Healthy discursive spaces for female politicians:

Exploring social media as a communicative practice promoting gender equality

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Abstract

Despite growing support for equal access to opportunities, there remains a puzzling tendency to systematically undermine female leaders. Evidence suggests that in comparison to their male peers, discussion about female politicians diverges from *healthy* democratic critique and debate more frequently. Through cues included in—and excluded from—public discussion, authoritative sources consistently reinforce damaging stereotypes. Even as new officials are appointed, legacy media effects set agendas for what we talk about, frame how we talk about it, and prime how we make subsequent political decisions. Despite widespread recognition of the problem, there is currently limited Canadian-context research about mass media effects, gender, and politics—and particularly in applied communications research exploring how these topics interact in social media's discursive spaces.

This study explores how professional communicative practices are perpetuating barriers for female politicians, and also how these practices can help to remove some of those same barriers. Salient contributions to the literature include: reviewing significant discursive analytic research about biases in media coverage towards female political leaders, translating academic findings from neighbouring disciplines into applied communications strategies that mitigate and remove some of these barriers, and exploring how key influencers are applying social media communications strategies to advance gender equality.

My research design sought concrete solutions to the negativity, and I structured my inquiry accordingly—to qualitatively describe current social media initiatives that promote gender equality. To this end, I purposefully-sampled and recruited key informants, conducted semi-structured interviews, and explored emergent themes within the data using content analysis.

Among the many lessons learned through this study, perhaps the most striking conclusion is that discursive fixation on political vitriol towards female politicians (when ignoring their actual agendas) is merely another media effect impacting how much we hear the actual voices of the politicians before us.

There is currently significant civic and political will to understand and mitigate these social tendencies systematically targeting female authority figures. This study adds to current research in the field by drawing and reframing related interdisciplinary and communications research—and translating that into manageable recommendations for applied communications practices.

Key words: sexism, politics, leadership, representation, equality, gender performance, feminism, female politicians, media effects, framing, social media, gender, privilege, intersectionality, applied communications, communications strategies, strategic communications, communications for development, C4D, gender studies, political sciences, policy studies, critical discourse analysis, qualitative description, content analysis, semi-structured interviews, NVivo qualitative data analysis software, Trint transcription, RefWorks, Alberta, Canada.

Introduction

In Alberta, recent incidents of harassment towards female politicians range from public, sexist ridicule in the legislative assembly (Bennett, 2016), to threats of physical violence (Bell, 2016), to blatant sexism cited as motivation to leave a political party (Anderson, 2016; Graney, 2016)—to name just a few of the gender-based concerns currently confronting female politicians. A social climate normalizing online harassment towards political leaders is both intrinsically problematic and also sets the tone for gender relations more broadly. The research study's topic is the unhealthy discursive spaces socially constructing our understanding of female politicians. The research problem is that despite signs of progress, negativity remains common towards female politicians. Communicative practices have the power to either perpetuate or remove barriers for female politicians, and as such, this paper seeks to outline some of the ways we can revive a healthier discourse about our female politicians.

This study explores how professional communicative practices perpetuate barriers for female politicians, and also how they can help remove some of those same barriers. This study adds to the current research in the field by drawing and reframing related interdisciplinary research into applied communications practice. The primary limitation of the study is its scope. Beyond that, it should be noted that this is an exploratory study and does not seek to define causal relationships or provide quantitative data.

The study situates applied communications solutions within a broader base, ranging from academic literature in gender studies and political sciences, gray literature on policy applications, and related legal developments. Major research studies informing this study include Kahn's (1992) foundational work documenting media bias towards female politicians, and Ross and Comrie's (2012) exploration of the role that media plays in political discourse.

My research design sought concrete solutions to the negativity, and I structured my inquiry to qualitatively describe current social media initiatives that promote gender equality. Qualitative description is my chosen research method, as it matched my research question better than other potential research designs, including: discourse analysis, meta-analysis, grounded theory, and participatory action research.

Understanding how we can apply communications strategies to advance gender equality and recreate healthy discursive spaces is significant because harassment towards female political leaders sets the tone for gender relations. It is an area of high topical interest in Alberta, though the problems experienced here are certainly not limited to this setting. Key areas of literature reviewed include: features of the current state of the discourse, thematically organizing how researchers are measuring gender bias in media accounts of political candidates, and strategic communications components, as applied communications solutions to the problem of negativity directed towards female politicians. Following the literature review, I discuss the research design and data collection methods in greater detail, present the findings, and finish with my analyses of these findings in the context of the literature reviewed.

In the upcoming literature review section, I discuss my search strategy and inclusion criteria, and present and discuss the literature which formed the foundation for this study.

Literature Review

The research study's topic is the unhealthy discursive spaces socially constructing our understanding of female politicians. The research problem is that despite signs of progress, negativity remains common towards female politicians. The purpose and goal of this chapter is to situate the study within related disciplines working to promote gender equality, healthy discursive spaces, and increased diversity in representation. First, this chapter describes the methods used in my literature search process (including locating, selecting, and reviewing, as well as defining inclusion criteria). Secondly, it identifies relevant literature—emphasizing how communicative practices can contribute to healthier discourse about female politicians.

Regarding the literature chosen, while this study focuses primarily on the role of communicative practices in both perpetuating and removing barriers for female politicians, there are valuable insights to draw from neighbouring disciplines: gender studies, political sciences, critical discourse analysis, and policy studies. Communicative practices are the primary field of study. I discuss these practices, as they either perpetuate or remove barriers for female politicians. There is also a secondary grouping of disciplines informing this research. This component briefly reviews interdisciplinary considerations whose intersections contextualize the research problem and situate the role for strategic communications.

Search Strategy and Methodology

I selected literature based on overlapping as many of the following categories as possible: communications, gender studies, political sciences, critical discourse analysis, and policy studies. Discourse analysis was initially emphasized, as it illuminates embedded meanings and seemingly neutral terms to expose the power relationships reinforced through "knowledge, assumptions, and inferences we bring to any communication" (Gee, 2014, pp. 13–14). Seeking Canadian

content wherever possible, the parameters still needed to be expanded, given the volume of available literature. That said, the geographic range of the literature also emphasizes the universality of the problem. Interdisciplinary literature was ranked according to relevance with highest priority given to articles from peer-reviewed academic literature and other formal publications from communications perspective. Grey literature is relevant, particularly for advocacy and policy applications, and popular news pieces can also be quite relevant in highlighting current events and media foci. This highlights the need to translate academic theory and research for applied communications work.

Given the complexity of the problem, I felt it required insight from several angles (political science, gender studies, regulatory bodies, advocacy groups, etc.), in order to apply it to solutions that key informants envision for future communications policies.

Inclusion and review. Prior to starting the study, handling the volume of information began with processing resources saved in my RefWorks database. I also needed to methodically assess relevance and dig deeper into the content as I progressed. To this end, I created a spreadsheet matrix to organize my notes for each resource. Each resource was assigned a row, and included the basic information exported from RefWorks, such as author, title, year, and a link to its source where possible. Each column represented the eligibility and inclusion criterion. Columns included their overall relevance to the research questions, based on: title (Y/N)**,** abstract/preface/foreword/executive summary/introduction (Y/N), and full text (scored from 1–3, 1: highly relevant, 2: somewhat relevant, 3: peripheral. Other documented information included: type of publication (e.g. book/article/grey literature/web page), whether or not it was peer-reviewed (Y/N), the primary discipline (e.g. communications, political sciences, gender studies). I briefly summarized my initial notes about the resources in this matrix, such as the authors'

arguments (e.g. a brief description, assessment of validity, summary of alternate explanations, and statement of my biases inclining me to accept their arguments). I also documented where the study took place, summarized any markers for bias, sources' foci and key findings, and made space for evaluative notes such as strengths, weaknesses, and how I would apply it to my project.

Locating and selecting literature. To situate the research and understand existing contributions, the literature review took place over several iterations as I sought to understand where new research stood to contribute the most. I distinguish these iterations of the research questions over three distinct phases. I began with the research aim of discovering how other scholars have itemized gender-biased discursive markers, and analyzing if/how this knowledge is integrated into policy messaging.

The first phase was guided by two initial literature review research questions: (1) What markers are other scholars using to track gender-biased media effects in reporting on female political candidates (fourth and fifth estates)? (2) How is this connecting to progressing policy around gendered language? That is, how does it impact considerations like journalistic integrity, and the controversial debate between hate speech and freedom of speech?

To answer these questions, I used the following basic parameters. The minimum requirement was a topical reference to gender and politics, prioritizing communications theorists (over gender studies and political science theorists). Additionally, resources also covered at least one or more of the following: either framing or media effects, discourse analysis, and policy initiatives for framing gender.

I focused my initial searches in the following databases: Communication & Mass Media Complete, Proquest Dissertations and Theses, the University of Alberta's Education and Research Archive (ERA), Political Science Complete, Gender Studies, and Contemporary

Women's Issues. I performed various searches based on combinations of keywords. Topically, I searched for gender (including feminism, female politicians, gender roles, gender performance, identity politics), journalism (including news bias, media sexism), politics (including government, representative governance, leadership, democracy), media effects models (including priming, framing, agenda setting), as well as various terms (barriers to entry, inequality, Canada, power, social construction of language). As I dug deeper into the literature, I also located interesting returns, as I incorporated more specific terms. This included types of indicators for bias (overt negativity, stereotyping, vilification, prejudice, sexism, hate speech, freedom of speech, double standards, tone reporting, trivialization), covert exclusion (underrepresentation, relevance, novelty, othering/otherness), denial of issue (gas-lighting, privilege, fragility), philosophy or approach (critical feminist theory, discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, feminist philosophy, discourse markers, semiotics, Foucault), applications (policy, legislation, political sciences, media studies), disciplines (communications, gender studies, political science), and location (Alberta, Canada).

