et al. (2012) has even indicated that sexual harassment experiences correlate with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

In addition to negative consequences for victims of sexual harassment in the workplace, the effects of the behavior can also have a monetary impact on a company or organization. Bergman et al. (2002) and Lengnick-Hall (1995) discovered that sexual harassment can cost an organization a great deal of money due to expenses associated with hiring and training to fill positions left empty by victims of sexual assault, litigation, and negative publicity. Several U.S. companies have experienced those consequences since 2017 after fallout from the #MeToo movement.

**Theoretical Framework**

For decades, scholars have discussed the capability of the press and news organizations to shape which issues the public considers to be pertinent. The public’s perception of an issue’s importance is based on the coverage given to those issues. However, the agenda-setting power of traditional media (i.e., newspapers, television, and radio) has been questioned due to the growth, impact, and influence of social media.

The #MeToo movement quickly became a hot topic around the globe when the conversation on social media and the coverage in mass media focused on the movement. A mass media news article spurred the social movement, which received momentum from the subsequent reports and articles published about sexual harassment and assault as well as the development of and happenings within the movement (Griffin et al., 2018; Kantor & Twohey, 2017; Khomami, 2017; Steel, & SchmidSt, 2017).
**Agenda Setting**

The theory of agenda-setting posits that the news media influences the importance of the topics on the public agenda. Lippmann (1922) first identified this function more than 80 years ago in his book, *Public Opinion*. The first chapter in his classic book is titled, “The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Head,” and in it he established the idea that the mental imagery of the public, or the perceived public opinion, is derived from the media’s coverage of world events. Lippmann (1922) demonstrated the impact the press can have on the opinions formed by the public: “Lippmann elaborated the role of the press in providing the raw materials, the basic information, from which public opinion is constructed” (McCombs, 2005, p. 552). McCombs (2005) said that Lippmann was the “intellectual father” of the agenda-setting theory devised by himself and Donald Shaw.

Following Lippman, Bernard Cohen (1963) asserted that happenings in the world reach individuals from the press via the medium of mass communications. Cohen (1963) observed “the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (p. 13). In his book, *The Press and Foreign Policy*, Cohen (1963) explained the way people see the world will look different depending on “the map that is drawn for them by writers, editors, and publishers of the paper they read” (p. 13). Further, if a news item is covered frequently and prominently, the public will regard the issue as more important. Cohen (1963) expressed the idea that was verified in McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) Chapel Hill study.

McCombs and Shaw (1972) put Lippmann’s idea of imagery and Cohen’s idea of message mediation to the test by analyzing media coverage and public affairs. They used the 1968 U.S. presidential election as a case study for their research. They conducted a content
analysis on media messages of the election and compared it to what the public believed were the key issues in the presidential race. This seminal study became the foundation of the agenda-setting theory.

In 1972, McCombs and Shaw, two associate professors of journalism at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, introduced the agenda-setting theory of the mass media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The theory evolved from a study the duo executed on the 1968 presidential election, which has come to be known as “The Chapel Hill Study.” The researchers set out to find if there was a correlation between the issues the media reported about the election, and what voters thought were the prominent issues. The researchers surveyed 100 voters who lived in Chapel Hill, North Carolina on what they thought were the most important issues of the presidential race between Democratic incumbent Lyndon B. Johnson and the Republican challenger Richard Nixon (McCombs, 2003; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). McCombs and Shaw (1972) then compared voters’ opinions about the most important issues to what was reported by local and national news outlets.

From the data, the researchers discovered “a very strong relationship between the emphases placed on different campaign issues by the media . . . and the judgment of voters as to the salience and importance of various campaign topics” (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 181). In other words, the voter’s agenda highly correlated to news media coverage. This finding reinforced the position that media selects what events and issues to cover, and that coverage then shapes and directs what the public thinks about.

McCombs and Shaw (1972) introduced the agenda-setting theory, which proposed that the media sets the public agenda by orienting news consumers to specific content, stories, narratives, or ideas. McCombs and Shaw (1972) explained:
In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue by also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position. In reflecting what candidates are saying during a campaign, the mass media may well determine the important issues – that is, the media may set the “agenda” of the campaign (p. 176).

Following the publication of McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) original article, the duo continued their research and investigated other U.S. presidential campaigns in 1972 and 1976. Their research focused on two elements: awareness and information. Agenda setting is the creation of public awareness and concern of salient issues by the news media. McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) agenda-setting theory states that newsroom staff, editors, and broadcasters play a key role in choosing and displaying news that shapes the perception of the public’s reality (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The scholars argued that the mass media determines the critical issues and “readers learn not only about a given issue but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position” (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 176). Most research on agenda setting embraces the assumptions that the press do not reflect reality; they filter and shape it, and the few issues and subjects that the news media focus on leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001; Chaffee & Wilson, 1977; Coleman & McCombs, 2007; Feezell, 2017; Grzywinska & Batorski, 2016; McCombs, 2005; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs & Zhu, 1995; Roberts et al., 2002; Sayre et al., 2010; Tan & Weaver, 2013).

Salience is at the root of agenda setting. Topics that are ubiquitous, pervasive, and prevalent in news reporting are perceived by consumers as more important because of the
coverage those topics receive. The public feels that the issues that are most pertinent are those that the media focuses on most. Salience is connected to attention, awareness, importance, and popularity. Agenda setting has been described as:

. . . the creation of public awareness and concern of salient issues by the news media.

Two basis assumptions underlie most research on agenda-setting: (1) the press and the media do not reflect reality; they filter and shape it; (2) media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues. One of the most critical aspects in the concept of an agenda-setting role of mass communication is the time frame for this phenomenon (University of Twente, 2012, p. 104).

Kiousis (2004) identified three elements of media salience: attention, prominence, and valence. Attention refers to the number of news stories devoted to a matter and is “usually gauged by the sheer volume of stories or space dedicated to topics in newspapers, television news, and so on” (Kiousis, 2004, p. 74). Prominence indicates the placement of a topic, and “a story’s salience is influenced by its placement, size, pictures, pull quotes, and other aesthetic devices (Kiousis, 2004, p. 74). The positioning can include placement of the story in a paper or within a broadcast, the amount of time or space given to the topic, and the size of the headline or other visual elements. Valence is connected to the emotional attributes of a narrative, which could include conflict or the positive or negative tone of a report. Kiousis (2004) explained, “the higher the conflict, the higher the valence score,” and “more positive stories would indicate higher salience in some instances whereas more negative stories would indicate higher salience in other cases” (p. 76).
The traditional models of agenda setting regard that mainstream media impacts the public agenda by guiding audience attention to certain issues, which then amplifies the perceived importance of those issues to the public. Dearing and Rogers (1996) performed a meta-analysis of more than 350 empirical studies on agenda setting. Based on statistical evaluations of the agenda-setting effect, they concluded that there was a correlation between media and audience agendas (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). This research reinforced Lazarsfeld and Merton’s (1948) notion that “the mass media confer status on public issues, persons, organizations and social movements” (p. 101).

Iyengar and Kinder (1987) explained that agenda setting transpires through a cognitive process known as “accessibility.” The concept of accessibility insinuates that the more prominently and frequently the news media covers a topic, the more that subject becomes accessible in the reader, listener, or viewer’s memory. In the context of agenda setting, memories and information are made more accessible through news coverage. Dearing and Rogers (1996) explained that when an issue or topic has a higher salience in the news media, that information will also have a higher salience in a news consumer’s mind. With each occurrence of exposure to an issue in a media report, individuals are reminded of the information: “This exposure will keep that information ‘fresh’ in memory, ready for use” (Carpentier, 2014, p. 533). Because this information is readily accessible, Bruner (1957) and Higgins and King (1981) showed it is likely to be used in information processing.

**Criticism of Conventional Agenda Setting.** The conventional model of agenda setting and the news media’s agenda-setting power is challenged by the digital media environment, the accessibility of the Internet, and the impact of social media. Some researchers argue that the ability of the mass media to shape the public agenda is threatened by the current media landscape.
(Chaffee & Wilson, 1977; Grzywinska & Batorski, 2016; McCombs, 2005; McCombs & Zhu, 1995; Tan & Weaver, 2013). McCombs (2005) pointed out that the heterogeneous media available on the Internet can lead to different agendas among the public, creating a “situation that would spell the demise of agenda-setting as we have known it” (p. 545).

Scholars have argued that the personalization of media exposure nullifies the traditional agenda-setting power of the mass media. At the height of the publishing and broadcast eras in the 20th century, there were only a handful of print and broadcast media outlets whose publications and programming held significant influence over the public agenda; but in the current digital era, there are numerous sources and outlets for information, allowing people to customize their media consumption (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001; Feezell, 2017; McCombs, 2005; Prior, 2007; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). In the digital age of the 21st century, more information is easily accessible and readily available to people via the Web. Chaffee and Metzger (2001) claimed that the Internet has given people the ability to customize media, and thus “mass communication is a fleeting idea, a purely 20th century phenomenon” (p. 365). The availability of so much information and peoples’ ability to tailor media threatens the long-held ability of the mass media to shape the public agenda (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001; Feezell, 2017; McCombs, 2005; Prior, 2007; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011).

McCombs (2005) acknowledged how the World Wide Web has dramatically changed the communication landscape: “E-mail, online newspapers, chat rooms and websites representing every ideological, commercial and personal niche have changed the communication behaviors of millions of people across the world” (McCombs, 2005, p. 544). Advances in technology have made more kinds of media available, allowing more ways for audiences to be influenced. Divergent views and diversity of information on the Internet also allow consumers to tailor their
media consumption and individualize the messages they receive while choosing the channels and outlets they received it from. McCombs (2005) believed that “the result of these idiosyncratic personal agendas . . ., continues the argument, [and] will be a public agenda characterized by considerable diversity and the scattering of public attention” (p. 544).

**Audience Fragmentation.** Increased selectivity and audience fragmentation in today’s digital media environment threaten the traditional agenda-setting power of the mass media. In the post-broadcast media environment, there is a “shrinking audience for traditional mass media in the face of growing choice in media options and increased selection for the consumer” (Feezell, 2017, p. 490).

Feezell (2017) observed,

This shift from mass broadcasting to large audiences toward niche media reaching more narrowly targeted and attentive audiences is commonly referred to as audience fragmentation and is widely believed to be a source of change in political behavior and public opinion (p. 482).

The fragmentation of audiences limits the strength of the mass media to reach and inform the general public casting doubt on the ability of the mass media to influence and shape the public agenda (Chaffe & Wilson, 1977; Feezell, 2017; McCombs & Zhu, 1995; Tan & Weaver, 2013). Feezell (2017) explained that the long-held ability of the mass media to shape the public agenda is threatened because there are “more media sources, allowing for the tailoring of media consumption to suit individual audience members’ interests” (p. 482).

A growing number of researchers contend that the Internet has diluted the ability of the mass media to set the public agenda. The agenda-setting theory assumes that people receive news and information from traditional sources such as newspapers, radio, magazines, and
television, but in the digital age there are now multiple sources for people to receive and share
information (Bimber, 1999). The Internet is at the core of this change and has been an integral
part of the changing definition of news sources and news producers (Sayre et al., 2010). Sayre et
al. (2010) explained that the World Wide Web has created an environment where “citizen
journalists, as well as activists, are availing themselves of Internet-based platforms in the form of
personal and cooperative blogs, social networks, and photo and video sharing sites” (p. 9).

Mass Media Platform Change

Massive shifts in mass media, particularly in newspapers and television news, have taken
place over the past few decades.

The number of daily print newspapers in the United States has seen a steady decline over
the past five decades. American newspaper circulation is at its lowest since 1940 (Pew, 2019).
Since 1970, 488 daily papers have disappeared, and the number of print newspapers has dropped
almost 28% (Watson, 2020). According to the Pew Research Center (2019) circulation of
newspapers was down 12% for weekday publications and declined 13% for Sunday circulation
in 2019.

Television news viewership has dropped dramatically over the past several years. The
Pew Research Center (2018) found in 2017 that only 50% of adults in the U.S. got their news
from television, and that number had dropped from 57% the year before. Local TV news saw
audience decline across all key time slots in 2018. Viewership was down 10% for morning news,
14% for late night and evening news, and 19% for midday and primetime news broadcasts (Pew,
2019).

The Internet has changed how news is distributed, and newspaper publishers and
television news stations have both been compelled to go online. More than 80% of newspapers
have integrated web and print operations (Pew, 2019). Digital circulation for news publishers is more promising. Pew (2019) found in 2018 that digital circulation for weekdays was up 6%, and Sunday circulation was up 8%. Television news stations have a robust online presence. This is reflected in the digital advertising revenue. Local TV stations online advertising earnings increased 14% in 2018, totaling nearly $1.2 billion dollars (Pew, 2019).