Looking at a list of returns on the above terms, I then prioritized by discipline and refined my keyword list. Paring the list down to the ten most relevant returns, I then found a methodical way to do a 'pearl' article scan of references, disproving Oliver's (2012) claim that there unfortunately was "not a particularly systematic way of going about th[is] task" (p. 41). I copied the references from a selection of the most relevant articles found in my initial survey, pasted them into a spreadsheet and manipulated the data to arrive at basic bibliometrics on the sources that my references cited. I then used these authors and works as a reference point for relevance in the field, tracing references cited in their work as a bridge back to other relevant works.

After uncovering what seemed too large a body of work to justify doing more research in the same vein (without revisions), I started shifting away from justifying the problem and towards potential solutions. In the second phase of my literature review, I refined my literature review research questions to the following: (1) What markers are scholars tracking to determine the presence of gender-biased media effects (framing, priming, and agenda-setting) in traditional media accounts of female political candidates? (2) How does the current media environment further shape the public discourse on female political candidates? (3) How can we translate academic knowledge about gendered language into policies in the digital media environment to promote inclusive and balanced political discourse? Further focusing my research questions, and having developed my eligibility criteria by this point allowed me to be more methodical in locating relevant materials for both this phase and the next.

Finally, the third phase of my literature review related to pragmatic concerns of structuring social media communications strategies and locating concrete examples of communications initiatives seeking to promote gender equality. Please see Appendix A for a more detailed description of how these research questions developed throughout the research process.

Review structure and key literature areas. The literature is organized into three areas, based on how they relate to the research problem of negativity towards female politicians, and to a research design positioned to find concrete solutions to the negativity.

The first section discusses features of the current state of the discourse. In the literature for this section, I review the media effects theory, as it contributes to a theoretical framework for the study, in understanding how the negativity impacts public perceptions (and voting preferences). I discuss critical feminist theory and gender performance, as they articulate

correlations between gender and negative treatment. For context, I review developments in our communications and media context that intensify barriers and negativity for female politicians. I consulted neighbouring disciplines for context, and in exploring research gaps between these disciplines, I also learned of valuable opportunities for strategic communications. Despite my focus on communicative practices, I also briefly review literature from related (secondary) disciplines as they help to contextualize the negativity facing female politicians. For this contextual survey, I draw on academic literature in gender studies and political sciences, gray literature on policy applications, and related legal developments.

The second section focuses on a cursory meta-analysis, thematically organizing how researchers are measuring gender bias in media accounts of political candidates. This summary of critical discourse analyses serves three functions: (1) compiling evidence that media coverage about female politicians is biased, (2) deconstructing how communicative practices are contributing to an unproductive and unhealthy discourse, and (3) translating these academic findings into accessible content which can serve as a foundation for strategic communications.

In the third section of the literature review, I review strategic communications components, as applied communications solutions to the problem of negativity directed towards female politicians. I also draw examples from the literature on feminist communications strategies and communications for development to identify successful examples of concrete solutions to the negativity

The final section ends with a brief discussion of how this literature review shapes my planned research design.

Theoretical Framework

This section provides a framework for how the results are interpreted, as well as explicitly discussing my personal research biases. Merrigan, Huston, and Johnston (2012) outline that operating within the "epistemological paradigm… [of] knowledge by criticism… The purpose of research is to identify structures and instigate social change… [which] is accomplished by identifying historically and culturally situated structures, and assessing their utility" (p. 36). As for approach, this study takes the form of intervention-oriented applied communications research (Frey & SunWolf, 2009)—in other words, applying communications theories to concrete problems in order to promote advocacy and social justice. Declaring my bias, I take a post-positivist, social-constructionist approach, embracing human fallibility and the truth that comes from seeking the "'soft' realm of meanings, instead of the 'hard' world of facts" (Best & Harris, 2013, p. 289). I take a critical feminist standpoint, that for the purposes of this inquiry aligns most closely with a liberal feminist approach.

This paper takes the stance that language is a socially-constructed tool that can either reinforce or challenge existing power relationships; in other words, it "explor[es] the language of the mass media... and its role in legitimating unequal power relations and hegemonic social practices" (Abdullah, 2014, p. 12). As such, language creates bias explicitly and implicitly (both through how it is said, and what is excluded). Language creates bias explicitly when the media cuts down female leaders with name calling. For example, we may see the "routinised, sex-based name-calling such as 'nanny' and 'matron' that women leaders [such as New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark] endure… [or the] more novel way [such as] when [terms like] 'Helengrad' [are] coined" (Ross & Comrie, 2012, p. 972). Language also creates bias implicitly, which can be more difficult to isolate. One place to start is by identifying patterns in these signs of bias—

described subsequently here as bias markers. “Writers and theorists accept that language does exclude, trivialize and demean women…language is systematically sexist and plays an active role in the symbolic positioning of women as inferior to men” (Letherby, 2003, p. 33)—for example, “mankind,” “chairman,” and the predominant usage of male pronouns in historical texts.

Critical feminist theory is embedded throughout the paper. Butler’s (1990) definition of gender as a performance is a central concept in my exploration of the topic. Butler (2006) posits that gender is not a neutral pre-existing category, or “descriptive feature of experience” (p. 23), as it is often mistaken for. Rather, it is an identity category constructed by enacting “normative ideal[s]” (Butler, 2006, p. 23) through clothing, posture, speech, and various other signifiers of a person’s gender. Individuals are expected to perform their prescribed gender and systematically punished when they do not (Butler, 2006, p. 190). The public’s latent expectations of individuals based on their gender factor heavily into how they perceive and discuss them. The goal is to explore how to apply critical feminist perspectives to framing female politicians positively through social media communications strategies, set an agenda for more equality in political representation, and prime the public to accept and welcome female leaders into their democratic spaces.

Media effects models. Studying media effects provides insight into how biased descriptions at a large scale can impact public perceptions of political candidates. The media effects models of framing, priming, and agenda-setting work together. Opinion leaders and media sources set the agenda for what the public discourse focuses on, frame how that information is presented so that the public can make sense of it, and prime the audience to use that information to evaluate political candidates (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, pp. 11–12). For

example, some scholars suggest media coverage favours male politicians, an agenda which Gidengil and Everitt (2003) describe as "gendered mediation" (p. 210; Sreberny-Mohammadi & Ross, 1996). Conscious or not, once the agenda is set, "[framing] adds meaning to a seemingly disconnected list of facts… [and] help the facts make sense" (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p. 176). Finally, all of the information presented about the candidates primes the audience to make a decision about their fitness in office, observed through the "effects of news coverage on issue salience, evaluations of presidential performance, attributions of issue, responsibility, and voting choices" (Iyengar, 1990, p. 1).

It is worth explicitly distinguishing between two closely-related terms, as this paper deals heavily with both media coverage and media effects. For the purposes of this paper, I use the term media coverage to denote the act of reporting (in the general sense). When referring to media effects, I am describing framing, priming and agenda-setting as outcomes of coverage.

Interdisciplinary Context

This section tackles the current state of the discourse. This includes how we're producing and sharing information, and the resulting impact on the discourse around female politicians. It discusses interdisciplinary concerns, including a brief discussion of related legislative developments and other solutions seeking to resolve gender-based representational issues.

Challenges: Adapting to new media. Scholars have diligently documented for over the last quarter of a century how the media frames the discourse around female politicians, and the net impact of this activity on the politicians' credibility. Given there is substantive evidence this is an ongoing problem, what is it about the current media environment allowing a resurgence of regressive views on gender parity? Who is producing what kind of news—and to what end—greatly impacts the discourse. New forms of communications technologies impacting

information production and distribution are exerting forces on the media environment. These contribute to shaping public discourse about female political candidates. As our communicative landscape evolves, so must our communications strategies. This section addresses how developments in the media environment are impacting discursive constructions of gender.

Information production. Amateur reporting continues to increase. This diversification of media sources, paired with structural challenges facing traditional media outlets affects news production. "Online publishing, social networks, and web search[es] have dramatically lowered the costs of producing, distributing, and discovering news articles" (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016, p. 298). As "our social tools remove older obstacles to public expression, … [this results in] the mass amateurization of efforts previously reserved for media professionals" (Shirky, 2008, p. 55), and "challenges professional journalists with citizen journalists who can report, break, and disseminate news more quickly" (Sturgis, 2012, p. 5). Central tenets of traditional journalism impact production quality, such as: "scrupulous 'objectivity'" (Ross & Comrie, 2012, p. 981) as it impacts fact-checking and verification procedures (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, pp. 174–175; Sturgis, 2012, p. 5), and "newspaper ethics… [or] deeply held [beliefs in] … a newspaper's duty to the reader" (Carroll, 2004, p. 62). This shift towards amateurization impacts the discourse about female politicians, as untrained voices opine as influentially as the professionals trained to uphold objectivity and democratic transparency.

Responding to this shift, "post-truth," recently named the word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries, means "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Flood, 2016, para. 2). Given the current state of public discourse, it follows there is renewed interest in news

production methods. In a lecture given over a decade ago, Carroll's (2004) words feel like they were written yesterday:

> What we're seeing is a difference between journalism and pseudo-journalism, between journalism and propaganda… The propaganda technique that has invaded journalism… springs not from journalistic roots but from modern politics—specifically, that woeful subset known as attack politics. In attack politics, the idea is to 'define' one's rival in the eyes of the public. This means repeating derogatory information so often that the rival's reputation is ruined. Sometimes the information is true; sometimes it is misleading; sometimes it is simply false. (p. 67)

Admittedly, these are not new techniques, but are resonating with renewed validity in our current political discourse. Another hallmark of sensationalism,

> the growing deployment of tabloid news values such as sex, celebrity, entertainment and showbiz… leads to narratives that often depict women in stereotypical and frequently sexualised roles, the personalised aspect of which deflects attention away from the structural aspects of social inequality. (Comrie & McMillan, 2013, p. 212)

Information sharing. Some scholars suggest networked media affect sharing and accessing information, thereby affecting the discourse. This next section discusses various ways our current media environment is changing. I discuss how the theoretical concepts of filter bubbles, echo chambers, and political homophily may be entrenching and amplifying existing views. I also discuss the counterargument that access to information is freer, with greater exposure to all aspects of any debate.