**Digital Media.** In the 20th century, newspapers and television were the main sources of information, but in the 21st century, “traditional” media is losing readers and viewers to “new” media, known as *digital media*. According to Goldstein (2011), the average daily total paid circulation for U.S. daily newspapers in 1970 (about the time the agenda-setting theory was formed) was just over 63 million households. By 2010 the number of households in the U.S. had doubled, but the paid circulation for U.S. daily newspapers had dropped to around 40 million (Goldstein, 2011).

Like newspaper subscriptions, television news viewing is also declining. The 2018 Reuters Institute Digital News Report found that “local TV news, and the major broadcast networks are all down several percentage points from last year” (Newman et al., 2018). Newman et al. (2018) also discovered that TV news consumption has dropped 15% in the five years between 2013 and 2018.

It is because of the decline in newspaper circulation and TV news viewership that many scholars question the power of the print and broadcast media to continue to set the public agenda: “We cannot ignore the fact that, for the past 100 years, journalism has lived within a bundled product called media, and that bundle now is beginning to unravel” (Goldstein, 2011, p. 2). Historically, journalists set the agenda on what the public read and saw; although with the rise of
social media, some say they no longer do so exclusively (Feezell, 2017; Grzywinska & Batorski, 2016; McCombs, 2005; Sayre et al., 2010).

However, news organizations and mass media outlets have adapted to the technological changes and have a strong presence online. Both print and broadcast news groups have embraced and used digital media, including the World Wide Web and social media. The Pew Research Center Digital News Fact Sheet (2019) noted, “online news includes the digital operations of many so-called ‘legacy’ news organizations (those that originated in print or broadcast)” (para. 2). Practically all news sources offer content through multiple platforms: “Someone who turns to their local newspaper for news can access it in print, via its website or by following the outlet on social media” (Pew, 2019). Digital space is a key component in how people obtain news and information. According to the Pew Research Center (2019), nearly as many Americans prefer to get their news via the Web as television and news organizations are providing that content in multiple ways including digitally on websites and social media.

**Mass Media Communication Channel Change.** As technology has changed, news organizations and their methods of distributing information have also changed. Traditional mass media organizations now have a footprint in the digital space, both online and in social media. It could be argued that prominence in those spaces keeps mass media news organizations in a prominent position of influence. Just because the platforms news organizations use to share messages has changed, it doesn’t mean that their influence or agenda-setting function has been diluted.

Traditional media and new media may have a symbiotic relationship. Coleman and McCombs (2007) compared a younger generation who used the Internet with older generations who used newspapers and television for news information and found that the different media use
did not eliminate the agenda-setting influence. The findings “do not support the idea that diverse sources of news and the Internet spell the end of the agenda-setting influence” (Coleman & McCombs, 2007, p. 504) and “provides strong support for the idea that agenda-setting effects still prevail among the young” (Coleman & McCombs, 2007, p. 504). This observation suggests that old media and new media may foster a flow of information, which cultivates the public agenda. Roberts et al. (2002) reached a similar conclusion: this relationship may result from online users redistributing and sharing information from traditional media. Sayre et al. (2010) determined that social networking sites did not dismantle the agenda-setting theory. Their research demonstrated that the nature of traditional media’s role in agenda setting was not eliminated but modified (Sayre et al., 2010). They asserted, “if new media are following the cues of traditional media, then agenda-setting power has not diminished but has instead gained another channel” (Sayre et al., 2010, p.13).

**Information Sharing**

With the emergence of social media, the way the public accesses and receives information is drastically different from when the agenda-setting theory was introduced more than 50 years ago. When the theory was first developed, media was a one-way communication model with print, radio, and television, and print sources pushing content out to a mass audience. In this digital age, many media consumers participate in a two-way communication model. In the 20th century, there were only a few outlets available with information, but in the 21st century, audiences have unlimited sources for content.

A 2018 study for the Pew Research Center found that in the United States social media outpaced print newspapers as a news source (Matsa & Shearer, 2018). Matsa and Shearer (2018) found that 68% of adults in the United States get their news on social media sites, and U.S.
Americans use Facebook more than any other social media network for news. About 43% get news on Facebook, 21% from YouTube, 12% from Twitter, and 8% from other social networks like Instagram, LinkedIn, or Snapchat (Matsa & Shearer, 2018). Grzywińska and Batorski (2016) described this practice in their research and explained how news consumers rely on friends and online connections for news to come to them, “replacing the professional filter of institutionalized news media outlet with a social one” (pp. 19–20).

**Twitter and News.** Twitter was founded in 2006 as a microblogging social networking platform (Twitter, 2021; Twitter launches, 2019). Millions of people worldwide use the social network (Twitter, 2021; Twitter launches, 2019). Users of the social media outlet send and receive 280-character text posts called *tweets* (Larson, 2017; Twitter launches, 2019). Users see the tweets in a timeline that updates immediately and in real time. Twitter users can also share other people’s tweets on their own profile. Sharing another user’s tweet is called a *retweet* or *retweeting*.

Twitter tracks the most often mentioned words, phrases, and hashtags (#), and these become trending topics. Kwak et al. (2010) explained, “a hashtag is a convention among Twitter users to create and follow a thread of discussion by prefixing a word with a ‘#’ character” (p. 2). Trending topics on social media often begin on Twitter with hashtags. Those hashtags and tweets are easily searchable and cannot be made private like posts on Facebook and Instagram.

In 2017, 80% of the U.S. population used social media (Tankovska, 2021) and millions of Americans used Twitter. The platform is one of the largest social networks worldwide and Americans account for the highest number of Twitter users in the world (Tankovska, 2021). In the fourth quarter of 2017, there were 68 million monthly active Twitter users in the United States (Tankovska, 20121). In fact, according to Tankovska (2021), “the top 10 percent of
Twitter users in the United States generate approximately 80 percent of the tweets on the platform” (para. 2).

Twitter is a social network, but it has also become an important medium for news sharing (Twitter launches, 2019). Many news organizations use the social media platform to get and share news content (Kwak et al., 2010; Moon & Hadley, 2014; Wu & Shen, 2015). Moon and Hadley (2014) described “the remarkable nature of Twitter as an information dissemination and information gathering tool” (p. 300) and said, “Twitter has gotten widespread attention for its central role in facilitating communication about international political upheavals and natural disasters” (p. 292). For this reason, some researchers have examined whether Twitter is a social network or a news media (Kwak et al., 2010).

**Research Questions**

More research needs to be done to understand the role of mass media and its relationship with agenda setting in the digital era. This study’s scrutiny of the mass media coverage of sexual harassment and the #MeToo movement, as well as trends in posting and hashtag use on social media, will clarify the agenda-setting role and the agenda-setting power of the news media in a technological era. This research explores agenda setting in the digital era to examine how the theory and mass media function in new media. The main examination will explore whether people posting content to social media networks acted in response to mainstream news coverage, or whether posts on social networking sites influenced professional media coverage of the issue. The answers to those questions will help determine whether it was mass media or social media that set the public agenda on sexual harassment and the #MeToo movement.

It is important to understand the impact and implications that the mass media, particularly online news outlets, played in the reckoning of sexual harassment in the United States and
insurgence of a new cultural phenomenon known as #MeToo. This thesis will attempt to fill some of the gaps in the current academic literature through the following research questions:

RQ1: What role did mass media have in setting and driving the public agenda on sexual harassment?

RQ2: What role did social media have in setting and driving the public agenda on sexual harassment?

RQ3: Did mass media or social media set the public agenda on sexual harassment?

This thesis focuses on 2017 because this was the year that the #MeToo movement exploded, and heightened awareness and dialog about the issue of sexual harassment became a major topic of the public agenda.

**Method**

This research sought to determine if mass media is still the driving force of agenda setting in regard to the public agenda or whether social media has become the main influencer of the public’s perception of the important topics in the nation and world. This study used the topic of sexual harassment and more specifically, the #MeToo movement as a case study for this investigation. To examine the relationships between traditional media and social media, the volume of content referring to sexual harassment and #MeToo was tracked.

Articles from digital news sites were used for mass media, and tweets from Twitter were used for social media. The decision to use digital news sites and Twitter was made because of the nature of the media landscape at this time. Mass media looks different now than it did 20 years ago. The actual printing of newspapers has been in steady decline for the past two decades, and television news viewership has also seen losses. Since the late 1990s, the World Wide Web has grown, and there has been a digital boom, including news websites and social media platforms.
Only original tweets were used, no retweets or duplicates were included in the data. The data was extracted during a 10-week period between October 1, 2017 and December 6, 2017. This timeframe was chosen because 2017 was a landmark year for the #MeToo movement.

Mass media content included articles from CNN, USA Today, and The New York Times, and social media content included tweets from Twitter. CNN, USA Today, and The Times were chosen because they were the top three most visited news websites in 2017 as determined by ComScore that were searchable on the Factiva database. Twitter was chosen because there are more Twitter users in the U.S. than anywhere else in the world and the social media platform tracks the most often used words, phrases, and hashtags in tweets that are public and therefore searchable. Articles and tweets were gathered over a 10-week period between October 1, 2021 and December 6, 2021 which was the beginning of the public acknowledgement of the problem of sexual harassment in the United States. The sample included more than 1,200 articles from the news websites and more than five million tweets from the social media platform.

**Sample Selection Procedures**

Using the current media landscape as a guide, this study used three online news websites and Twitter for data collection and investigation. This study analyzed the number of articles published and tweets sent in the United States on the topics of sexual harassment and #MeToo every day for 70 days between October and December of 2017. The scope of this investigation included dozens of news articles and between tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands of tweets on each of those days. Analysis and comparisons of the trends were made in order to gauge whether mass media or social media drives and sets the public agenda.

To examine the relationship, the researcher conducted a trend analysis on the volume of content on sexual harassment and #MeToo from two sources (i.e., digital news websites and
Twitter) on consecutive days over a period of 10-weeks. For mass media, this analysis included articles from the top three most visited news websites as determined by ComScore (Table 1). For social media, hashtag use from Twitter was used. The timeframe began on October 1, 2017 and went through December 9, 2017. This time period was chosen because, as demonstrated in the literature review, this was the beginning of the awakening of the problem of sexual harassment in the United States and the beginning of the #MeToo movement, which was followed by a surge of social activism.

The researcher gathered data on the number of digital articles published on the topics of sexual harassment and #MeToo during a 10-week period in the top three most visited news websites in the United States. The unit of analysis was the number of articles published about those topics which is a good indicator of media salience. The results were compared with the number of tweets on Twitter using the same two topics during the same timeframe. The researcher compared the trends on those topics during the timeframe in mass media and on social media.

Hundreds of thousands of samples were drawn from two searchable databases: Factiva for mass media in digital news and Synthesio for Twitter in social media.

**Traditional News Data**

Factiva was used to gather the content produced by the three most visited news websites in the United States in 2017. Digital news sites were chosen because of the massive shifts in mass media, particularly in newspapers and television news over the past few decades.

For traditional news data from mass media, the websites with the most visitors determined by ComScore (2017) were used. The news outlets with the most visitors were used because more Americans visit those sites and those organizations reach the most people. Public
exposure to the news was a necessary component of this study so the most utilized news sources
needed to be incorporated in it. The most visited platforms were determined by ComScore
according to unique viewers in its news/information category. According to ComScore, unique
visitors “is a measure of how many unique (i.e., different) individuals visit a site over some
period of time” (Sutcliffe, 2007, p. 1). Sutcliffe (2007) stated this metric is appropriate to
quantify the size of an unduplicated audience that a specific website reaches. Unique
viewers may visit a website on a computer, mobile phone, or tablet.

The top three most visited digital news platforms based on unique viewers according to
ComScore during the months of October, November, and December of 2017 were used to gather
traditional news data. The data from ComScore is listed in Table 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yahoo-HuffPost News Network</td>
<td>156,880</td>
<td>163,340</td>
<td>156,623</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNN Network</td>
<td>147,685</td>
<td>141,273</td>
<td>134,345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA TODAY Network</td>
<td>123,391</td>
<td>125,240</td>
<td>121,364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weather Company, The</td>
<td>115,586</td>
<td>107,163</td>
<td>115,759</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBC News Digital</td>
<td>123,024</td>
<td>115,402</td>
<td>113,571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBS News</td>
<td>116,365</td>
<td>109,858</td>
<td>102,874</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Times Digital</td>
<td>94,925</td>
<td>93,625</td>
<td>92,091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox News Digital Network</td>
<td>95,890</td>
<td>89,011</td>
<td>84,932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WashingtonPost.com</td>
<td>88,908</td>
<td>85,823</td>
<td>84,627</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tribune Publishing</td>
<td>82,983</td>
<td>73,580</td>
<td>71,730</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Top 10 most visited web platforms according to total unique visitors/viewers in the
news/information category in the United States from October 2017 to December 2017 according
to ComScore (2017).
The three news websites utilized in the study were CNN, USA Today, and The New York Times. All three of these news organizations produce and create original content and employ professional reporters. Although Yahoo-HuffPost News Network was the most visited website, the researcher chose not to include it for gathering article data for this study because Yahoo aggregates news content from several different platforms and organizations and using their data may risk duplication of news stories covered by other organizations. As Palser (2002) pointed out, Yahoo! News “needs no reporters and creates no stories. It is the ultimate aggregator of online media, republishing the work of about 100 news sources and organizing links to thousands more” (para. 2). The researcher did not use The Weather Company in data collection because this outlet focuses on weather and not current events. NBC News Digital and CBS News were not used because the information from these companies and platforms was not available on a research database. There was information on research databases for the television content of these organizations, but not for their digital content. The three news websites that were chosen represent part of the core of the mainstream media within the United States. One of the outlets (i.e., CNN) has a broadcast background and the two other outlets (i.e., USA Today and The New York Times) have a print background. The three news sites were chosen because they have the largest number of visitors and were searchable on the Factiva database.