Social media platforms promote the rapid exchange of information. Finding relevant information leads to an increased reliance on search engines, and more energy is going into

understanding the algorithms impacting information accessibility. Emerging network theories about covert information filtering problematize how information is created and shared, and contextualize trends. Pariser (2011) explains:

> The new generation of Internet filters… are prediction engines, constantly creating and refining a theory of who you are and what you'll do and want next. Together, these engines create a unique universe of information for each of us… the filter bubble introduces three dynamics we've never dealt with before. First, you're alone in it… Second, the bubble is invisible… Finally, you don't choose to enter the bubble. (pp. 9–10)

The extent to which algorithms are impacting our exposure to balanced discourse is hotly debated, and produces conflicting results, even within the same studies: Flaxman et al.'s (2016) findings on "the effect of recent technological changes on ideological segregation" suggested the theoretical constructs of echo chambers and filter bubbles were somewhat neutralized by the effects of increased exposure (pp. 317–318). They discovered that

> articles found via social media or web-search engines are indeed associated with higher ideological segregation than those an individual reads by directly visiting news sites. However, we also found… these channels are associated with greater exposure to opposing perspectives. Finally, we showed that the vast majority of online news consumption mimicked traditional offline reading habits, with individuals directly visiting the home pages of their favorite, typically mainstream, news outlets. We thus uncovered evidence for both sides of the debate, while also finding that the magnitude of the effects is relatively modest. (Flaxman et al., 2016, pp. 317–318)

Barbera, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, and Bonneau (2015) outline this division as "whether online communication resembles an 'echo chamber' (as a result of selective exposure and ideological segregation) or a 'national conversation,'" (p. 1531), concluding "when it comes to explicitly political issues, individuals are clearly more likely to pass on information that they have received from ideologically similar sources than to pass on information that they have received from dissimilar sources" (p. 1540). This idea of an echo chamber is also expressed as

> political homophily… [which] concerns the ability of digital media to support the formation of a public sphere, where a diversity of opinion and information can interact, or, conversely, to function as an echo chamber that reinforces established perspectives and opinions. (Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014, p. 317)

Despite ideals of promoting a national conversation or improved public sphere, there are clearly concerns and conflicting findings—around how these technological features shape our discourse, and in how we shape them.

Finally, rather than asking how specific communication platforms inform political participation, Colleoni et al. (2014) suggest analyzing information sharing as part of our public discourse, differently:

> [turning] away from treating the Internet or [social networking sites] as a separate reality and towards a focus on the Internet as one among many aspects of social reality in general—might open up interesting and fruitful avenues for Big Data Analysis. (Colleoni et al., 2014, p. 329)

Colleoni's (2014) suggestion underlies how I conceive of the discursive spaces of social media—as merely another space where discourse happens, albeit with its own rules and idiosyncrasies.

There continue to be issues with how professional journalists frame candidates, under the guise of objectivity. Amateur "journalists" are not held to the same standard and professional credo, and furthermore, the networked media environment rewards sensationalism. Regulating user generated content also follows different rules than traditional media outlets, and has proven difficult.

Legal context. Legally, there are precedents and frameworks offering perspective about the current state of public discourse as it contributes to our social constructions of female politicians. Guiding our legal framework, the Government of Canada (n.d.) states "women's rights are human rights. Equality rights are especially important, given the unequal treatment women have experienced in Canada. A number of legal instruments exist in Canada to protect equality for women" (Protecting Women's Rights section). In the context of media bias specific to female politicians, it's interesting to note the definition of discrimination in the workplace: "the Employment Equity Act of 1986, which applies to federally regulated employees and requires employers to identify and eliminate unnecessary barriers that limit employment opportunities" (Labour section). Lomic (2014) notes how ambiguity in Canadian law could construe social media critiques as workplace harassment:

> Although there can be little question that insults or vitriol hurled at a co-worker in the workplace itself may constitute 'workplace harassment' under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* and at common law, it is less clear that defamatory or harassing postings on social media amount to 'harassment' in the workplace. However, recent cases in the labour and human rights context suggest that defamatory or harassing comments in social media between co-workers may amount to workplace misconduct and harassment, where there is sufficient nexus between those communications and the workplace. (p. 259)

Returning to the political context, co-workers of female politicians include other politicians. In Alberta, there are cases of defamatory and harassing social media comments towards female politicians actually either coming from, or explicitly encouraged by those very co-workers (Anderson, 2016; Bell, 2016; Wildrose MLA Derek Fildebrandt suspended, 2016; Wood & Graney, 2016).

Despite these expectations for conduct, problems remain. Individuals critiqued for making defamatory or harassing comments sometimes evoke the defense that it is their right to speak freely. The next section deals with a cursory overview of recent developments, to contextualize the study.

Hate speech is an extreme example of unhealthy discourse. In 2014, Motion 502 controversially sought to repeal section 3(1)(b) of the Alberta Human Rights Act, claiming it impeded freedom of speech. On the surface, the claim appears reasonable, until looking more closely at what sections the Motion found too restrictive:

> No person shall publish, issue or display … before the public any statement, publication, notice, sign, symbol, emblem or other representation that … is likely to expose a person or a class of persons to hatred or contempt because of the race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, physical disability, mental disability, age, ancestry, place of origin, marital status, source of income, family status or sexual orientation of that person or class of persons" (Alberta Human Rights Act in Koshan, 2014, para. 2).

There are arguments to be made for language policing that constrains freedom of speech, and for the potential risks in driving dissent underground—creating a *spiral of silence* effect (Noelle-Neumann, 1984). The overall impact on discourse, however, determines which claim deserves priority. Though freedom of speech is clearly a worthy end in itself, "hate speech is

antithetical to [democracy] in that it shuts down dialogue by making it difficult or impossible for members of the vulnerable group to respond, thereby stifling discourse" (Supreme Court of Canada in Koshan, 2014, para. 6). It is thus both a symptom of the problem, as well as creating additional barriers to healthy discursive spaces.

Party-level correctives could include a better enforcement of a zero-tolerance policy for candidates who turn a blind—or amused—eye to hate speech on their social media platforms and at their gatherings (Bell, 2016). Climenhaga (2015) notes benefits that the visible public forum has, when hate speech is expressed:

> we can see very clearly where this poison is coming from, and often exactly from whom. Moreover, there's pressure on the police... And a politically engaged citizenry is disinclined to allow politicians whose supporters act like this to [ignore] the problem.

Policies and Quotas. Some researchers suggest that adding more women may not address the bias problems. Research by Vanlangenakker, Wauters, and Maddens (2013) suggests a trend of female leaders being systematically "pushed toward the exit by the[ir own] party" (p. 63). They elaborate, offering two conclusions:

> The abundant literature on the effects of quotas… should be complemented by studies focusing on parliamentary exits and the reasons underlying those departures… Second, parties clearly play a pivotal role in women's representation. Not only do they facilitate women's entrance into parliament, but our findings suggest that they also shape women's departures (p. 73).

Another striking finding is Bohnet's (2016) policy-based research for creating inclusivity by pragmatically re-designing systems around bias—rather than either denying bias exists, or idealistically trying to teach people to remove biases. Her premise is that biases exist, therefore if

we design better systems and organizations with these biases in mind, we have access to more diverse input, and can create better outputs for these systems and organizations.

Informing Strategic Communications Messaging

Media contributes to perpetuating gender biases held towards female politicians. A substantial body of research indicates how embedded gender bias is in traditional mass media sources' accounts of female politicians. This section draws heavily from critical discourse analysis with a feminist lens, with its emphasis on power relations—this approach particularly exposes measurable discrepancies in how the traditional media presents political candidates. This section thematically outlines types of markers scholars track to demonstrate gender bias when traditional media covers female political candidates. Pursuing a cursory meta-analysis of the markers scholars measure to demonstrate the existence of gendered media bias serves three objectives:

1) Organizing academic evidence of media bias towards female politicians,
2) Learning by example how media coverage may be undermining attempts to advance gender equality through healthy discursive spaces, and
3) Contributing to solutions by informing strategic communications messaging with these academic findings

Identifying gender bias markers in media coverage. If these are the markers that scholars use to measure biases in mass media coverage, it stands to reason that strategic communications benefits from examining the literature.

Gender performance and enforcement. Some scholars demonstrate differential media reporting at a higher level of abstraction. Recalling Butler's (1990) definition of gender as a performance, this is relevant to media depictions of female politicians, as it can refresh

unexamined social expectations of how individuals from each gender perform. More explicitly, how female politicians may draw criticism if they behave contrary to social norms. There's an interesting contradiction when it comes to gender performance. Popular opinion seems to support that female politicians would fare better by adopting **masculine characteristics**. Indeed, some research suggests that the political arena exhibits bias by defaulting to rewarding traditionally masculine characteristics. For example, Walsh (2000) studied how structural bias rewards masculine traits, by examining the power structures embedded in organizational language. Her mixed method approach triangulates interviews in communities of practice (with participant observation), textual content analysis for patterns, and secondary research of work by feminist sociolinguists (p. 98). By looking at the texts displaying this language, and also comparing women's experiences in male-dominated professional environments to female-positive communities of practice, she found that we can explore discursive agency and the often-overlooked forces constraining this agency (p. v). She states that in traditionally male domains, women are expected to adopt "masculinist discursive norms that masquerade as gender-neutral professional norms" (p. 2).

Many scholars disagree with this normative expectation of strategically adopting masculine characteristics. For example, Ritchie (2013) coded images of US Senator Hillary Clinton from the 2007–8 Democratic leadership election, as they were strategically used to undermine her. She found that images highlighting masculine attributes and those dehumanizing Clinton created discomfort in the audience. She attributes this to the images activating frames about Clinton's supposedly "unnatural" gender performance, and refreshing what the author terms the audience's "anxieties" about gender roles (p. 103).