The database Factivia was used to search for articles and content about sexual harassment and #MeToo from the three news organizations. Factiva was chosen because all of the news organizations were found in that database. Factiva (n.d.) is a global news information service and research tool owned by Dow Jones & Company. The database includes more than 30,000 sources including national and international newspapers and aggregates content from those sources.
(Factiva, n.d.). The researcher used this database to search the keywords in the content of the three media outlets during the specified time period.

The unit of analysis was the articles. The data for all analysis was gathered using the same keywords or terms “sexual harassment” and “#MeToo.” The keywords or terms must have appeared within the headline or lead of the story. Due to the inverted pyramid structure of news writing, this sifted out stories that only mentioned the search terms peripherally.

**Social Media Data**

The data from Twitter was collected using the social media analytics platform Synthesio. Synthesio was used to scour tweets sent out on the social network from users in the United States in 2017. Twitter chosen because Twitter is primarily meant for sharing ideas (Forsey, n.d.); other social networks were not chosen because their purposes are different. Facebook is designed for connecting with friends and family (Forsey, n.d.); Instagram is meant to share pictures (Forsey, n.d.); Snapchat is a personal messaging app (Elgersma, 2018); and TikTok is a video sharing platform that had not yet gained traction in the United States in 2017 (Liao & Shu, 2020).

The software Synthesio was used to search for tweets about sexual harassment and #MeToo from Twitter. Synthesio was chosen because it is a social intelligence application used for the purpose of social media monitoring, social analytics, and social listening. Social listening refers to tracking social media platforms for conversations and mentions, which are then analyzed for insights and information. The software does stratified, random sampling in sets of 10,000 posts in order to extract data. This is common in social listening platforms because high volume searches, like trending topics, require too much strain on the database resources to provide complete lists. However, the integrity of the data trends remain intact because the data ratio delivers the same results on a smaller scale.
The database Synthesio was used to search for articles and content about sexual harassment and #MeToo from the social media platform Twitter. Synthesio is a modern visual web data extraction software that allows immediate and historical data to be collected. Synthesio’s software uses artificial intelligence for online trends analysis. The technology captures what consumers say, think, and do. Synthesio (n.d.) said its artificial intelligence and analytical frameworks “employs market research frameworks to help you rationalize consumer motivation” (para. 1).

Synthesio (n.d.) was named the global leader in social listening and audience insights by an independent research firm. The company’s social intelligence suite provides strategic insights and quantitative data to “measure the impact of social and mainstream media conversations” (Synthesio, n.d., para. 28). The information gathered from the software can be used to understand consumer behavior and changes. The science-based company has partnerships with Columbia and MIT.

The unit of analysis was the tweets. The data for all analysis was gathered using the same keywords or terms including “sexual harassment” and “#MeToo.” The keywords or terms of sexual harassment or #MeToo had to appear within the tweet. Tweets with partial terms (e.g., sex, sexual, harass, harassment, #Me, #Too) were not included. Only original tweets were considered. Retweets and duplicate tweets were not included in the data gathered.

**Trend Data Analysis**

A trend analysis was used to scrutinize the data to determine if there was a relationship between the news articles and social media posts. The total number of articles collected from the news sites using Factiva and tweets from Twitter using Synthesio were used as variables. The data was used to create charts and the two groups were compared to see whether the volume of
content of either one influenced the volume of the other. The results demonstrated whether or not there was a relationship between the variables.

**Results**

Three key findings were discovered after analyzing the data on sexual harassment and #MeToo from mass media and social media. The results from the trend analysis revealed three key findings: (a) the salience of news reports by the mass media set the public agenda on sexual harassment; (b) social media conversations amplified the public agenda of sexual harassment; and (c) the power of the mass media to set the agenda has not been eradicated but social media has changed the dynamic of agenda setting in the digital age.

**Mass Media Content**

Mass media organizations reported extensively on sexual harassment and #MeToo during the timeframe examined. The subjects became high profile issues that news organizations reported on almost daily. The subject matter grew from one article into a public agenda driven by the dozens of articles published from day to day by news organizations. The cultivation of the agenda was seen in the enhanced coverage of the topics and the importance and significance given to stories about the issues. The number of articles, reports, and content produced on sexual harassment was nearly seven times more than #MeToo over the course of the investigation.

**Sexual Harassment in Mass Media**

In October 2017, hundreds of articles were published by *The New York Times, USA Today,* and *CNN* about sexual harassment. The inception of the boom in coverage began during the first week of October 2017 (see Figures 1 and 2). Content and articles on the topic of sexual harassment from the three news outlets examined was nearly non-existent at the beginning of the month from October 1 through October 4 (see Figures 1 and 2). It was after *The Times* published
their investigation into accusations of sexual harassment against Harvey Weinstein on October 5, 2017, that spikes on the graph began to appear, indicating that more articles were published on the topic. After The Times article was published, the topic of sexual harassment appeared multiple times and almost daily in news coverage, articles, and reports from all three media outlets through the investigation period which ended on December 9, 2017, as illustrated in Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4.

**Figure 1**

*News (Mass) Media Coverage of Sexual Harassment from October 1, 2017 to December 9, 2017*

![Graph of Sexual Harassment News Coverage](image)

**Volume of Sexual Harassment News Articles.** In October, 377 articles from *CNN, USA Today*, and *The New York Times* contained the term sexual harassment. *CNN* published 92 articles, *USA Today* produced 81 stories, and *The Times* had 204 pieces of content (see Table 2). *The New York Times* produced more content than *CNN* and *USA Today* combined. Throughout the period analyzed, there were several spikes or increases in content about sexual harassment that stand out.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News Outlet</th>
<th>October</th>
<th>November</th>
<th>December</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Unique</th>
<th>% of Days</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CNN</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Harassment</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#MeToo</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both Terms</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA Today</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Harassment</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#MeToo</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both Terms</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>90%</td>
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<td>NY Times</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Harassment</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>524</td>
<td>464</td>
<td>96%</td>
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<tr>
<td>#MeToo</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>54%</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>671</td>
<td>551</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All News Outlets</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sexual Harassment</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>1,014</td>
<td>905</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#MeToo</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both Terms</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>558</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>1,269</td>
<td>1,051</td>
<td>100%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. News articles published online by CNN, USA Today, and The Times with the terms sexual harassment, #MeToo, and both terms in the United States from October 2017 to December 2017 according to Factiva (2017). Unique article totals exclude duplicates—any articles classified into multiple categories were only counted once in the unique article number.
Figure 2 shows multiple days of increased activity during the first month of analysis in October, and all of those days coincided with events about sexual harassment and high-profile individuals in the public eye. The first bump appeared on October 5, 2017, which was the day *The New York Times* published the Weinstein article (Kantor & Twohey, 2017). Upticks on the chart around October 8th and 9th correlated with the firing of Weinstein and reports on his firing (Twohey, 2017). On October 13, 2017, the news cycle was filled with reports of at least five men who were accused of sexual harassment including a Hollywood director and a top executive at Amazon (Griffin et al., 2018). Between October 21, 2017, and October 24, 2017, there were escalations on the chart that correlated with when Bill O’Reilly was forced out of Fox News and reports about his severance and a $32 million agreement to settle sexual harassment allegations with one network analyst (Steel & Schmidt, 2017).

**Figure 2**

*News (Mass) Media Coverage of Sexual Harassment from October 1, 2017 to October 31, 2017*

Looking at the month of November, *CNN*, *USA Today*, and *The New York Times* produced 455 unique articles about sexual harassment. *CNN* wrote 101 articles, *USA Today* published 124 stories, and *The Times* produced 230 reports (see Table 2). Figure 3 illustrates bumps on the graph connected to several events including November 8, 2017, when actor Kevin
Spacey was accused of sexual assault (Francescani, 2019) and November 10, 2017, when comedian Louis C.K. admitted that accusations about sexual misconduct made against him were true (Louis C.K. responds to accusations, 2017). The uptick in articles around November 14, 2017, corresponded with accusations against Senator Al Franken, a Democrat from Minnesota, for forcibly kissing and groping a female radio host and his subsequent apology days later (Wang et al., 2017). On November 21, 2017, all three news outlets had a large increase in content related to sexual harassment. This was the day that news anchor Charlie Rose was pulled off the air at CBS (CBS, 2017; Katz, 2017). The jump on November 29, 2017, corresponds to the day Matt Lauer was fired from his anchoring job at NBC (Ortiz & Siemaszko, 2017).

**Figure 3**

*News (Mass) Media Coverage of Sexual Harassment from November 1, 2017 to November 30, 2017*

*CNN, USA Today, and The New York Times* produced 182 articles with sexual harassment mentioned in the nine days that were evaluated in the month of December. *CNN* had 43 items, *USA Today* produced 49 articles, and *The Times* published 90 stories (see Table 2). The last major spike in the graph, seen in Figure 4, happened at the beginning of December. The increase in news articles aligned with when *Time* magazine’s Person of the Year issue was
released on December 6, 2017, and the reports in the following days about the people who were named and appeared on the cover of the publication titled “The Silence Breakers” (Zacharek et al., 2017).

**Figure 4**

*News (Mass) Media Coverage of Sexual Harassment from December 1, 2017 to December 9, 2017*

![Graph showing sexual harassment media coverage from December 1, 2017 to December 9, 2017](image)

**Salience of Sexual Harassment News Articles.** The sheer volume of news articles made the topic of sexual harassment salient in the mass media. The prominence of news articles on the topic of sexual harassment over the 10-week period was fairly consistent with the nearly daily coverage on the issue across all three news organizations examined. The number of reports, stories, articles, and discussions on the topic elevated the significance and value of it among media consumers. In total 1,014 articles were released among CNN, USA Today, and The Times during October, November, and part of December of 2017 (see Table 2). During the 10-week period, CNN published 236 stories, USA Today printed 254 articles, and The New York Times produced 524 reports on the topic (see Table 2). That was an average of 14 articles per day among the three media groups.
The number of articles and daily coverage speaks to the importance given by the news media on the topic of sexual harassment. The prominent coverage of the topic by all three news outlets demonstrates the significance and gravity of the topic in mass media. *The New York Times* placed more importance on the topic of sexual harassment than the other two news organizations, *USA Today* and *CNN*, during the dates studied (see Figure 1 and Table 2). However, it was also clear that the pattern of coverage on the topic of sexual harassment among the three news organizations as seen in Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4, was similar. An increase in coverage on the topic peaked among the three news outlets not only on or around the same days, but also to a similar degree. A substantial increase in the volume of articles on sexual harassment gave the topic more salience than had been recorded on the days prior to October 5, 2017 (see Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, and Table 2).

During the 70-day period, *CNN* had 59 days with articles about sexual harassment, *USA Today* produced content on 63 days, and *The Times* published stories on 67 days (see Figure 1 and Table 2). Between the three news outlets, articles on sexual harassment were published nearly daily during the timespan explored. *CNN* published articles on sexual harassment on 84% of the days, *USA Today* circulated content on 90% of the days, and *The Times* posted reports on 96% of the days followed (see Table 2). All three news organizations had content on most of the same days, just to a varying degree. Reports on sexual harassment by all three news agencies were distributed on 55 days or 79% of the time during the study (see Table 2).

Among the three news groups, *The New York Times* published the most content and published the most often about sexual harassment. Content published by *The Times* was more than twice as much as *CNN* and five times more than what *USA Today* produced (see Table 2). The month of November had the highest number of articles from all three publications on the
topic (see Table 2 and Figure 3). The topic of sexual harassment was reported on daily during the 10-week period studied. During this timeframe, there were zero days without a report on sexual harassment from at least one of the news organizations; every day evaluated had at least one report on sexual harassment every day from CNN, USA Today, or The Times. There were only six days during the 70 days examined where sexual harassment was only mentioned by one of the news outlets. This means that on 91% of the days studied, the subject of sexual harassment was mentioned by two or more outlets. On the vast majority of the days examined the outlets were reporting on the issue of sexual harassment, all of them almost daily.