Despite refreshing latent expectations about gender performance, other literature suggests that female politicians may still be expected to adopt masculine characteristics, as a subset of an overall feminine gender performance. For example, Harp, Loke, and Bachmann (2009) attribute former US Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin's relatively warm initial reception to her successful performance of traditional femininity—giving her room to perform the masculinity expected of politicians. They suggest that Palin's

> public performance of masculinity (her toughness and ability to lead) is accepted only as it is rearticulated through traditional femininity… [and] conform[ity] to patriarchal expectations based on dichotomous gender roles—mother, beauty queen, daughter, supportive partner—in order to successfully gain access into the male world of national level politics. (p. 17)

Harp et al.'s (2009) proposed synthesis of conflicting gender-binaries does give a semblance of a compromise between equally persuasive arguments on both sides about how female politicians may tread gently on the conflicting expectations present in public discourse.

Investigating bias quantitatively. Numerous studies conclude that female political figures receive less attention than their male peers in traditional media sources. Quantifying the coverage female politicians receive can illuminate media bias (Chimba, 2006; Kahn, 1992; Plaster, 2002; Ross, 1995; Ross & Comrie, 2012). Exposing these quantitative differences can be harder to refute and deny, based on the assumed subjectivity of number-based narratives. For example, Plaster (2002) analyzed campaign coverage of U.S. female senatorial candidates from 1978 to 1996, by 13 major newspapers, finding that male candidates received more coverage of platform-related issues, as well as overall coverage (p. 148). Underrepresentation and exclusion can be measured in a number of different ways, including the "length of article, proportion of

paragraphs about candidate, prominence [of the] headline and lead mention, [and]… article placement" (Kahn, 1992, p. 501), the "visibility of the… leaders measured by column inches" (Ross & Comrie, 2012, p. 969), and by measuring the size of the articles and their placement (Chimba, 2006). It is worth noting that Chimba (2006) studied media portrayals of women over an eight-year period, also including qualitative markers such as headlines, subjects, themes, and portrayals of specific individuals. They found that media coverage was regressing *after* Zambia reached democratic governance in 1991—despite optimism that media developments would have the opposite effect.

O'Neill, Savigny, and Cann (2016) speak to the underrepresentation of female politicians in the media, asserting that "in this mediatised political age, to struggle to be seen and heard is a form of political death" (p. 303). They troublingly found that representational media coverage of female politicians in the UK has proportionally declined significantly in the last 20 years, and in 2012 was no longer proportional to the number of officials (as it was in 1992 and 2002; p. 299). From a sample of 147 newspaper articles in 1992, they found that 91% of articles mentioned male MPs, compared to the 9% mentioning female MPs. By contrast, from a sample of 196 newspaper articles in 2012, they found that 87% of articles mentioned male MPs, compared to the 16% mentioning female MPs. At a first glance, this appears to be an increase. However, the proportion of female MPs in Parliament increased to 22% in 2012 from 9% in 1992 (p. 299). The authors offer substantive explanations for the frames explored and the focus of the coverage, which they also highlight as problematic. In their exploration of politician visibility in media coverage, the authors instead apply their evidence to highlight the necessity of future studies in this area. They suggest this coverage gap could in part be due to female politicians (understandably) shying away from the media's tendency to fixate on trivializing details by

avoiding "exploiting newspapers' enthusiasm for pictures of women politicians looking attractive or glamorous" (p. 304), which they still admit is "undoubtedly sexist, and contributes to undermining and trivializing women's contributions to politics" (p. 302). The uncomfortable dilemma of choosing between media accounts that are either fuelled by irrelevant details, or neglect female candidates altogether mirrors findings from other scholars. Gidengil and Everitt (2003) echo this sentiment, describing how combative behaviour *can* provide press coverage, but at a cost: "behavior counter to stereotype is unexpected, and unexpected or surprising behavior is newsworthy. The result is a classic 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' dilemma for women seeking high political office" (p. 211).

Investigating bias qualitatively. Another area of research studies found that when female political figures are mentioned in the media, that stories tend to include irrelevant personal details. The following section summarizes qualitative markers that scholars have studied for evidence of media bias. The largest category comprises irrelevant personal characteristics, such as gender roles, gendered character traits, private lives, family structure, physical appearance and image use, and emotion. There are also details topically relevant to politics, such as discussing the candidates' platform issues, their qualifications, describing competing candidates as though in a horse race, and disproportionately emphasizing certain topics for candidates, based on their gender (e.g. emphasizing child care policy planning to female candidates). Finally, there are markers of the degree of interpretation, such as the reporters' coverage tone, and descriptions that highlight a candidate's categorical novelty.

Irrelevant personal characteristics. Some researchers suggest that within the media share accorded to female politicians, the discourse frequently derails into discussions of irrelevant personal characteristics that may serve to reinforce stereotypes. This next section outlines how

focusing on these irrelevant details reinforce gender frames for the audience in relation to a candidate's gender. I have grouped these characteristics into the following categories: gender roles, gendered character traits, private lives (particularly family structures), physical appearance, images circulated, and discussions of emotions.

Some studies conclude that explicit mention of **gender roles** reinforces gender frames because it leads the audience to evaluate how well a candidate performs their gender. Coding for mentions of gender roles highlight media bias in framing female politicians (Garcia-Blanco & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012; Gidengil & Everitt, 2003; Harp et al., 2009, 2016; Kahn, 1992; Miller & Peake, 2013; Walsh, 2000). For example, Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen (2012) tested media responses in France, Italy, Spain, and the UK to the appointment of a "majority-female government in Spain." Their goal was to explore suspected gender bias in the three main papers of each of these countries—particularly stereotypes about gender roles. They found that the main frames emphasized in news stories were gender (65%), experience (17%), and then policy (16%; p. 428).

Some researchers suggest that coding media emphasis on gender-associated **personality traits** highlights potential bias, as it activates gendered assumptions about the candidates (Harp et al., 2009, 2016; Hayes, 2011; Kahn, 1992; Khalida, Sholpan, Bauyrzhan, & Ainash, 2013; Kim, 2012; Meeks, 2013; O'Neill et al., 2016; Ribberink, 2010; Valeda, 2002; Walsh, 2000; Wiens, 1996). There is also some evidence to suggest that even positive character traits linked to gender may reinforce gender frames, as they may invite speculation and stereotyping assumptions about what someone may—or may not be—"naturally" suited to. This could include "compassion… honesty and integrity… knowledge, leadership" (Kahn, 1992, p. 506), vulnerability and toughness (Ribberink, 2010), and "deontic modality markers" (Walsh, 2000, p.

81)—or sense of ethical duty. For example, Harp et al. (2009) performed qualitative content analysis on a random sample of 150 videos (out of 328), that featured Palin on five major news websites, suggesting that leadership and toughness activated assumptions about gender performance. Providing interesting evidence to the contrary, Hayes (2011) analyzed 2006 US mid-term election survey data from 476 respondents, and looked at traits that included "empathy, compassion, and leadership." He found

> "that party stereotypes [differentiating Democratic and Republican candidates] are more powerful than gender stereotypes [in comparing candidates of different genders within the same party], and that assessments of candidate attributes can be affected by news coverage when candidates are portrayed in ways that challenge traditional partisan images" (p. 133).

Extrapolating on Hayes' findings, this may still impact candidates based on their genders—as parties across ideological divides tend to place different emphases on diversity and inclusive representation.

Some examiners found that disproportionately focusing on the candidates' **private lives** reinforces gender frames because it not only shifts the conversation away from policies and issues, but also reactivates expectations around gender performance. Coding and comparing how frequently candidates' private lives or personal backgrounds are mentioned highlight media treatment differentials (Kahn, 1992; Lee, 2004; Valeda, 2002; Wiens, 1996). For example, Wiens (1996) studied Nova Scotian (Canadian) print media coverage of provincial candidates, coding 74 articles from two major newspapers. Wiens (1996) based her coding frame on categories in the Canadian Press Stylebook: "under the section entitled Sexism, that there should be no stereotyping, undue mention of marital status, descriptions of physical appearance when not

directly applicable, unjustified mention of women's attire, or suggestion of surprise when a wom[a]n displays talent" (pp. 74–75). Despite this explicit expectation about mitigating sexism in the media, Wiens nevertheless found that "women's private lives were mentioned six percent more than their general level of coverage would suggest and 12 percent more than their proportion of the total number of candidates would suggest" (p. 79). The current Canadian Press Stylebook (2018) simplifies its test for sexism: "Would this information be used if the subject were a man?"

Researchers studying this focus on candidates' private lives often discuss the emphasis on **family structure**. Drawing attention to family structures through mentions of marital status or parental duties is a subset of media fixation on a candidates' private lives (Garcia-Blanco & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012; Harp et al., 2009; Kim, 2012; Lee, 2004; Miller & Peake, 2013; Plaster, 2002). For example, Miller and Peake (2013) conducted a study of media focus on family information as an evaluation of gender performance, measuring it by coding content of 2,592 newspapers covering the 2008 presidential campaign. They found there was

> disproportionate press attention [given] to [Sarah] Palin's gender, appearance, and family status… Palin's gender was mentioned six times more often than [Joe] Biden's (20.9 versus 3.4 percent). Her clothing/appearance and parental status were mentioned four times as often (6.7 versus 1.7 percent and 18.1 versus 4.6 percent, respectively). The disparity was smallest, but still statistically significant, for mentions of marital status. Palin's was mentioned twice as often (14.9 versus 7.0 percent). (p. 491)

Whether or not discussing family structures reinforces gender frames and activates considerations about a candidate's performance of their gender role, at the very least it does vie for the allotted space that could otherwise be used to discuss platforms and issues. In a textual

analysis of Hong Kong newspapers, Lee (2004) suggests that idealizing female politicians as "perfect" erases and invalidates their experiences (and those of the women for whom they are role models) in overcoming gender-based patriarchal challenges found in some traditional family structures. He discusses the cult of the "superwoman," and the idea that because we should be able to do it all, we can, and so we will (even if these unrealistic standards destroy us).

Some of the literature suggests that focusing on a candidate's **physical appearance** reinforces gender frames because focusing on the trivial details of a candidate causes them to appear trivial. This is a common theme, when coding for instances of media bias directed towards female politicians (Garcia-Blanco & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012; Ibroscheva & Raicheva-Stover, 2009; Kim, 2012; Miller & Peake, 2013; Railo, 2014). Male politicians are not immune to the media fixating on their appearance, as seen with media fixations on the hairstyles of Donald Trump (Costello, 2016) and Justin Trudeau (Schmunk, 2015). It is worth noting however, that this misplaced attention tends to be an *exception* to the typical treatment of male politicians, whereas it tends to be an exception when female politicians' appearances are *not* mentioned.

Interesting dynamics arise when discussing the objectification of female politicians. "Research demonstrates that female candidates who are physically attractive are rated lower [in public opinion] by study subjects… Thus, attractive female candidates are thought to be adversely affected when their appearance is emphasized by reporters" (Miller & Peake, 2013; Bowman, 1985; Chiao, Bowman, & Gill, 2008). Railo (2014) studied a popular Finnish magazine's strategy for presenting female politicians' bodies. Compared to examples from the 1970s and 1980s, he found the strategy had shifted significantly over the decades, and that the samples from the 2000s are actually *more* heteronormative and objectifying. He discusses how

this paradoxically presents the politicians as being more "in control" of their bodies, yet ironically implicitly adheres more closely to "male norms" and standards of beauty (p. 59).

Some explorations suggest that focusing on a candidate's **emotional displays** reinforces gender frames because it sets up an unwinnable situation—leading the audience to evaluate either their fitness for the role or their gender performativity (Brooks, 2011; Harp et al., 2016; Khalida et al., 2013; Walsh, 2000). Harp et al. (2016) performed qualitative analysis on 93 articles mentioning US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's 2013 testimony at Benghazi hearings, to

> examine media texts to recognize how they construct and relate notions of femininity, competence, politics, and gender, and to examine the themes that emerged in depictions of Clinton and her testimony [on the attack of a U.S. diplomatic outpost in Benghazi, Libya]. (p. 198)

Harp et al. (2016) found that media portrayals "hinted at the femininity/competence (as well as a new competence/authenticity) double bind" (pp. 198–99). In other words, they contend that while emotionality is popularly touted as either proof of incompetence, or lack of fitness for high political office; there is another possible double bind. While female politicians may be criticized for unemotional rigidity, they may also be criticized for displaying emotion—as though this emotion is inauthentic, and merely a manipulation of the audience to evade responsibility (Harp et al., 2016, p. 193).

> Through the cultural context of gender norms, the texts implied that she was not competent in dealing with a tense situation and had trouble controlling her emotions—a common frame that feeds the femininity/competence bind. The texts then tapped into the idea that women (and emotions) are irrational, and Clinton was cast as somewhat

> powerless, expressing an invalid emotion, with her personality (or gender) getting the best of her… Anger (reserved for males) signified an inappropriate response for Clinton to express and therefore became an important and gendered aspect of the coverage. (Harp et al., 2016, p. 201)

There are inconsistent findings in the literature about audiences judging female politicians more harshly for displays of emotion. For example, Brooks (2011) experimented with a demographically representative sampling of 1120 US adults. Respondents were shown a news article about a fictional politician performing emotionally, which varied the gender of the subject of the article between two subsets of the respondents. The respondents were then asked to rate the candidate based on their perception of the members of Congress seeking a Senate seat, in the measures of "overall favorability, likely effectiveness in the Senate, and likely effectiveness as U.S. president about 10 years from now" (p. 602). Overall, Brooks (2011) found that while some gender-linked differences do exist, displaying sadness and anger impacted the popularity of *both* female and male candidates. One of the gender-linked differences was that female audiences tended to censure female politicians more for displaying emotion, describing this occurrence as "distancing responses" (p. 610), where the audience is distancing themselves from behaviour that they feel could reflect badly on them, as fellow women. Returning to Brooks' significant finding that contradicts common assumptions about politicians' emotional responses based on their gender, she suggests that politicians may be insulated from the audiences' censure because the fictional subjects were of relatively high social status (p. 600).

Details relevant to politics. Some researchers have found that when the media does discuss topics relevant to political discourse—such as politicians' issues and qualifications—that there is still a gender frame present. This section outlines findings such as how much their issues

are discussed, the idea that descriptions of female candidates are still tinged more by interpretation, and reinforcing stereotypes and activating frames that highlight the candidates as categorically different, novel, or "other."

Media fixations on anything other than their platforms may also lead to a lack of familiarity with a candidates' policies and proposed solutions to **issues**. "In the late 20[th] century, when women entered politics they got less news coverage than their male opponents, and women candidates' news coverage was more about questioning whether they were viable candidates than about their issues" (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p. 50; Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991). How much the media focuses on female politicians' issues and platforms is a marker of bias (Chimba, 2006; Kahn, 1992; Kim, 2012; Meeks, 2013; O'Neill et al., 2016; Plaster, 2002; Robertson, 2000; Valeda, 2002).

Robertson (2000) conducted a mixed methods study of campaign issues and advertisements for gender bias by looking at campaign issues and advertisements in the 1998 senatorial and gubernatorial campaigns. He researched gender bias by conducting qualitative interviews with 8 political candidates (4 males, 4 females), and performed quantitative content analysis of 593 newspaper articles (p. 118), and 116 political advertisements (p. 121). He found gender-based differences, between their issue agendas and their advertising coverage—concluding that men have an advantage with the current media bias.

In addition to whether or not the media reports on a candidate's issues, there are nuances in *which* issues are emphasized. Kahn (1992) studied the "content of issues, [classifying them as] 'male' issues [or] 'female' issues," (p. 501), e.g. "education… women, economy, farm… military" (p. 506). Meeks (2013) classifies this division of politicians' issues, as either 'soft' news or 'hard' news, and studied what she terms '**gender ownership**'—the concept that specific

areas of responsibility are conferred onto individuals, based on gender-stereotyping assumptions (p. 61). She writes that "more recently scholarship has developed around gender ownership, based on a history of public perceptions of effective issue handling and knowledge, as well as social roles, for men and women" (p. 61). In other words, this might be understood as pigeonholing or policy niches that limit politicians, based on their gender.

Meeks (2013) suggests that **gender ownership in journalism** also exists. Analyzing content from the

> news coverage of male and female candidates in eight mixed-gender elections in eight newspapers between 1999 and 2008... each candidate sought a legislative (senator) or executive office (governor, vice president, or president). The candidates were Republicans Elizabeth Dole and Sarah Palin and Democrats Claire McCaskill and Hillary Clinton. (p. 63)

She studied correlations between a journalist's gender and their coverage of political candidates. She analyzed differences in how they covered politicians of different genders by analyzing content from "553 articles across all eight elections… Of the analyzed articles, men wrote 84% (n = 466) and women wrote 16% (n = 87)" (p. 63). She found

> female journalists will provide more coverage of so-called feminine content than male journalists in general… and for so-called feminized, legislative offices… male journalists will provide more coverage of so-called masculine content than female journalists in general… and for so-called masculinized, executive offices. (p. 63)

Other researchers have also investigated how gender in the newsroom correlates to how female politicians are presented (Comrie & McMillan, 2013; Ibroscheva & Raicheva-Stover, 2009; Kahn, 1992; Meeks, 2013; Plaster, 2002). For example, Comrie and McMillan (2013)

analyze and discuss findings about "New Zealand's performance in the… 2010 round of the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) covering 108 countries. Using quantitative and qualitative content analysis the GMMP measures the representation and participation of women in the news media" (p. 196). They found that New Zealand's media is stagnating, as far as gender-representative coverage in newsrooms, and as news subjects, and that "gender inequality remains a defining characteristic of daily news content around the world" (p. 196). They conclude that:

> rapid and profound changes to media technologies, business models and players, combined with post-feminist and neo-liberal discourses, can disguise the fact that in the representation and participation of women in the news media much has remained the same. Data from the GMMP surveys continue to remind us that monitoring the gender gap in media news coverage remains a necessary task. As long as women's voices and experiences are under-represented in the New Zealand news media, the news will act as to maintain women's inequality rather than challenge it. (p. 213)

This presents an interesting contradiction, returning to Plaster's (2002) study of the intersection of journalist identity and candidate coverage, where she looked at 18 years of campaign coverage for U.S. female senatorial candidates. She ironically found that despite the push for gender inclusivity in the newsroom (and the widespread assumption this would improve coverage for female politicians), that female authors were more likely to evaluate female candidates negatively. Analyzing quantitative differences in the coverage, she found that

> female authors were twice as likely to frame a female candidate as a loser than their male author counterparts were. Female authors framed female candidates as the loser 64.1 percent of the time while male authors framed the female candidates as losers only 38.3

> percent of the time. Subsequently, male authors were the ones more likely to frame the female as a winner. They did so 61.8 percent of the time; female authors framed female candidates as winners 35.9 percent of the time. (p. 67)

Plaster suggests that female journalists (and cited female sources discussing female candidates) shy away from appearing uncritical of their own gender, lest they be accused of bias—an ironic self-protective bias. Plaster explains,

> female sources did, however, have a relationship with lack of qualifications being mentioned for the female candidate. Much like author gender, perhaps female sources didn't want to appear too biased for the female candidate and overcompensated by mentioning the candidate's shortfalls. (p. 140)

This is reminiscent of Brooks' (2011) experiment with the fictional news story that alternated the gender of an emotional politician—as potentially another type of "distancing responses" (p. 610).

Some researchers suggest that looking for mentions of **candidate qualifications** can help to expose gender-related media bias (Fulton, 2012; Garcia-Blanco & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012; Ibroscheva & Raicheva-Stover, 2009; Plaster, 2002). On the surface, it seems positive to highlight a candidate's qualifications, so I would like to refresh Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) observation that evaluating viability often takes up more attention than issue coverage (p. 50).