The news organizations clearly focused on the issue and subject of sexual harassment. Although the placement of the articles on the websites was not thoroughly examined, many of the reports and articles were at the top of the website or in prominent positions that would garner the most views, clicks, or reads.

#MeToo in Mass Media

The #MeToo was not found in news reports and the mass media until after Alyssa Milano’s tweet. This was because the term became a commonly used phrase after Milano’s call to action for women to speak up on Twitter. On October 16, 2017, the day before Milano’s tweet, none of the news organizations published any articles on the topic of #MeToo. On October 16, 2017, the day after Milano’s tweet, The New York Times published two articles, USA Today published one, and CNN did not publish any. The following day, October 17, 2017, all three news outlets had articles that contained #MeToo. The New York Times had four reports, USA Today had one article, and CNN had one story that used the term. On October 18, 2017, news coverage using the hashtag continued on all three media websites. The Times published three stories, USA Today published two write-ups, and CNN had one article. The use of the
hashtag in news media was somewhat consistent after October 16th, but not stable over the analyzed period (see Figure 5). The term was used in reports more frequently but not on a daily basis, and the number of articles published each day was small. There were multiple steep peaks and valleys on the graph, indicating some use and then little or no use of the term from day to day (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

*News (Mass) Media Coverage of #MeToo from October 1, 2017 to December 9, 2017*

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**Volume of #MeToo News Articles.** The three media outlets produced 146 articles on #MeToo during the 10-week period examined (see Table 2). *The Times* published the most out of the three news organizations with 87 articles the on the topic. *USA Today* published the next highest number of stories: 33 over the period reviewed. *CNN* used the term in reports the least of the three news companies with a total of 26 publications during the span of time explored. The *Times* produced more than 2.5 times the content than *USA Today* and more than 2.25 times more than *CNN* (see Table 2).

Looking at the information in Figure 5, the output of content on #MeToo among the three media outlets follows a similar pattern. The peaks and valleys on the days articles were published was very similar. All three news companies published content about #MeToo on or around the
same days, but the amount of content or number of articles was different (see Figure 5). The difference in the number of articles and amount from each outlet is outlined in Table 2.

In October, 45 articles were written on the topic of #MeToo between CNN, USA Today, and The New York Times (see Table 2 and Figure 6). The number of articles produced by each media source is broken down in Table 2, which shows that CNN published 12 articles, USA Today had nine stories and The Times wrote 24 reports on the topic. There were no reports on the topic before October 16, 2017, which was the day after Alyssa Milano used the term “me too” in a tweet (Griffin et al., 2018; Khomami, 2017). It wasn’t until two days later that all three news organizations reported on the topic on the same day. Throughout the month of October, there was a clear increase and decrease of articles on the subject from day to day. There was a lack of consistency in the reporting on the term (see Figures 5 and 6). The hashtag was reported on but not consistently, nor on the same days among the news outlets. It was difficult to determine a pattern because the outlets did not report at the same time.

Figure 6

*News (Mass) Media Coverage of #MeToo from October 1, 2017 to October 31, 2017*

The largest number of articles written on the topic of #MeToo during the timeframe studied was in November. During this month, 61 articles were written on #MeToo between CNN,
USA Today, and The New York Times (see Table 2). During this month, an average of two articles per day mentioned #MeToo. CNN published 10 stories and USA Today had 14 reports (see Table 2 and Figure 7). The Times created more content on the subject than CNN and USA Today combined with 37 articles on the topic, as illustrated in Table 2 and Figure 7.

Figure 7

News (Mass) Media Coverage of #MeToo from November 1, 2017 to November 30, 2017

Only nine days in the month of December were monitored. During that time, 40 articles were published on #MeToo (see Table 2). CNN produced four reports, USA Today published 10 reports, and The Times had 26 stories on #MeToo during those nine days (see Table 2 and Figure 8). The coverage of the topic by The New York Times was almost double that of the other two media outlets combined. There was a similar pattern of reporting on #MeToo during this timeframe than in the other two months (see Figure 8).
Salience of #MeToo Articles. The topic of #MeToo was covered by the news media inspected in this study, but the coverage was not very extensive compared to coverage of sexual harassment. The topic did not dominate as many headlines, and the number of reports on any given day was relatively small. There were only 146 articles written between the three news groups during the 70 days studied which averaged out to less than one article per day per news agency (see Table 2). Although there was an increase in reports on the subject throughout the weeks examined, those reports were sporadic, and the coverage was inconsistent.

During the 10-week period, the topic of #MeToo was reported on, but the number of reports was not overwhelming. News consumers were exposed to the topic but were not inundated by it, and the theme was not one that was seen in daily news coverage. During the 70-day period, CNN only had 20 days with articles about #MeToo, USA Today published stories on 21 days, and The Times produced content on 38 days. That equates to 29% of days examined that had articles on #MeToo published for CNN, 30% for USA Today, and 54% for The Times (see Table 2). During the eight-week period after Milano (2017) tweeted “me too” and the hashtag went viral, there were only half a dozen days where all three news groups published about
#MeToo (see Table 2). In the timeframe studied, only six of the 70 days of the investigation period, or 9% of the days studied, contained articles or reports on #MeToo from all three news organizations (see Table 2).

The New York Times published the most stories about #MeToo, and the month of November saw the highest number of articles from all three publications on the topic (see Table 2 and Figure 5). However, there were many days during the month where there was no mention of the topic #MeToo from any of the three news organizations. In the weeks following Milano’s tweet, there were seven days where #MeToo was not mentioned in any of the three news sites, and 23 days where it was only mentioned by one of the news outlets.

The news outlets reported on #MeToo but were not talking about the hashtag every day. The subject was covered by the mass media, but the number of those reports was not so substantial that the topic was magnified to a large degree. The low volume of articles and the low percentage of days with content demonstrates a weak salience of #MeToo in the news media.

**Sexual Harassment With #MeToo in Mass Media**

Although there was more content on sexual harassment than #MeToo in the mass media, it was necessary to collectively examine both terms together in order to accurately gauge the news trends during the evaluation period. This was essential because #MeToo is a subcategory of the larger theme of sexual harassment. The comprehensive issue must be observed in order to accurately understand how mindfulness of the issue emerged within the public. Content on sexual harassment and #MeToo was combined to form one set of data for the two terms for each of the mass media outlets (Figure 9). This data pattern gave a better picture of the use of the two terms in CNN, USA Today, and The Times. The trends of sexual harassment and #MeToo in the mass media became much clearer when the content of the three news groups was combined (see
Figure 10). This categorization streamlined the quantity and regularity of articles with both terms among the three news organizations and made the pattern in the mass media much easier to interpret.

**Figure 9**

*News (Mass) Media Coverage of Sexual Harassment, #MeToo, and Both Terms from October 1, 2017 to December 9, 2017*

![Graph showing media coverage](image)

**Figure 10**

*News (Mass) Media Unique Articles on Sexual Harassment, #MeToo, and Both Terms combined from October 1, 2017 to December 9, 2017*

![Graph showing unique media articles](image)

The topics of sexual harassment and #MeToo were both covered by the mass media in the last few months of 2017, but it was clear that the dominant topic in the news cycle was sexual harassment, and not #MeToo. The data in Figure 9 illustrates that the topic of sexual harassment
was covered with more volume and frequency than #MeToo. During the 10-week period of study, sexual harassment dominated the content of mass media in comparison to the coverage of #MeToo. On average, the topic of sexual harassment was covered two to three times more on a daily basis than the topic of #MeToo. There was a disparity in the coverage of the two topics. The topic of sexual harassment received more attention and discussion by reporters and news outlets than #MeToo. When comparing the occurrence of terms, reports with sexual harassment along with #MeToo typically exceeded the number of articles with only #MeToo (see Figure 9). However, the quantity of articles with both terms was far less than content on sexual harassment exclusively (see Figure 9).

When the subject of #MeToo was reported on, it was almost always in conjunction with sexual harassment. The majority of the time, articles about #MeToo also mentioned sexual harassment, whereas articles about sexual harassment rarely mentioned #MeToo. There were hundreds of reports about sexual harassment that do not mention #MeToo, but there were few reports on #MeToo that don’t mention sexual harassment (see Table 2 and Figure 9). Out of the 146 news articles on #MeToo, the term sexual harassment was included in 109 of the articles. That means that 75% of the time, when there was a report on #MeToo, it also included sexual harassment. Thus, #MeToo was only reported on exclusively about 25% of the time (see Figure 11). However, reports on the topic of sexual harassment were rarely connected with the topic of #MeToo. Of the 1,014 articles about sexual harassment, only 109 articles also included #MeToo. Statistically, 11% of the articles contained both the terms sexual harassment and #MeToo while 89% of the reports were exclusively about sexual harassment and did not mention #MeToo (see Figure 12). Reports with both topics did increase after mid-October, but the content was not nearly as pervasive as reports about the topic of sexual harassment individually. There were 905
articles on the term sexual harassment, but only 37 reports on the term #MeToo during the 10 weeks examined (see Table 2 and Figure 9). However, the majority of reports on #MeToo contained both terms not #MeToo on its own (Figure 9).

**Figure 11**

*Total Unique Articles Published Online by CNN, USA Today, and The Times With #MeToo Exclusively and #MeToo With Sexual Harassment in the United States from October 2017 to December 2017*

![Mass Media Articles](image)

*Note.* The data for this figure come from Factiva (2017).

**Figure 12**

*Total Unique Articles Published Online by CNN, USA Today, and The Times With Sexual Harassment Exclusively and Sexual Harassment With #MeToo in the United States from October 2017 To December 2017*
Volume of Sexual Harassment With #MeToo Articles. The three mass media companies produced 109 stories that included both of the terms (i.e., sexual harassment and #MeToo) during the weeks examined (see Table 2 and Figure 9). *The New York Times* published 60 articles on the issues—the most out of the three news organizations (see Table 2 and Figure 9). *USA Today* published the next largest number of stories on the subject matter with 26 reports (see Table 2 and Figure 9). *CNN* used the terms in 23 publications, the fewest of the three news organizations during the examined timeframe (see Table 2 and Figure 9). *The Times* produced more than 2.33 times the content than *USA Today* and more than 2.5 times more than *CNN* (see Table 2).

The extent of the news coverage became more clear when the number of collective publications on sexual harassment, #MeToo, and both terms were taken into consideration. Figure 10 presents the combined unique articles distributed by the mass media on sexual harassment, #MeToo, and both terms during October, November, and part of December of 2017.

*Note.* The data for this figure come from Factiva (2017).
In total, 1,051 unique articles were created among the three news organizations during the 10-week period (see Table 2 and Figure 10). During the timeframe, CNN published 239 reports, USA Today produced 261 stories, and The New York Times printed 551 articles on the topic (see Table 2 and Figure 10).

Salience of Sexual Harassment With #MeToo Articles. There was a high salience of news articles on sexual harassment and #MeToo. When examined collectively, there were articles on sexual harassment and #MeToo on 100% of the days in the timeframe studied (Table 2 and Figure 10). In addition, there were multiple articles published on the topics each day of the 70 days surveyed. There were more than 10 articles on sexual harassment and #MeToo on 51 of the days, which equates to 72% of the time (see Table 2). There were more than 20 publications on the topics on 23 days, or 33% of the days, extracted and 8 days, or 11% of the days, with 30 or more articles (see Table 2).

The large quantity of news articles made the topics of sexual harassment and #MeToo substantial and noticeable in the mass media. An average of 15 articles per day were produced among CNN, USA Today, and The Times during the 10-week investigation (see Table 2). The vast amount of content on the topics was indicative of the significance placed on the issue by the news media which most likely elevated the importance of those topics of sexual harassment, #MeToo, and both terms among news readers.

Social Media Content

Social media users were buzzing about sexual harassment and #MeToo during the weeks studied, and the topics went viral. Hundreds of thousands of hashtags were used in tweets, and the topics that previously saw very little or no engagement became hot topics. The growth of the conversations on social media can be seen in the boom of chatter and use of key words on the
platform. The term sexual harassment was used on average about 10 times more than #MeToo over the course of the study.

**Sexual Harassment in Social Media**

The topic of sexual harassment exploded on Twitter in October 2017. Twitter users began to use the term “sexual harassment” with much more frequency during the time period studied, and the number of Twitter users who employed the term also grew (see Figure 13). Upon examination of the data, it was evident that the words sexual harassment were dormant at the beginning of the month. After *The Times* article about the sexual harassment accusations against Weinstein was published, the use of the term began to be used much more frequently and by more people. After that publication, the term sexual harassment appeared on Twitter with higher consistent usage through the period of exploration of this study (see Figures 13, 14, 15, and 16).