Interesting nuances come to light when we're investigating mentions of politicians' qualifications. Fulton (2012) studied how an "omitted variables problem" conceals voter bias, as it impacts gender parity in politics. She looked at female candidates ranking higher in the following list are able to achieve equal standing with their male peers, examining

> "ten items: personal integrity, dedication to public service, grasp of the issues, ability to find solutions to problems, ability to work with political leaders, public speaking ability, ability to stay in touch with the district, ability to provide constituency service, ability to bring federal funds to the district, and legislative accomplishments" (Fulton, 2012, p. 307).

Fulton (2012) measured it by surveying 2,672 informants knowledgeable about politics, providing assessments about the candidates using a "7-point scale ranging from extremely strong (+3) to extremely weak (-3)" along the ten items (pp. 306–307) and found that these (often neglected) qualifications form a "hidden variable." Merely looking at the presence of the female candidates in the forum overlooks how they must first outperform their male counterparts in a range of qualities to get there, thus masking the additional barriers they must overcome because of their gender (p. 307).

She suggests that female candidates outperforming their male counterparts for consideration conceals the gender biases working against them. This finding potentially undermines the popular argument of pointing to successful female candidates, when using elected examples of female politicians to claim that media bias is imagined. She explains,

> to perform on par with men, women incumbents would need to be approximately one standard deviation greater on the quality scale than their male counterparts. This suggests that if women withdrew from making additional investments in political quality… they would encounter significant electoral sanctions—in fact, they appear to escape the electoral effects of gender discrimination precisely because they exceed their male counterparts in this respect… After controlling for a variety of alternative explanations, my results consistently show that men and women systematically vary with respect to

> their political quality, and the gender parity in electoral success is directly attributable to this gap in quality. Although the scholarship on stereotypes uncovers strong evidence of the use of sex-based cues at the individual level, empirical evidence of bias at the aggregate level has been suppressed by the omission of an intervening variable in the causal model linking gender to election outcomes. Identifying this omitted variable, producing theoretical explanations for its significance, and directly testing this hypothesis on election data has been the principle contribution of this article. Relative to men, women have to work harder at developing greater political quality to be equally competitive. (Fulton, 2012, pp. 308–310)

Returning to Miller and Peake's (2013) study of gender roles in the media coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign, they also found that discussing qualifications activated sexist frames about Palin, impacted her standings more significantly than what has historically seen in accounts of similar qualifications-based scrutiny directed towards male politicians (p. 497).

Interestingly, Plaster (2002) found that:

> mention of candidate qualifications had a significant relationship to the author gender. Female authors were half as likely to mention a female candidate's qualifications than a male's—reporting female qualifications 33.4 percent of the time and male qualifications 66.6 percent of the time. Male authors mentioned the candidates' qualifications with a less marked difference, reporting the female candidate's qualification 44.8 percent of the time and the male candidate's qualifications 55.2 percent of the time. (p. 65)

"**Horserace**" style coverage is another potential marker for gender bias (Kahn, 1992; Plaster, 2002; Valeda, 2002; Wiens, 1996). Researchers studying this bias marker suggest that by fixating on candidates' relationship to each other in the polls and in public opinion, it reduces

attention given to issues coverage—not to mention that it is wildly open to interpretation. In addition to general horserace coverage, Kahn (1992) also looked at parallel evaluative terms signaling this attitude, like "sure winner, [and] competitive" (p. 501). It is worth noting that Kahn's (1992) foundational work in differentiating evaluative descriptions applied to the candidates has both directly and indirectly influenced many lines of questioning discussed above. For example, Kahn (1992) analyzed coverage content surrounding "26 U.S. Senate races from 1982–1986" (p. 499) measuring frequency and space devoted to coverage characteristics—such as length of article, proportion of paragraphs, prominence, page location, issues, content of issues, horserace coverage, horserace assessment, criticism, positive and negative resources, background mention, traits mentioned in article, and tone (p. 501). She found that

> male incumbents are often described as "sure winners," while female incumbents are more likely to be considered "competitive." Among challengers, male candidates are most likely to be described as "competitive," while female candidates are usually described as "somewhat competitive." (p. 500)

In Wiens' (1996) study of gender stereotypes in print media about the 1993 Nova Scotian provincial election, two of the ten coded categories were evaluative and subjective terms related to horserace-style coverage: longshot and winnable (p. 76). She found that "women are overrepresented in stereotyped areas—private lives, longshot, personal characteristics, inexperienced and incompetent, and underrepresented in winnability and experience" (p. 80).

> In the second category, longshot, women were over-mentioned by 20 percent in comparison with their overall ratio of coverage and 26 percent in comparison with their proportion of the total candidates. For both genders this category records mentions of being unable or highly unlikely to win the constituency. (p. 81)

Valeda (2002) studied media framing in local newspaper coverage of the 1999 Indianapolis mayoral election, by analyzing the content of 290 articles from 3 major local papers covering the election (pp. 152–153). Looking at the frequency with which each newspaper discussed variables indicating horserace coverage, she found "momentum coverage was applied more to [Democratic Party candidate Bart] Peterson and the variable public support and endorsement was applied more for [Republican Party candidate Sue Anne] Gilroy with potentially different impact for each candidate" (p. 225). For example, "momentum coverage was used for Peterson more than for Gilroy in The Star (6% versus 1%), the NUVO (7% versus 0%), and the Recorder (11% versus 0%). The variable public support was used for Gilroy more than for Peterson in The Star (21% versus 10%), the NUVO (24% versus 9%), and the Recorder (19% versus 11%)" (p. 218).

Interpretation. This section addresses the evaluative components of reporting, where a journalist's bias appears when describing a candidate's traits, using particularly subjective words like "insensitive" and "effective" (Kahn, 1992, p. 501). Chimba (2006) describes this as a tendency "to talk *about*, rather than *to* women" (p. 259), meaning that female politicians' messages are more likely to be diluted through both interpretation and human fallibility in the translation process.

Gidengil and Everitt (2003) studied television reporting coverage of 1993 and 1997 Canadian federal elections, and blended quantitative content analysis with an experimental analysis. They measured reporter bias by looking at the impact of reported speech verbs that are either emotionally-charged or neutral. Aggressiveness and negative bias were measured for reported verbs. "The test of whether a verb is a verb of reported speech is straightforward: Can the sentence containing the verb be rephrased substituting either say, tell, or talk about?" (p.

216), as contrasted with words like: attack, lash out, blast, show off, fire at (p. 218). For their study, respondents

> read a series of statements, each of which identified a fictitious speaker, a speech verb, and the generic statement "such and such" … [respondents then] rated each verb… according to how negatively or positively the reported speaker came across… [and their] aggressiveness. (pp. 216–217)

They consistently found more variability, negativity, and interpretation in coverage of the female candidates when they unmasked the blind ratings and matched them back to the reported candidates:

> the results indicate that in 1993 Chretien and Manning were reported in more positive terms than were Bouchard and the two women leaders… the overall sex… is statistically significant ($p < .005$)… The gendered mediation argument is given further support in the 1997 coverage. Here the difference in the way that McDonough is covered by the media becomes even more noticeable… the mean affect score for McDonough is almost .20 less than for the male leader with the lowest score. When say, tell, and talk about are excluded, the difference increases to .45.
>
> The same pattern is repeated for the aggressiveness scores… The pattern is both clear and consistent: The verbs used to report all three women's speech are both more negative and more aggressive in tone than those used to report all but one of the seven men's speech. (pp. 222–223)

Many studies also use coverage **tone** as a marker for biased media coverage (Brooks, 2011; Chen, 2006; Ibroscheva & Raicheva-Stover, 2009; Kahn, 1992; Miller & Peake, 2013; Ross, 1995; Ross & Comrie, 2012; Wiens, 1996). Tone could be assessed as positive, negative,

neutral, or a "mixture (positive and negative tone)" (Kahn, 1992, p. 501), as well as variations like "patriarchal, feminist, or neutral" (Chen, 2006).

For example, returning to Miller and Peake's (2013) study of 2,592 newspapers covering the 2008 US presidential campaign. Among the information they coded was the articles' "tone toward each candidate (negative/neutral/positive)" (p.488). Calculating this as a percentage of the total articles in which candidates were mentioned (Sarah Palin n = 1,109, Joe Biden n = 585), they found that the difference in articles' overall tones toward each candidate (positive to negative): was −3.8% for Palin, and +18.0 for Biden. The articles expressing positive tone towards the candidates were roughly even for both candidates (31% for Palin and 33% for Biden), but it changed significantly when it came to either using a negative tone (35% for Palin and 15% for Biden) or a neutral tone (34% for Palin and 52% for Biden) to describe the candidates (p. 489).

Novel outsiders and otherness are another set of markers. Initially, it seems unproblematic to highlight positive milestones like "the first female prime minister" or "the first female premier." These milestones absolutely need to be celebrated, but they can ironically damage a candidate's standing *during* an election by highlighting a candidate's novelty, or refreshing their categorical otherness. Novelty interacts with many other bias markers, reinforcing stereotypes and activating gender frames (Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012; Ibroscheva & Raicheva-Stover, 2009; Meeks, 2013; Ross, 1995; Ross & Comrie, 2012; Valeda, 2002; Wiens, 1996). Ross and Comrie (2012) note that "women politicians… remain obstinately 'othered' by and in media discourse. They are still given the prefix 'woman' to mark them out as different to the traditional (male) politician" (p. 971).

In Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen's (2012) analysis of French, Italian, Spanish, and British media responses to the appointed 2008 majority-female Spanish government, they quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed the frames expressed in selected newspapers. They found that the main frames emphasized in news stories were gender (65%), experience (17%), and then policy (16%; p. 428). While not employing novelty as a marker in itself, they found

> focusing on women's physical appearance and celebrating traditional gender roles, reinforc[ed] the construction of women politicians as falling outside of the norm. This makes it almost impossible to discursively construct women "just" as politicians, assessing their suitability on the basis of their education, previous experience, and their political performance. (p. 437)

Wiens (1996) also discusses the impact of emphasizing novelty in her study of gender stereotypes in print media about the 1993 Nova Scotian provincial election. Two of her ten coding categories were 'experienced' and 'inexperienced' (p. 76). She found that

> male candidates are over-mentioned by nine percent in comparison to the ratio of coverage and three percent in comparison to the ratio of candidates. While there were more male incumbents entering this election and more male candidates with formal political experience, this cycle is reinforced with this type of coverage. If the formal political experience of males is constantly being reinforced while informal political experience which women may have is being under-valued, male candidates are being given an advantage. In the partner category of political inexperience, female candidates received all of the mentions. Phrases such as 'rookie cabinet minister,' 'first time campaigner,' 'inexperienced' and political novice' only reinforce this cycle. In addition,

> there were many politically inexperienced male candidates in this election, but such phrases were never used to describe them. (pp. 82–83)

Healing the Discourse Strategically

This point in the literature review marks a significant shift in approach. To explain, my initial drive to pursue discourse analysis was partially motivated by a perceived expectation that I needed to produce quantitative evidence—as I continued to experience resistance in casual conversation to the idea that female candidates were treated any differently in public discourse than their male counterparts. After compiling what I felt to be an overwhelming amount of evidence that candidates are represented unevenly in media coverage, based on their gender, I lost my drive to produce yet more evidence of the problem. With so much relevant and valid academic evidence, and a social sense that the problem is worsening, perhaps the issue is not one of further justification. Lakoff (2014) states that "the truth alone will not set you free. Just speaking truth to power doesn't work. You need to frame the truths effectively from your perspective" (p. 28). Perhaps the solution is then one of demonstrating how this body of discourse analytic literature can be applied strategically to improve our discourse.

This cursory meta-analysis of the markers scholars measure to demonstrate the existence of gendered media bias is the first step for this study. Returning to my choice to include findings from this discursive analytic approach, I feel that it both provides ample evidence that media coverage about female politicians *is* biased, as well as demonstrating pitfalls for professional communicators—if they wish to avoid undermining attempts to advance gender equality.

If we accept that media coverage is biased and reinforces gender stereotypes, a subsequent step could be to investigate ways that the media can help counteract this. The next section refreshes basic principles of planning communications strategies, defines the required

elements, and shows how they're typically formulated, drawing from examples of feminist communications strategies. It also draws heavily from case studies in the Communications for development (C4D) literature as a body of literature on communications strategies that are implemented to change attitudes and perceptions, in order to change the discourse. This framework informs my study, by helping to summarize best practices for communications strategies. It also serves to develop questions for more detailed study, further addressed in the Methods section.

There are many C4D initiatives looking to change attitudes and perceptions about gender, that we may learn from and adapt to our purposes change the discourse around female politicians. C4D is an area of communications looking to create positive social change. It is

> a social process based on dialogue using a broad range of tools and methods. It is also about seeking change at different levels including listening, building trust, sharing knowledge and skills, building policies, debating and learning for sustained and meaningful change. (World Congress on Communication for Development in Governance and Social Development Resource Centre, 2017)

C4D offers a strong base of applied communications literature, with the added benefit that it is characteristically substantiated with evaluative measurements, as required for international funding.

C4D operates on the "theoretical basic assumptions [of]: equality, respect for all people, [and that] communication can change behaviour [and] attitudes" (G. Gow, personal communication, February 21, 2017). World Bank (2007) defines the discipline as follows:

> The real difference between communication and Communication for Development lies in this broader vision that views the people most affected by development change as being

> active participants in a social process, not only as receivers of messages. If development is something done "with" people, not "to" them, Communication for Development must be central to any development initiative from the very beginning (p. ix-x).

Strategic communications planning. "Strategic communication… is defined as the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission" (Hallahan, K., Holtzhausen, D., van Ruler, B., Verčič, D., & Sriramesh, K., 2007, p.3). Mahoney (2013) describes the elements of a strategic communication plan as: goals, objectives, messages, target publics, communications strategies, and tactics—as well as implementation and evaluation (pp. 52–54). This section is structured according to his strategic plan framework.

Goals. According to Mahoney (2013), "goals acknowledge the situation or issue and set out how the organization wants to deal with it," particularly "reputation, relationships, [and] tasks" (p. 53). Walker (2015) classes communicative purposes as follows: "to inform, to convey goodwill, to establish credibility, [and] to persuade and influence" (p. 57). In one example of goals in strategic communications planning, grassroots activists pursued legal protection. Fischer (2016) writes, "in 2011 CeCe McDonald, an African-American transgender woman, was charged with murder for killing her attacker during a racist and transphobic assault in Minneapolis. After McDonald's arrest, local queer communities organized an astounding level of support" (p. 755). She articulates how the "CeCe Support Committee… pursued two key goals: first, to get McDonald the best outcome possible in her case; and second, to build broader activism around the prison-industrial-complex, particularly its violence against trans women of color" (p. 756).

Objectives. Goals and objectives are frequently conflated. Mahoney (2013) differentiates them, defining "objectives [as] clear, measurable statements that indicate changes the organization wants to achieve over a period of time to meet the goals" (p. 53). Categories of

objectives could include pursuing for example, "awareness, acceptance, [or] action. They are directed at achieving outcomes. Objectives are precise and measurable—they need to include numbers that indicate the amount of change needed" (p. 53). In even simpler terms, "objectives are steps to achieving goals" (R. McMahon, personal communication, May 13, 2016).

For comprehensive grey literature on C4D, the Governance and Social Development Resource Centre (GSDRC), is a helpful source. As suggested in the name, they focus on "issues of governance, social development, humanitarian response and conflict[, and their] research team supports a range of international development agencies, synthesising [available evidence] to inform policy and practice" (GSDRC, 2017). Writing for GSDRC, Avis (2017) cites six case studies of specific campaigns for reducing Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG), conducted in west Africa, and central and southeast Asia—specifically, Sierra Leone, Viet Nam, China, Nepal, and two in India. Broadly speaking, Avis (2017) suggests that in planning communications objectives under the goal of "shift[ing] harmful social norms[,] programmes need to: shift social expectations not just individual attitudes, publici[z]e the change and cataly[z]e and reinforce new norms and behaviours" (p. 8).

Writing for Partners for Prevention, a joint project working to prevent gender-based violence in Asia and the Pacific, Liou (2013) analyzes three major social media campaigns in different countries (Viet Nam, China, and India)[1] as case studies in a working paper that also provides tools for those planning similar projects around changing attitudes on gender. As

1 These three cases overlap with Avis' (2017) review.

examples of concrete communications objectives in the C4D literature, Liou (2013) describes those of the Love Journey campaign in Viet Nam as follows:

> 10,000 individuals in the target audience exposed to positive messages on alternatives to violence; five percent (500 of the 10,000) of these individuals who were exposed to the positive messages on alternatives to violence take action by becoming contestants in the social media campaign; 100 campaign contestants create and implement action plans to prevent violence in their communities; and new and long-term supporters and activists added to a larger, 5-year umbrella campaign on VAWG prevention... A further objective was that key policy and decision makers take action on the prevention of gender-based violence and the promotion of gender equality. (p. 48)

Language and key messages. Mahoney (2013) defines "messages [as] the things that the organization needs to say to its target publics in order to achieve objectives" (p. 53) like changing perceptions and behaviours (p. 53). Liou's (2013) document presents case studies and concrete recommendations. She writes, "the key message(s) in any communication campaign should include: (1) concise, relevant and clear statements that capture the problem; (2) what the audience can achieve by addressing the problem; (3) the solution to the problem; and (4) the specific actions the audience can take to solve the problem" (p. 22), and that "successful messages are personal, unexpected, visual, and visceral" (p. 25). For example, summarizing the key messages used in the Must Bol campaign in India, Avis (2017) writes:

> 'Young people have to come together to challenge violence against women', 'Do you prefer care versus control in your relationship? Are you practicing care or are you practicing control?', and 'What kind of a man are you? What kind of a man are you

> having to become because of societal pressures?' … [both to] challenge gender stereotypes, [and] create inclusive spaces for people of diverse sexualities" (p. 14).

In another example, Liou (2013) describes how the the Love Journey campaign in Viet Nam "targeted young men and women from 15-25 years-old, though later expanded it from 15-30 years of age in order to allow more people to participate. The campaign had one main key message, which was that a healthy relationship (or a 'cool relationship') is one that is loving, trustful, caring, respectful and non-violent" (Liou, 2013, p. 48).

Audience and target publics. While more commonly described as audiences, Mahoney (2013) uses the term "target publics... [referring to] the people who need to know the organi[z]ation's messages to help it achieve its goals and objectives" (p. 53). He classifies them as: "primary—those directly affected, secondary—indirectly affected publics who can nevertheless influence primary publics, tertiary—publics that can influence the others" (p. 53). Avis (2017) suggests that prior to defining the messages, "it is also important to use research, such as interviews with key stakeholders and focus groups with members of the target audience, to determine existing attitudes and beliefs and ways of motivating people to change their behaviour" (p. 3). He also suggests that "campaign messages… be pre-tested among target audiences to ensure they are understood correctly and to minimize any unintended negative effects on other audiences" (p. 3).

For examples of specific audience demographics, we can turn back to the C4D literature. In the Must Bol campaign in India,

> the overall objective of the campaign conducted by Community the Youth Collective was to engage young people—especially men—in dialogue around VAWG, and from the dialogue identify the different forms of violence that young men face in their everyday

> lives. The specific communication objectives of the 'Must Bol' campaign were developed based on formative research studies and focused on three main themes: (1) VAWG emerging from dominant gender norms… (2) Violence within intimate relationships [, and] … (3) Violence emerging from popular notions of 'body image': the campaign specifically targeted mainly urban middle-class youth aged 18-25, and consciously aimed to work more with young men. The target audience was limited due to the fact that the main tools used were online platforms, and so they were more readily able to reach target audience. (Avis, 2017, pp. 13–14; Liou, 2013).