**Figure 13**

*Social Media Tweets With Sexual Harassment from October 1, 2017 to December 9, 2017*

![Sexual Harassment - Twitter](image)

**Volume of Sexual Harassment Tweets.** In October, more than 1.5 million tweets included the term sexual harassment (Table 3). At the beginning of the month from October 1st through October 4th, there was not much use of the words or term “sexual harassment” on the social media platform. But on October 5th there was a spike in the number of tweets using the words sexual harassment (see Figure 13). The number of mentions jumped from hundreds to tens
of thousands (see Figures 13 and 14). On October 1st, there were 1,340 mentions of the term among the millions of users in the United States. The number of tweets using the hashtag stayed around that same volume for the next three days. On October 4th, there were 1,751 hashtags that used the term sexual harassment. On October 5th, when The Times article about Harvey Weinstein was published, the number of tweets that mentioned the topic surged to 41,374. That was an increase of more than 23 times day to day and nearly 31 times from the first day analyzed (see Figure 14). The day after the Weinstein article was published, the number of mentions of sexual harassment in hashtags on Twitter increased another 40% (almost 17,000 tweets) to 58,182 (see Figure 14). The line graphs in Figures 13 and 14 exhibit the increase in the use of hashtags on the topic of sexual harassment, which demonstrates more discussion, chatter, and talk about the topic among Twitter users. The use of the hashtag remains prominent throughout the investigation with the exception of a few days where use dipped (see Table 3 and Figures 13, 14, 15, and 16).

Table 3

Tweets With The Terms Sexual Harassment and #MeToo

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<th>Social Platform</th>
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<th>% of Days</th>
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<td>75k+</td>
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<td>Sexual Harassment</td>
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<td>#MeToo</td>
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<td>105,762</td>
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<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>855,114</td>
<td>5,350,075</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Tweets shared via Twitter with the terms sexual harassment and #MeToo in the United States from October 2017 to December 2017 according to Synthesio (2017).
Throughout the timeframe surveyed, there were several upticks in use of the term sexual harassment, and those upticks increase more the longer the hashtag remained in use. During the first month of analysis, the first large increase in hashtag use was the day after *The Times* article was published (see Figures 13 and 14). The next spike happened on October 10th and then on October 11th which was the first time the use of the term surpassed 100,000 (see Figures 13 and 14). The increase over these two days came a few days after reports of Weinstein being fired (Twohey, 2017). There was a severe drop in use of the hashtag on Twitter until October 15th when Milano’s famous tweet with the hashtag “me too” was sent out. Afterwards, use of the term sexual harassment increased again and gained traction and momentum. After October 16th, there was a steady decline in the use of the term on the platform until October 21st and October 22nd (see Figures 13 and 14). The increased use of the term on these days correlated with when Bill O’Reilly was fired from Fox News (Steel & Schmidt, 2017).

**Figure 14**

*Social Media Tweets With Sexual Harassment from October 1, 2017 To October 31, 2017*

The month of November saw the largest number of tweets with the term sexual harassment used during the timeframe studied. The month began with a slight downward trend in the number of tweets that use the term (see Figure 15). That trend reversed around November 9th
and November 10th when Louis C. K. was accused of and admitted to sexually harassing women (Louis C.K. responds to accusations, 2017). A dip in hashtag use happens in the days following before a steady increase between November 13th and November 16th (see Figures 13 and 15) when Senator Al Franken was in news headlines accused of inappropriate behavior and sexual harassment (Wang et al., 2017). Later that month, there was an extremely sharp decline in hashtag use on Twitter between November 17th and November 19th. But on November 21st, the use of sexual harassment on the social media platform reached it largest number of the time period surveyed (see Figures 13 and 15). On this day, more than 200,000 tweets that utilized the term were sent via Twitter. This was the day longtime CBS news anchor Charlie Rose was removed from air (CBS, 2017; Katz, 2017). The use of the hashtag declined again for about a week, until a large increase on November 29th, which was the day that the announcement was made that Matt Lauer was fired from NBC for sexual misconduct after 25 years at the network (Ortiz & Siemaszko, 2017).

**Figure 15**

Social Media Tweets With Sexual Harassment from November 1, 2017 to November 30, 2017

Going into December, the use of the term sexual harassment on Twitter took a downturn at the beginning of the month and leveled off until the last considerable increase in the
The jump in usage seen in Figure 16 happened on December 6th and maintained through the next day before dropping off again. The increase in hashtag usage was synonymous with the release of *Time* magazine’s Person of the Year issue, The Silence Breakers, which featured the women who first publically spoke out about sexual harassment (Zacharek et al., 2017).

**Figure 16**

*Social Media Tweets With Sexual Harassment from December 1, 2017 to December 9, 2017*

Salience of Sexual Harassment Tweets. The topic of sexual harassment became relevant in social media during the last 10-weeks of 2017 due to the large quantity and massive increase of the hashtag use of sexual harassment. The enormous volume of hashtags being used on a daily basis on the topic of sexual harassment averaged more than 68,000 tweets per day during the 70 days that were investigated (see Figure 13 and Table 3). In October there were 1,500,792 tweets that used the term sexual harassment, and that number increased to 2,523,345 in November (see Table 3). In the nine days that were tracked in December, there were 749,352 tweets that used the term (see Table 3). In total, more than 4.7 million tweets with sexual harassment were sent out during the timeframe investigated (see Table 3).
Despite the increase and decrease in the number of tweets that used the term sexual harassment, the use of the hashtag was prominent during the 10-weeks analyzed. The number of tweets heightened the significance and value of it in social media conversations. During the 70-day period, there were 42 days, or 60% of the days, examined with 50,000 or more tweets using sexual harassment (see Table 3). Over the course of the investigation, there were 21 days, or 30% of the time period, with 75,000 or more tweets (see Table 3) and 13 days, or 19%, with more than 100,000 tweets that included the term (see Table 3). The enormous volume of tweets sent with the term generated salience about the topic of sexual harassment on the social media platform. The more people tweeted about sexual harassment, the more prominent the topic became on the social network, which may indicate that people perceived the issues to be important.

#MeToo in Social Media

The #MeToo was not being used with regularity or in large quantities at the beginning of October 2017 but became more widely used over the course of the timeframe analyzed. The hashtag appeared after The Times article about Harvey Weinstein was published. Sexual harassment became a more top of mind topic, and Milano (2017) tweeted the hashtag in conjunction with the sexual harassment reckoning that had begun in the United States. Use of the hashtag had a couple major spikes over time but was only used between 5,000 and 10,000 times a day during the months studied (see Figure 17). The topic had a clear surge and then tapered off in usage until December, when usage jumped again but not nearly to the degree of the first crescendo (see Figure 17).
Volume of #MeToo Tweets. #MeToo became a mainstream term and hashtag used by U.S. Americans on Twitter in the fourth quarter of 2017. Use of the hashtag appeared on the social media platform in the middle of October. From October 1st through October 14th, there was not much use of the hashtag among Twitter users. During that time, the hashtag only received between 18 and 307 mentions per day on the social media platform (see Figures 17 and 18). However, that trend changed on October 15th when there was an enormous increase in the usage of the hashtag (see Figures 17 and 18). On October 15th, Alyssa Milano sent out a tweet and encouraged women to speak up about sexual harassment by tweeting the words “me too” (Milano, 2017). On that same day, the number of tweets using #MeToo jumped from 103 the day before to 17,378 (see Figure 18). The next day, October 16th, the hashtag gained momentum and reached its peak usage during time period examined (see Figure 17). After this peak, the usage of the hashtag had a steady decline until October 23rd, which was where the average use of the hashtag settled at just under 10,000 uses per day (see Figure 18).
The use of #MeToo did not have any major increases or decreases during the month of November. Use of the hashtag remained steady and averaged around 8,200 daily uses. The #MeToo experienced a large increase in traffic in mid-October, and by November (see Figure 19) the use of the hashtag settled after the spike and steadied in use. The hashtag had traction but not in large numbers as was demonstrated in Figure 19. Most of the traffic in November remained below 10,000 tweets per day until December 6th when the last large jump in usage was recorded (see Figures 17, 19, and 20).
December 6th was the day *Time* magazine named the women who broke their silence about sexual harassment as the Person of the Year (Zacharek, et al., 2017). The day before that announcement, 6,663 tweets used #MeToo (see Figure 20). On the day the magazine’s Person of the Year was named, there were 29,135 tweets that used the hashtag, an increase of four times from day to day (see Figure 20). Over the next two days, the use of the hashtag quickly declined dropping 60% to 17,489 the day after the announcement. On the two subsequent days, the use of #MeToo continued to take a downturn to 14,746 on December 8th, and back into the 10,000 range on December 9th (see Figures 17 and 20), which was what had become a more normal use of the hashtag after the initial surge in October. The use of #MeToo among Twitter users had an initial major surge in October but then leveled off to a fairly consistent usage level and then had a second peak near the end of the time surveyed (see Figures 17, 18, 19, and 20).

**Figure 20**

*Social Media Tweets With #MeToo from December 1, 2017 to December 9, 2017*

![Graph showing social media tweets with #MeToo from December 1, 2017 to December 9, 2017](image)

**Salience of #MeToo Tweets.** The #MeToo became a trend and a constant on social media during the last 10-weeks of 2017, and while there was a very large increase in use of the hashtag during the first few days after Milano’s (2017) tweet, the volume of the hashtag’s use was not particularly overwhelming during the time period examined. Although the hashtag was
being used on a daily basis, the topic of #MeToo averaged just over 8,000 tweets per day during
the 70 days that were monitored (see Table 3). In October, there were 279,750 tweets that used
#MeToo, and that number decreased to 191,074 in November. Further, in the nine days that were
tracked in December, there were 105,762 tweets that used the hashtag (Table 3). In total, 576,586
tweets that used the #MeToo were sent out during the weeks scrutinized (see Table 3).

There was an abrupt increase in use of #MeToo that progressively declined and settled
well below the pinnacle of use (see Figure 17). The hashtag continued to be tweeted at a steady
rate during the weeks studied, but the number of tweets using the hashtag was not massive (see
Figure 17). The trend of use displayed in Figure 17 depicts a few minor peaks and valleys
through November until December when there was a moderate uptick but quick downturn in
tweets with #MeToo.

The sudden increase and large volume of tweets using #MeToo between October 15th
and October 18th was substantial enough to get the hashtag trending, but the number of tweets
using the hashtag during the 10 weeks studied was not significant enough to sustain prolonged
salience. During the 70-day period, Twitter only had one day or 1% of the time studied with
50,000 or more tweets using #MeToo (see Table 3). There were not any days during the
investigation when tweets that utilized the hashtag reached 75,000 or 100,000 (see Table 3).

**Sexual Harassment With #MeToo in Social Media**

The subjects of sexual harassment and #MeToo were both topics of conversations on
social media during the last few months of 2017, but it was clear that the dominant topic on the
platform was sexual harassment, and not #MeToo. The figures reveal that the term sexual
harassment was much more heavily used than #MeToo through the period evaluated (see Table 3
and Figure 21). During the 70 days of exploration, sexual harassment dominated the discussion
on social media in comparison to the dialogue about #MeToo. On average, the topic of sexual harassment was tweeted about more than eight times as much from day to day compared to #MeToo (see Table 3 and Figure 21). There was an extensive inequality in the use of the two terms, and the topic of sexual harassment was utilized and tweeted more by Twitter patrons than #MeToo (see Table 3 and Figure 21). Although #MeToo was what got a lot of attention, the numbers reveal that the term sexual harassment was actually utilized more on Twitter during the weeks studied.

The topics of sexual harassment and #MeToo are not mutually exclusive. The #MeToo movement is about sexual harassment, and the hashtag was created in direct response to the topic as a way for women to speak up about it. The #MeToo was a part of the larger reckoning of sexual harassment within the United States. In order to get an accurate picture of what was happening with social media during the timespan surveyed, it was necessary to combine trends on sexual harassment and #MeToo (see Table 3 and Figures 21 and 22).

Figure 21

Social Media Tweets With Sexual Harassment and #MeToo from October 1, 2017 to December 9, 2017
Volume of Sexual Harassment and #MeToo Tweets. The pattern of social media conversations on Twitter did not change much when tweets including sexual harassment and #MeToo were combined. The total sum of tweets increased from day to day but not in large enough amounts to make a drastic change to the formation of the graph (see Figure 22). The number of combined tweets totaled 5,350,075 over the 70-day period (see Table 3). The average of 76,429 tweets per day was just slightly higher than the daily average of only sexual harassment tweets which was more than 68,192 tweets per day (see Table 3 and Figures 13 and 22). However the average daily tweets were significantly higher than the daily average of 8,236 of tweets with #MeToo (see Table 3 and Figures 17 and 22).

Salience of Sexual Harassment and #MeToo Tweets. The prominence of tweets that used sexual harassment and #MeToo was high during the 70 days data was collected for this study. When analyzed jointly, the large quantity of tweets made the topics noticeable and apparent on the platform. In total, more than 5.3 million tweets with sexual harassment and #MeToo were sent out during the timeframe explored (see Table 3).
The combined use of the term and hashtag was distinctive during the 10-weeks monitored. The large amount of tweets heightened the importance and impact of the issue in dialogues on social media. During the 70-day period, there were 47 days, or 67% of the days, observed with 50,000 or more tweets using both terms (see Table 3 and Figure 22). Over the course of the analysis, there were 26 days, or 37% of the timeframe, with 75,000 or more tweets with the terms combined (see Table 3 and Figure 22) and 16 days, or 22%, with more than 100,000 tweets with the sexual harassment and #MeToo (see Table 3 and Figure 22). The combined volume of content produced salience about the issue among Twitter users.

**Mass Media and Social Media Content Comparisons**

Both mass media and social media played a role in generating public awareness about sexual harassment and the #MeToo movement in 2017. News reports and conversations on social media brought attention to the pervasive issue of sexual harassment among women. News reports and tweets were filled with stories of women who broke their silence about the mistreatment and harassment they had received. These stories were an integral part of making 2017 a landmark year for public acknowledgement of the problem of sexual harassment.

**Sexual Harassment in Mass Media and Social Media**

Both mass media and social media had more content on sexual harassment than #MeToo. The trends in mass media coverage and social media conversations on sexual harassment between October 1 and December 6, 2017 are displayed in Figure 23. Those trends were clarified in Figure 24, where all of the mass media content and publications of the three separate news outlets were combined into one chart to demonstrate what was happening in the mass media as a whole during the months investigated.
Figure 23

Sexual Harassment in CNN, USA Today, The Times, and Twitter from October 1 to December 9, 2017

Note. Data is adjusted for scale.

Figure 24

Sexual Harassment in Mass Media and Social Media from October 1 to December 9, 2017

Note. Data is adjusted for scale.

*The New York Times* appears to have been the instigator of the awakening on the topic of sexual harassment. Figure 23 shows the trends in mass media in terms of content published on sexual harassment and the trends of use of the term on social media. It was evident from the data collected that *The Times* published the most content on the subject among the three media outlets (see Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, and 23, and Table 2). The news agency was the first to bring the issue of
sexual harassment to light with its groundbreaking article about Harvey Weinstein (Kantor & Twohey, 2017). After that seminal article, The New York Times continued to investigate, write, and publish content on the topic of sexual harassment. After the initial article by The Times was published, the other two media outlets, CNN and USA Today, also began covering the topic on their websites. CNN and USA Today did not publish as much content as The Times, but after October 5, 2017, the coverage was almost as frequent. There were multiple days when coverage among the three outlets was similar on the same day, just not to the same degree, as reflected by the peaks on the graphs (see Figure 23).

During the 10-weeks of this study the topic of sexual harassment was heavily reported on by the mass media. The news media produced articles and reports about sexual harassment on 79% of the days included in the study. There was a definite increase in articles and consistent coverage on the issue of sexual harassment during this timeframe. Figure 24 gives a clearer picture of just how prominent the topic of sexual harassment was in the mass media during the last quarter of 2017. The content and publications of the three separate news outlets were combined into one chart to demonstrate what was happening in the mass media mutually during the months investigated (see Figure 24). The amount of coverage, number of articles, and daily content made the topic salient in the mass media.

Conversations on social media followed news coverage about sexual harassment and amplified the agenda set by the mass media. Figure 23 and Figure 24 demonstrate how use of the hashtag with the words sexual harassment followed coverage of the topic in the news. The data from Twitter appears to react to the amount of content published in the mass media (see Figure 24). The social media trend was a delayed emulation of the mass media trend. The activity on social media was very similar to the activity in mass media but happened a few days later. The
graph exhibited how there was an increase in news articles, and then a day or two after, there was a surge in the use of the key words on Twitter (see Figure 24). The pattern of mass media activity was followed by a delayed but similar pattern of social media activity. Because the trend lines were very similar but the movement on Twitter was a couple of days behind that of the news organizations, it can be deduced that the news reports were what got Twitter users talking.

**#MeToo in Social Media and Mass Media**

On social media #MeToo became a way for people to share their own experiences of sexual harassment and express solidarity with victims of sexual harassment. Use of the hastag began on Twitter but then became a common phrase used in everyday conversations which spilled over into news coverage about sexual harassment. The developments in social media discussions and mass media coverage on #MeToo between October 1 and December 6, 2017 are displayed in Figure 25. Those trends were clarified in Figure 24 where all of the mass media figures were combined into one category which made it easier to decipher the movements of #MeToo in social media and mass media.

**Figure 25**

*#MeToo in CNN, USA Today, The Times, and Twitter from October 1 to December 9, 2017*

*Note.* Data is adjusted for scale.
Figure 26

#MeToo in Mass Media and Social Media from October 1 to December 9, 2017

Note. Data is adjusted for scale.

#MeToo was not a hashtag being employed by Twitter users at the beginning of October 2017. However, around mid-month, use of the hashtag exploded, and the term became a trending topic. The trends in social media use of #MeToo and the trends in mass media content published on #MeToo are reflected in Figure 25. The most prominent increase in the use of #MeToo on Twitter was between October 15, 2017 and October 18, 2017, when there was an obvious surge in use of the hashtag (see Figures 17, 18, and 23).

The call by Milano (2017) for people to tweet using #MeToo to call attention to the issue of sexual harassment was infectious on the social media platform. Tens of thousands of people jumped on the bandwagon and used the hashtag. Nearly 59,000 tweets used the hashtag at its apex on October 16, 2017 (see Figures 17, 18, 25, and 26). The #MeToo had longevity as seen in Figure 25, but the degree of usage fell well below the initial use during the first few days after the call to action. The hashtag continued to be used during the timeframe studied, and conversations on social media that incorporated #MeToo continued for months, but not in large quantities as they did in the first few days after Milano’s (2017) original tweet. There was a clear
surge in usage of #MeToo, and then engagement of the hashtag took a deep dive and tapered off (see Figures 17, 18, 25, and 26).

The first time #MeToo appeared in mass media was on October 16, 2017, the day after Milano (2017) made a plea for action. Interestingly, that was also the same day the hashtag hit its peak usage during the timeframe studied. The apex of the hashtag’s use could have been affected by mass media reports, but there was no way to decipher whether or not that was the case. The hashtag was created on Twitter, so it was social media that initiated the use of the term. After the first use of the hashtag mass media followed the social media usage trend, but that structure didn’t last long.

Reports in the mass media on #MeToo came after the hashtag was tweeted out in social media. News content, stories, and reports on the hashtag followed the first use of the hashtag on the social media platform (see Figures 25 and 26). The data demonstrates how the mass media content reacted to the social media conversations at the beginning of the timeframe examined, however, that trend doesn’t hold for the duration of the 10-week timeframe (see Figures 25 and 26).

To best understand the dynamic between Twitter and news media it was best to examine Figure 26, where all of the data from the mass media outlets were combined. For the first three days after the hashtag was established, the mass media trend was a delayed reflection of the social media trend. The pattern of activity in mass media looked very similar to the social media activity but was delayed by one day. The figures showed a boom in the use of #MeToo on Twitter and the next day an escalation in the use of the hashtag term in news reports and articles. The pattern of social media activity was followed by a delayed but comparable pattern of mass media action for the first three days after the inception of the hashtag.
After those initial few days, the trends in mass media looked very different from those on social media. The social media activity leveled out, and there were only five occasions where there was a distinct escalation in use. The press led the usage trend in three of those instances. On one occasion, the surge happened on the exact same day for both mass and social media, and neither one was leading or following; and in the other incident, social media activity increased before the mass media uptick (see Figure 26). As time passed, there was a change in the dynamic of which media was leading in the #MeToo discussion. In the beginning, social media established the trend, but after the first few days, mass media was setting the pattern, which was then followed by social media (see Figure 26).

The mass media was inconsistent in its reporting on #MeToo. Unlike social media, where usage of #MeToo leveled off and stabilized, the mass media content on the hashtag was more erratic, with several articles on one day and none the next (see Figure 26). Although the coverage and use of the term was less consistent than it was on social media, Figure 26 indicates that when adjusted for scale, the amount of content on the issue in mass media exceeded that of social media after the initial eruption. This could be due to the fact that #MeToo is a component of the larger sexual harassment agenda.

**Sexual Harassment and #MeToo Combined in Mass Media and Social Media**

In order to accurately compare the trends in news media with the trends on Twitter during the span of the survey, it was essential to examine the use of the two terms (sexual harassment and #MeToo) together. This was necessary because #MeToo was a part of the larger theme of sexual harassment during the time period studied. To understand how the public awareness unfolded, the issue as a whole must be examined. Content on sexual harassment and #MeToo was combined to form one set of data from the two terms for each of the mass media outlets and
the social media platform (see Figure 27). This data pattern gave a better picture of the use of the two terms in CNN, USA Today, and The Times as well as on Twitter (see Figure 27). However, the trends of sexual harassment and #MeToo in the mass media became much clearer when the content of the three news groups was combined (see Figure 28). This categorization streamlined the quantity and regularity of articles with both terms among the three news organizations and patterns between the news outlets and Twitter were easier to interpret.

**Figure 27**

*Sexual Harassment and #MeToo in CNN, USA Today, The Times, and Twitter from October 1 to December 9, 2017*

*Note.* Graph is adjusted for scale.
The pattern of the number of articles published in mass media compared to the number of tweets that used the two terms in social media is outlined in Figure 27 and Figure 28. The trend between the two forms of media was easier to discern when the terms sexual harassment and #MeToo were united in mass media content and social media use (see Figure 28). The data clearly displayed how social media followed the trend set by mass media and amplified the awakening about this social issue (see Figure 28). The trend implied that after the press published a story or an article, people online began to talk about it, and the conversation developed and grew on social media through the use of hashtags.

During the 10-week period examined, there were only two points on the graph where social media took the lead in the agenda. One of those was on October 15, 2017, when Milano (2017) sent out her call to action on Twitter using the hashtag “me too”. The other, was between October 21st and 22nd when mass media content dipped for a day while chatter on social media increased. Inspection of the figures also exposed how the patterns between mass media and
social media became more uniform as time went on (see Figure 28). It was evident that the agenda on Twitter was patterned after news coverage of the issue.

When the news articles and tweets with sexual harassment and #MeToo were combined, the activity on Twitter followed the pattern of action in the mass media on the subject. The peaks and valleys in the Twitter data and increased use of the terms corresponded directly with the days when there was more content on the subjects in mass media (see Figure 28). The two forms of media appear to be in delayed synchronization as increases and decreases with mass media and social media appear to ebb and flow similarly after October. During the days with increased content from both forms of media (i.e., November 9th, November 16th, November 21th, November 29th, and December 6th), there were major news events happening about sexual harassment and assault allegations against celebrities and senators (Francescani, 2019; Louis C.K. responds to accusations, 2017; Wang et. al, 2017), firings of prominent news anchors (CBS, 2017; Katz, 2017; Ortiz & Siemaszko, 2017), and tributes to the whistleblowers (Zacharek et al, 2017). It was challenging to interpret whether mass media or social media was leading the other on these days. The two forms of media appeared to be working in tandem. Twitter users may have been reacting to news faster on those days, or the breaking news could have been shared on Twitter.

**Discussion**

The relationship between mass media and the public agenda has been questioned in the digital era. The advancement and influence of social media has changed the dynamic of mass communication. These changes in society warrant a re-examination of the agenda-setting power of the mass media and the influence of social media in that process.
Role of Mass Media in Setting the Agenda on Sexual Harassment

RQ1 asked what role the mass media had in setting and driving the public agenda on sexual harassment. The findings of this study showed that the news media played a prominent leading role in setting the agenda on sexual harassment in 2017. From the seminal article on the issue through continued coverage on the topic, journalists and the organizations they worked for, created a strong salience on the topic through the repetition of the subject in stories and the number of reports published. The amount and frequency of content produced showed the importance placed on the topic by the mass media. After media reports were published, sexual harassment became a major topic of conversation in the public as demonstrated by the increased conversations of the subject on social media. The mass media continued to drive public discussions about sexual harassment and #MeToo through continued coverage of the topic.

Mass Media Set the Agenda on Sexual Harassment

The reporting on sexual harassment in the mass media during the timeframe studied was consistent and perpetual. All three of the mass media outlets inspected showed a major increase of coverage on the issue after the first week of October (see Figures 1, 2, 23, and 24). The increase in mass media content on sexual harassment was apparent in the peaks on the graphs after October 5, 2017. During October 2017, the three news outlets were covering the topic and publishing more about it than they had previously (see Figures 1, 2 and 23). Through November 2017 and December 2017, the patterns of coverage became more similar between the news organizations with peaks happening during the same days or cluster of days and to more similar degrees (see Figures 1, 3, 4, and 23).

The data revealed how the agenda on sexual harassment developed and solidified during this 10-week period. During this timeframe, the mass media oriented news consumers to content,
stories, and narratives about sexual harassment and helped shape the public’s perception of the issue: “Readers learn not only about a given issue by also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position” (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 176). The number of articles and the position of those articles in the news cycle on a daily basis established that the issue was important and created a strong salience on the topic of sexual harassment. This process followed the findings of McCombs and Shaw (1972) on how the “mass media may well determine the important issues—that is, the media may set the “agenda” of the campaign” (p. 176).

There was a definite increase in articles and consistent coverage on the issue of sexual harassment, which created salience with the public on social media. Figure 24 gives a clearer picture of just how prominent the topic of sexual harassment was in the mass media during the last quarter of 2017. The amount of coverage, number of articles, and daily content made the topic salient in the mass media. Reporting on sexual harassment was frequent, ubiquitous, prevalent, pervasive, and prominent in the mass media (see Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 23, and 24, and Table 2). Attention, awareness, importance, and popularity are all connected to the salience of an issue and the subject of sexual harassment and news reports had all four of these elements.

The coverage of sexual harassment was also comprised of the three elements Kiousis (2004) identified as necessary for media salience: attention, prominence, and valence. There was a massive amount of attention given to the topic, and this was exhibited through the number of news stories devoted to the matter and the volume of stories dedicated to the topic. Prominence was also a factor in the coverage, as the placement of the key words appeared in the headlines of all of the stories (Kiousis, 2004). The issue was one that had a lot of valence or emotional attributes due to the powerful people involved, the mistreatment or abuse of individuals,
accusations of wrongdoing, and celebrities who blew the whistle on their perpetrators. Kiousis (2004) explained, “the higher the conflict, the higher the valence score” (p. 76). The combination of power, mistreatment, accusations, and celebrity combined for a strong valence.

The salience of press coverage conveyed the importance of the topic of sexual harassment to the public. Schudson (2003) stated, “the press confer upon their subject matter public legitimacy, certifying importance” (p. 29) and the legitimacy and importance of the topic of sexual harassment was provided by the mass media during the weeks investigated during 2017. The manner in which the press filtered and shaped the issue of sexual harassment caused the public to perceive it as a more important topic than other issues (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001; Chaffee & Wilson, 1977; Coleman & McCombs, 2007; Feezell, 2017; Grzywinska & Batorski, 2016; McCombs, 2005; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs & Zhu, 1995; Roberts et al., 2002; Sayre et al, 2010; Tan & Weaver, 2013).

The topic of sexual harassment has continued to be an issue reported on repeatedly, even years after this 10-week timeframe. There has been a continuous flow of reporting on the topic and a plethora of reports about incidents of sexual harassment and misconduct in the public sphere since 2017. Reports and coverage on Weinstein have continued for more than four years after the initial story broke, including his sentence in New York (Full coverage, 2020; Levenson, 2020; Ransom, 2020), when a federal judge rejected a multi-million dollar settlement negotiated for his victims (#MeToo: A timeline of events, 2021), the appeal of his conviction (Harvey Weinstein timeline: How the scandal unfolded, 2021), his sexual assault case in California (Vercammen, & Chan, 2021), and continued accusations and interviews from Weinstein’s victims (Johnson, 2021). In January of 2018, more than 300 women in Hollywood formed an anti-harassment coalition called Times Up, and later that month at the 75th Golden Globes
Awards, many celebrities wore black in support of the movement, which was also highlighted at the Oscars ceremony in March of that year (#MeToo: A timeline of events, 2021). In July of 2018, CBS began an investigation into allegations of sexual misconduct against CEO Les Moonves (Farrow, 2018), and a month and a half later in September, Moonves resigned after six more women accused him of sexual misconduct (#MeToo: A timeline of events, 2021). In April of 2019, President Joe Biden, who was the former Vice President at that time, acknowledged that his physical displays of affection had made some women uncomfortable (#MeToo: A timeline of events, 2021). In July of 2020, Fox News fired news anchor Ed Henry for sexual misconduct in the workplace (#MeToo: A timeline of events, 2021). And in August of 2021, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo resigned after a bombardment of sexual harassment allegations (Villeneuve, 2021). His resignation came after the New York attorney general announced an investigation found that Cuomo had sexually harassed at least 11 women (Villeneuve, 2021).

There has been a report on sexual harassment in the mass media nearly every week since The Times seminal article. The mass media set the agenda on sexual harassment and continues to push that agenda today.

**Intermedia Agenda Setting Among News Organizations**

The data from this research provided evidence of intermedia agenda setting. Intermedia agenda setting refers to the influence news groups have on the agenda of other news organizations. All three news organizations in this study had a similar news agenda. The analogous agendas among CNN, USA Today, and The New York Times is most likely a result of journalists’ co-orientation.

The fact that The New York Times published the seminal article and continued to publish the most content on the subject of sexual harassment demonstrates the lead role of the
organization in reporting on the subject. *The New York Times* is considered by many journalists and news consumers to be the trendsetter in the industry. This perception is bolstered by the longevity of the paper, which has “been a fixture of American print news for over 150 years” (Watson, 2021, para. 2). Despite changes in the media landscape over the decades, Djordjevic (2021) said, “the paper has managed to stay relevant and maintain public trust in the internet age” (para. 3). The brand has 5.09 million digital subscribers (Djordjevic, 2021; Watson, 2021), and is the most popular newspaper among U.S. digital news consumers with nearly two out of five or 39% of digital newspaper subscribers (Djordjevic, 2021; Newman et al., 2020, p. 22). The paper has a positive reputation, and 49% of Americans consider *The New York Times* to be a credible source and accurate in its reporting (Djordjevic, 2020; Watson, 2021). *The New York Times* has been an organization that is followed and trusted by millions of Americans and has prestige and influence across the country. Hicks and Wang (2013) acknowledged the organization’s status and said, “this prestige is evident across a number of measures: circulation, Pulitzer prizes, use by opinion leaders, and words in the Wikipedia entry” (p. 855). It may be for some or all of these reasons that researchers have established that *The New York Times* has occupied a prevalent role in “establishing the saliency of issues” (Lafferty, 2010, p. vii) and setting the public agenda in the United States (Warren, 2016).

Once *The Times* exposed and highlighted the issue of sexual harassment, the subject was on the radar of the other mass media groups that then began doing their own investigating and reporting on the issue. This pattern of “follow the leader,” or intermedia agenda setting among *The New York Times* and other media outlets has been demonstrated in research from Warren (2016), Denham (2014), Golan (2007), Roberts and McCombs (1994), Protess and McCombs (1991), and Reese and Danielian (1989). Intermedia agenda setting refers to the influence news
sources have on each other. Lopez-Escobar et al. (1998) found “the potential elements that can shape the media agenda is the influence that mass media agendas have on each other” (p. 225). This intermedia agenda setting between *The Times*, *CNN*, and *USA Today* can be detected in Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 23, which depicted the lead *The Times* took on when it emphasized and highlighted the issue of sexual harassment in its publication and the two other news groups followed those reports.

The exact dynamics of how the news organizations chose their content or constructed the narrative on sexual harassment was not discovered in this analysis, but what this research did reveal was that news organizations were influenced by each other. The theory of intermedia agenda setting maintains that “the agendas of new organizations are often influenced by the news agendas of other news organizations” (Protess & McCombs, 1991). Intermedia agenda setting was seen in the trends of Figures 1—8, and 23 which exhibited a pattern of *The Times* directing the agenda on sexual harassment and *CNN* and *USA Today* following that lead. Understanding how intermedia agenda setting works and the role news organizations have in influencing each other is a significant aspect of setting the public agenda. With respect to intermedia agenda setting, Danielian and Reese (1989) said, “we need to be fully aware of all the factors that set the agenda of the media, causing them to converge on certain issues, sources, and themes” (p. 65).

The similar agenda between the news groups was most likely a result of journalistic co-orientation. Co-orientation is part of the process journalist’s use in the news decision process to evaluate and select stories for publication. “As a part of their working routine, journalists monitor how other media set the news agenda and news frames and how they evaluate both facts and people” (Kramer et al., 2008, p. 2). Reinemann (2004) explained that “routine reliance on other media as a major factor in news decisions is a notion widespread in journalism” (p. 857).
This co-orientation resulted in a similar news agenda on sexual harassment among the three news outlets in this research. What one outlet reported about influenced what the other agencies also reported about. Kramer et al. explained that “co-orientation might enforce agenda setting processes and therefore enable a society to focus on specific important problems” (Kramer et al., 2008, p. 2). This process was validated in this study as news organizations focused on the specific and important topic of sexual harassment in their agendas.

**Role of Social Media in Setting the Agenda on Sexual Harassment**

RQ2 asked what role social media had in setting and driving the public agenda on sexual harassment. The findings of this study demonstrated that the conversations and discussions on Twitter amplified the agenda set by the mass media on sexual harassment in 2017, and from the platform, a movement was created from a hashtag. When Milano (2017) tweeted a call for action from women across the nation, it was in response to the many reports in the mass media about sexual harassment. Her tweet was sent out 10 days after the seminal article was published by The Times (see Figure 25), during which time 166 articles about sexual harassment had already been published (see Table 2 and Figures 1, 3, and 23). The #MeToo was created, gained traction, and eventually spawned a movement against sexual harassment.

**Social Media Amplified the Mass Media Agenda**

Although social media did not set the agenda on sexual harassment, it did amplify it. The use of the term sexual harassment and the discussion on Twitter seemed to echo what was being reported on in the mass media. Twitter users appeared to be reacting to the topic and issue that the news organizations were reporting on. The trends of social media conversations were very similar to the patterns in mass media, but the movement on Twitter was a couple days behind...
that of the news organizations (see Figures 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28). The data in Figures 23—28 suggest that the news reports influenced Twitter users discussion about sexual harassment.

Lippmann (1922) recognized that perceived public opinion resulted from the media’s coverage of happenings in the world and demonstrated how the press can influence public opinion. It is clear from the statistics that sexual harassment was not being discussed much on Twitter before the subject was reported on in the news media (see Figure 13, 14, 15, 16, 23, and 24). As news reports on the subject increased, the number of hashtags using the words sexual harassment also increased. The conversations on Twitter appeared to be in response to the mass media content on the issue.

Cohen (1963) noted, “the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (p. 13). Public awareness and concern for the issue of sexual harassment grew because it was a salient issue in the mass media. McCombs and Shaw (1972) maintained that critical issues in society are determined by the mass media, and “readers learn not only about a given issue but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position” (p. 176).

The findings indicated that Twitter users in the U.S. began to talk about sexual harassment because of the salient reports on the issue in the mass media (see Figure 24). This pattern appeared to follow Cohen’s (1963) explanation of the dynamic between public opinion and the news media. The press repeatedly reported on an issue that Americans then became more aware of, which in turn, they began talking and tweeting about. In essence, the news media didn’t tell people what to think but did guide them on what to think about, and those thoughts became a conversation that was revealed through chatter on Twitter.
The trend in the discussion on social media about sexual harassment resembled the trend set by the mass media in the volume of articles published (see Figures 13, 14, 15, 16, 23, and 24). The term sexual harassment was used more than 236,000 times on its peak day and on average was used more than 68,000 times a day. This amplification likely strengthened the sexual harassment agenda that was started by the mass media and suggested that mass media and social media mutually nurtured a flow of information, which promoted the public agenda.

The topic of sexual harassment is still seen in social media today, suggesting that the agenda set by the mass media is still considered an important topic by the public. Chatter, conversations, and discussions on social media reflect what people are talking about and the issues with which they are concerned. A quick search of the hashtag with the words “sexual harassment” on Twitter in September 2021 resulted in an overabundance of results. There were numerous tweets that used the hashtag, substantiating the hashtag was still being used and the topic was still being discussed on Twitter.

**Social Activism in Social Media**

The #MeToo movement exemplified how people use social media platforms, including Twitter, to receive and share information and promote and engage in activism. Use of #MeToo on Twitter sparked a conversation about sexual harassment on the platform, and users of the social network brought attention to the issue, shared stories, and distributed information.

Sayre et al. (2010) explained the Web has created an environment where “activists, are availing themselves of Internet-based platforms” (p. 9). Some communications researchers have debated that the Internet enriches society or splinters public discourse (Sassi, 1996; Schneider, 1996) while others argue that the Internet “is creating new social bonds that transcend physical proximity” (Bimber, 1999, p. 409). Some of these social bonds have created groups of
individuals who are joined together in pursuit of a common goal or cause and become online activists for those objectives.

_Hashtag activism_, for instance, is the “act of fighting for or supporting a cause with the use of hashtags as the primary channel to raise awareness of an issue and encourage debate via social media” (Tombleson & Wolf, 2017, p. 15). Some studies have shown using hashtags in social media posts can spread ideas, create awareness and discussion, combine and consolidate online resources, and introduce individuals to a community (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Costa, et al., 2014; Yang, 2016). Hon (2016) discovered that activists contributed to the formation of public attitudes and beliefs around salient issues through activism in online platforms. Other scholars have argued that activism online can facilitate social change (Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002; Saffer, Taylor, & Yang, 2013). Milano (2017) started a hashtag activism movement when she shared her tweet. Twitter users who came together and participated in the use of the #MeToo contributed to the public attitudes, beliefs, and discussions around this prominent issue and agenda of sexual harassment.

People concerned about sexual harassment found a way to rally together and bring attention to the issue using #MeToo on Twitter. Some researchers (Chaffee & Wilson, 1977; Feezell, 2017; McCombs & Zhu, 1995; Tan & Weaver, 2013) suggested that the Internet has empowered the public or the audience to affect the civic agenda and has weakened the ability of the mass media to set it. In the digital media environment, there is a “growing choice in media options and increased selection for the consumer” (Feezell, p. 490) and one of those choices is social media. The social platform Twitter provides a place for niche groups and people with specific and similar interests to come together, share ideas, and network. Feezell (2017) observed that niche media has “more narrowly targeted and attentive audiences” (p. 482), and information
shared in these niche media spaces are believed to be a catalyst for change in public opinion. In this study, a group concerned about sexual harassment came together and connected using a hashtag. The voices of that group were able to speak out on the social media platform, and their individual voices were strengthened. They were able to demonstrate solidarity by using the #MeToo, and this collective voice was noticed as use of the hashtag increased and went viral, thus amplifying the agenda set by the mass media.

**Changes in the Dynamic of Agenda Setting**

RQ3 asked if mass media or social media set the public agenda on sexual harassment. The findings of this study indicated that the public agenda on sexual harassment was spurred by and given longevity by the mass media and social media strengthened that agenda. The theory of agenda setting posits that the more salient an issue is in the news, the more the public will perceive that issue as important. Both mass media and social media focused on sexual harassment in the last three months of 2017. The data indicated that the news media set the agenda on the subject of sexual harassment, and social media amplified that agenda. This was demonstrated through the trend of mass media content (news articles) produced and then an increase in the number of tweets on those same topics.

**Power of the Mass Media to Set the Agenda is Not Eradicated**

Mass media set the foundation for and led the dialogue on the social issue of sexual harassment. This became obvious when the trend of the unified terms of mass media and social media were compared (see Figure 28). There were only three days during the course of the 70 days tracked when mass media did not lead the direction of the dialogue on Twitter (see Figure 44). Despite those few anomalies, the trends suggested that mass media set the agenda, which social media amplified. The direction of the public discussion originated with the press 96% of
the time (see Figure 28). The unmistakable patterns between what the press reported on in the mass media and what the public tweeted about on social media were exhibited in Figure 28.

This outcome aligned with the findings of McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) Chapel Hill study. The scholars exposed "a very strong relationship between the emphases placed on different campaign issues by the media . . . and the judgment of voters as to the salience and importance of various campaign topics" (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 181). A similar phenomenon was observed with the topic of sexual harassment in this study. The news media chose to cover the issue of sexual harassment, and that coverage influenced and guided the public’s conversations on social media. The mass media created public awareness and concern for the issue of sexual harassment through its salient coverage of the matter and the public on Twitter not only learned “about a given issue but also how much importance to attach to that issue” (p. 176).

The topic of sexual harassment has continued to show up in headlines years after the initial deluge of coverage in 2017. The press has continued to follow the Weinstein case and the court proceedings and was still reporting on the issue four years later (Full coverage, 2020; Harvey Weinstein timeline: How the scandal unfolded, 2021; Johnson, 2021; Levenson, 2020; #MeToo: A timeline of events, 2021; Ransom, 2020; Vercammen, & Chan, 2021). In the years since the reckoning on sexual harassment, journalists have continued to drive this agenda, which has expanded to include sexual assault and sexual abuse. This agenda has been an ongoing one since October 2017, and in the months after this analysis, a multitude of content, reports, and articles continued to be published on the subject. In April 2018, actor Bill Cosby was convicted of drugging and molesting a woman. In May of the same year, Spotify announced it would no longer include R&B artist R. Kelly on its playlists after longstanding accusations of sexual abuse
In September of 2018, Christine Blasey Ford accused Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, who was a nominee to the Court at the time, of sexual assault and then testified about the incident at Kavanaugh’s confirmation hearing (Brown, 2018; #MeToo: A timeline of events, 2021). In July 2019, hedge fund manager Jeffrey Epstein was charged with abusing dozens of underage girls and then committed suicide in jail the next month (#MeToo: A timeline of events, 2021; Rashbaum et al. 2019). In July of 2020, Fox News fired news anchor Ed Henry after an investigation of sexual misconduct in the workplace (#MeToo: A timeline of events, 2021). In September 2021, four female American gymnasts testified about the abuse they had suffered by former USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar (Naylor, 2021). Since 2017, the mass media has continued to guide the sexual harassment agenda which has remained at the forefront of America’s consciousness.

In this case, it appeared that the public’s capacity to tailor media use did not hinder the ability of the mass media to shape the public agenda, as Chaffee & Metzger (2001), Feezell (2017), McCombs (2005), Prior (2007), and Williams and Delli Carpini (2011) debated it would. In fact, the relationship between mass media and social media reflected Sayre et al.’s (2010) findings that the nature of the mass media’s role in agenda setting may be modified but has not been eradicated. Figures 23 and 24 illustrated how social media followed the cues of mass media, proving that the mass media’s “agenda-setting power has not diminished but has instead gained another channel” (Sayre et al., 2010, p.13).

**Intermedia Agenda Setting Among Social Media and Mass Media**

#MeToo resulted from an agenda set by the mass media on sexual harassment, but the hashtag helped shape and drive that agenda. Activism on Twitter and the use of the hashtag kept the topic of sexual harassment relevant and a topic of discussion among the public.
Conversations on social media closely followed news publications and happenings reported on by the mass media. After the creation of the #MeToo hashtag, a reciprocal relationship between news media and social media developed. At periods of the examined timeframe, the lines between agenda setter and follower became obscure and the delineation of the driving force became less clear. This dynamic cultivated a media environment where mass media and social media became entangled in what Messner and DiStaso (2008) called source cycle. This source cycle is a two-way relationship between mass media and social media. The press is still able to set the agenda, but the issues discussed on social media are taken from that agenda, and then the mass media extracts other stories and ideas on the topic from the conversations on social media (Messner & DiStaso, 2008). Wilding et al. (2018) explained, “digital platforms can now be regarded as key participants within the broader framework for news media; they may not be publishers, but their role as distributors is increasingly hybrid in nature” (p. 6). This symbiotic relationship will continue to impact the way public opinion is formed in the future.

Research has documented that online sources have the ability to influence the news agenda of the mass media (Boyle, 2001; Ku, Kaid, & Pfau, 2003; Messner & Distaso, 2008; Reese & Danielian, 1989; Roberts & McCombs, 1994) and this action can create what Messner and Distaso (2008) called a “news source cycle.” The news source cycle happens when “news content can be passed back and forth from media to media” (Messner and Disato, 2008, p. 447). Intermedia agenda setting has been found between newspapers and television networks (Reese & Danielian, 1989), television commercials and television news (Boyle, 2001; Roberts & McCombs, 1994), and the Internet and the mass media (Ku et al., 2003; Messner & Distaso, 2008). This intermedia agenda setting was detected and exhibited in Figures 23 and 24.
How people access and obtain information has changed in the digital era, and that can be seen through the mass media trends with #MeToo. The Internet is at the center of this change and has been a fundamental part of the way information sharing has changed. Before the Internet became ubiquitous in society, communication was a one-way model; but in this digital era, many media patrons play a part in a two-way communication model. It was evident that the news groups picked up on #MeToo, which cultivated engagement from users on social media and transferred that topic to mass media. The news organizations first reported on a social media phenomenon and then took ownership of that topic. This was an impeccable example of intermedia agenda setting between media. Vonbun et al. (2016) defined intermedia agenda setting as “a dynamic and routinized process of news diffusion, where coverage of one media outlet is influenced by the agenda of other outlets” (p. 1055).

The interconnectedness of mass media and social media has become more apparent with the rise of social networks in the digital age. There is often a blurring of the lines, and it becomes difficult to decipher where the influence of mass media ends and social media begins and vice versa. Neubaum & Kramer (2017) noted, “social media's capacity for users to generate, comment on, and forward content (including mass media messages) to other users has created new forms of mass interpersonal communication” (p. 464). There are numerous news stories that turned into hot topics on social media and many social movements that became part of the news cycle.

The two forms of media are becoming more entwined, which has been observed in multiple instances where agendas morphed together. There are several examples of this phenomenon including equality issues like those supported by Times Up (Buckley, 2018; Bernat & Pelletier, 2018) and Black Lives Matter (Mourao, & Kilgo, 2021), topics involving prominent individuals or celebrities like the Obama birther conspiracy (Jardina, & Traugott, 2018), and the
Free Britney movement (Day et al., 2021; Spanos, 2021), as well as health-related matters like COVID19 vaccinations and mask mandates (Gostin et al., 2020), and social issues like domestic violence as exhibited by the Gabby Petito case (Anders, & Kornfield, 2021; Clark, & Armitage, 2021). These examples illustrate how people can use social media to share, comment, and get involved with what is happening in the news cycle and what the press is publishing.

**Conclusion**

The agenda-setting function of the mass media has not been eradicated by social media and the Internet. Although the media landscape has changed since the conception of the agenda-setting theory by McCombs and Shaw (1972) nearly 40 years ago, the function of the theory still holds true, but perhaps not to the same degree it once did. This was demonstrated by this study, which found that the mass media set the agenda on the social issue of sexual harassment that then ignited the #MeToo movement though social media’s amplification of the subject.

The diffusion of news has transformed in the digital era, but the relationship between the news media and public opinion that Cohen (1963) described is still intact. The capability of the mass media to influence and affect the public agenda was displayed through this research. The way the press filtered and shaped the issue with frequent, consistent, and prominent coverage created salience, led the public to perceive sexual harassment as an important topic. The attention the subject received in the press raised an awareness among U.S. Americans, which was reflected in their use of sexual harassment and #MeToo on Twitter.

The development and use of social media has affected the agenda-setting process. Intermedia agenda setting between the mass media and social media was revealed in this research through their influence on each other. In the digital era, communication is no longer a one-way model, but a two-way mode of information sharing with a more symbiotic relationship.
between media. And although the traditional agenda-setting power of the mass media has been diluted, it has not been extinguished.

**Research Limitations**

This study provided significant findings about agenda setting in the digital era using the topic of sexual harassment and #MeToo as a case study. However, the breadth and scope of this study was limited by several things, including the research parameters of mass media, research parameters of social media, and researcher bias.

First, this research only looked at the top three digital news sites and did not include printed editions of newspapers or television news broadcasts. Including more digital news sites, printed editions of newspapers, and TV newscasts would provide a deeper insight to the current agenda-setting ability of the mass media. The study did not take into consideration the fact that almost all news media outlets have a presence on social media. The presence of news media on social media and the possible effect of that existence on agenda setting was not taken into account.

Second, in terms of social media, this study only looked at Twitter and did not examine Facebook, Instagram, or the newest social media platform TikTok. Including these platforms could provide a better understanding of the social landscape and the #MeToo movement as well as other topics of public interest. The data may be incomplete “due to the constant update and removal of online information” (Su & Borah, 2019), including deleted Tweets that may not have been included in this study’s sample. This research only harvested hashtags and key-words and did not take the content or the context of the tweets into consideration. Rafail (2018) said that using samples that gather tweets using only a hashtag may “misrepresent important aspects of Twitter activity and may lead researchers to erroneous conclusions” (p. 197).
Third, as with any academic research, this study was vulnerable to my personal predispositions and preconceptions. I spent 20 years of my career working as a broadcast journalist and member of the mass media. I applied and utilized the agenda-setting function in my daily workflow. As a journalist, I strived to be fair, balanced, and unbiased. As a researcher, I incorporated those same attributes to my study. However, there was a possibility that my own biases could have had an effect on my interpretation of the data. I tried to mitigate this possibility by having other academic researchers verify the results of the data.

Future Research

There is a need for more research to understand the dynamic of mass media and social media and the agenda-setting effect on civic opinion and social movements. The relationship between old media and new media has not been fully realized yet. Future research could focus on news media content in social media. Many news organizations use social media to share and distribute their content. It would be interesting to know what percentage of the social media content contains links to news articles, discusses news reports, or is created by journalists. Future research could also examine the interrelatedness of mass media and social media in relation to other social movements. In regard to audience fragmentation, future studies could focus on the technological environment of communication to see how the increase in diversity of media platforms has impacted the media audience and if that has altered the agenda-setting function of the mass media.
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