Communication strategies. Mahoney (2013) describes communications strategies as "message delivery strategies, [which] indicate how the organization can reach its target publics" (p. 53). They also "deal with the mechanisms by which this will be done—for example: controlled media, uncontrolled media, building alliances, special events, sponsorship, interpersonal dialogue, [and] interactive media" (p. 53).

Looking to case studies for how this is articulated in practice, in his overview of effective C4D campaigns, Avis (2017) suggests that "the most successful interventions work with experienced organi[z]ations to develop and deliver sophisticated television/radio programming and communications combined with community mobili[z]ation strategies aimed at changing gender-related norms and behaviours" (p. 3). In another example, responding to issues of sexual assault and online harassment, particularly as it intersects with post-secondary institutions, Ng (2015) offers a concise description of a communications strategy, as articulated for delivering messages effectively:

> there have been several more or less grassroots, spontaneous feminist responses to gendered harassment and violence online that have garnered recent attention. What I

> propose here are more structural approaches to augment those efforts. First, institutional involvement can and should go beyond a narrow focus on "official" social media uses to addressing problematic online and offline cultures more broadly. Second, a feminist social media toolbox, maintained through crowdsourcing while reflexively mindful of the potential pitfalls of this approach, would serve as a repository of strategies allowing collective strategic knowledge to be more effectively shared. (p. 721)

Channels (tactics). According to Mahoney (2013), "communication strategies… indicate how a message is delivered, not the format of the message. Determining the format… in which messages will be delivered is the job of tactics" (p. 146). He defines "tactics [as] the activities an organization actually does when it pursues a communication strategy or message delivery strategy designed to achieve objectives" (p. 53). For example, they are outputs—the things target publics 'see'. In choosing the appropriate channels, it is helpful to briefly refresh media richness theory, which Ledford (2012) defines as:

> each medium has a measured capacity to convey messages and cues. The medium's richness is its capacity to process rich information… Medium richness is determined by four questions: (1) Does the medium offer the receiver the ability to send feedback and how quickly? (2) Can the medium communicate multiple cues? (3) Does the medium offer language variety and the opportunity for natural language? and (4) Does the medium have a personal focus (p. 176).

Other considerations in determining the appropriate media include:

> the most popular and accessible platforms that engage your primary audience, your available budget, how specific your messages are and therefore how specific the channels need to be, the platforms that best lend themselves to the content you have developed,

> [and] participatory approaches to communicating your messages, involving your audience and maximizing impact timing. (Liou, 2013, p. 25)

For example, this could include "websites, social media, displays, printed material, meetings, interviews, media releases, funding from sponsorships, factsheets" (Mahoney, 2013, p. 53), or restrict the focus to "digital platforms (social media, mobile phone apps and websites)" (Avis, 2017, p. 1). A more comprehensive list of digital platforms rightly also includes Short Message Services (SMS) and podcasts, and platforms in general would also include television, radio, and face-to-face. Despite the broad range of possible channels, for feasibility, I restrict the scope here to reviewing how organizations are using social media and websites.

Social Media. Avis (2017) states that "social media has been shown to strengthen social actors' ability to challenge and change power relations in society, providing platforms for debate, reflection, influencing and mobili[z]ing people" (pp. 9–10; Liou, 2013). He suggests it "can serve as a key tool at the forefront of the campaign, to support a more traditional campaign pinned to traditional media and on-the-ground events, or a campaign that uses social media on both these levels" (Avis, 2017, pp. 9–10; Department for International Development, 2012).

Liou (2013) strongly emphasizes the importance of linking to other campaign tools. In her overview of her comparative case studies, she states:

> social media can only be one part of the spectrum of interventions that are needed to prevent VAW. The three campaigns generally found that social media can be an effective way of mobilizing youth and promoting discussion and reflection around key topics, modeling positive behaviours and guiding target audiences to positive solutions. Each of the three campaigns resulted in varying levels of awareness, attitudinal, behaviour and/or social norm change. However, there was little evidence that social media alone could be

> effective in changing a lifetime of gender socialization, rather, it could serve as the starting point for such changes. Attitudinal or behavioural changes are more effectively brought about through interpersonal activities. Thus, when social media work is connected to other interventions, it can be a very powerful tool to foster change. (p. 9)

Implementation and timeframe. Correcting the notion that implementation occurs after planning, Mahoney (2013) states that it actually "applies to all phases of [a] strategy. It is the section that identifies all of the logistical things that will be needed to make the strategy work. [It] should include: a timeline… [a list of] resources…a [delegation] checklist… [and] the financial budget" (p. 54).

Mahoney (2013) structures his strategic communications plans with three phases, or horizons: now, mid-term (up to 5 years), long-term (or more than 5 years from now).

1) "current business [such as] day-to-day media, crisis communication, and marketing communication" (Mahoney, 2013, p. 30),
2) "emerging business," includes mid-term considerations such as "issue identification, policy development, [and] tactical lobbying" (Mahoney, 2013, p. 30).
3) "future business," includes long-term considerations such as "strategic issue identification, strategic communication through relationship management, ongoing government relations, [and] community relations" (Mahoney, 2013, p. 30)

Despite implementation being especially organizationally-specific, an example of resources, task delegation, budget, and timeframe may be helpful, so returning to the C4D literature can help illustrate how this element of a strategic communication plan is articulated.

For example, for timeframe,

the ‘17 Man’ campaign in China lasted one year, including the implementation or activity phase, which lasted about four months. The broad timeframe of the steps involved included: (1) 6 months: Developing the core group and working with student organizations to research, analyze and develop the campaign strategy; (2) 1 month: Promoting the campaign online and via traditional mass media; (3) 4 months: Implementing activities on-line and on-the-ground, including using social media to further build momentum of on-the-ground events; (4) 1 month: Evaluation of results. (Liou, 2013, p. 31)

For human resources,

The ‘Love Journey’ campaign team included a team leader (a social media expert), a web designer, a web coder, a content manager, a campaign promoter, a graphic designer, a photographer and a volunteer network managed by a volunteer coordinator. The campaign team comprised of members from the NGO Paz y Desarrollo (PyD) and from 2 Sao, the online entertainment magazine that ran and promoted the competition. (Liou, 2013, p. 15)

The Love Journey campaign budgeted for a

consultant for day-to-day management of pre-, during, and post-contest activities (US$ 4,800), local company to produce creative campaign content and graphic design (short videos, posters, advertisements; US$ 4,100), purchasing of advertising space for pre and post promotion (US$ 9,000), viral marketing (including social media, forum seeding, social networks; US$ 7,000), local company contracted to develop contest web page, competition platform and graphic design (US$ 8,500), production of contest photographs

> and IEC materials (US$ 3,200), [and] M&E (external consultant, project staff; US$ 3,400). (Liou, 2013, p. 15)

Evaluation and measurement. Patton (2008) defines evaluation simply as "which program components, goals, and objectives should be evaluated to produce the most useful information for program improvement and decision making" (p. 260). Mahoney (2013) elaborates, suggesting that an evaluation in this context needs to show:

> goals and objectives were achieved on time and within budget, the communication strategies were appropriate for reaching target publics, the tactics actually worked with the strategies, [and] the target publics received, understood and acted on the messages delivered by the tactics. (p. 54)

Ways to measure this include: "using metrics (traffic sources, visitor numbers, bounce rates and conversion rates) to make informed decisions as the campaign is being implemented, measuring exposure, engagement and action in the campaign, and measuring outcomes such as attitudinal and behaviour change" (Liou, 2013, p. 34). For example, the Love Journey campaign drew on website metric data to their campaign to be more effective. Liou (2013) notes of the bounce rates, that "69 percent of visitors spent less than 10 seconds; 12 percent spent 3-10 min; 7 percent of visitors returned to the campaign website" (p. 36). They interpreted "the very short average visit duration—too short to register as a participant—and low return rate shows weaknesses in the website in engaging visitors. [They attribute this to a] confusing participation process, [the] content [was] not interesting/engaging, or participation requirements may have been perceived to be too demanding. The campaign was later adjusted, [making it] easier to get involved and more engaging" (Liou, 2013, p. 36). They noted an increase in conversion rates after the adjustments, with "1,900 Facebook likes, 130 entries to the campaign completion, and

more than 4,000 votes" (Liou, 2013, p. 36). The team also looked at visitor numbers and which linked sources were driving the most traffic to their pages (Liou, 2013, p. 36). Other aspects of measurement could include "visibility/exposure/reach; interactivity level, type and number; engagement level, percentage and type of content; influence (virality); impact (relevance and dominant audiences); advocacy (contributors)" (Castillo-Esparcia, Almansa-Martnez, & Smolak-Lozano, 2015, p. 235).

Analysis of Findings from the Literature Review

This section summarizes major contributions in key areas of the literature reviewed. This summary also refreshes and refocuses how these contributions provide a foundation for communications solutions addressing the unhealthy discourse surrounding female politicians.

Media effects theories provide a framework for how communications as a discipline can either undermine or promote positive discourse that socially construct our understanding of female politicians. Major contributions of significant studies include Iyengar's (1990) influential work, articulating how media effects models such as framing shape election outcomes, and Scheufele and Tewksbury's (2007) tidy editorial synthesis of how three media effects models intersect—framing, priming, and agenda-setting. All of the markers highlighted from a critical discourse analysis perspective also point to the impact of framing, priming, and agenda-setting, as they problematically highlight how female politicians are frequently framed.

Critical feminist theory also contributes a framework for this research. The discipline provides both the motivation for pursuing gender equality, as well a lens through which to understand gendered power relationships as they are discursively re-framed and refreshed. The discipline provides insight and helps to articulate the dynamics at play in the unhealthy discursive spaces that socially construct our understanding of female politicians. Butler's (1990)

contribution of the idea of gender performance is especially significant to how female politicians present themselves—given that in traditionally male domains, women are expected to adopt "masculinist discursive norms that masquerade as gender-neutral professional norms" (Walsh, 2000, p. 2). Harp, Loke, and Bachmann (2009) articulate common contradictions to highlight the complexity of how female politicians are interpreted and presented by the media. They present compelling rhetorical narratives, for example, attributing Palin's success to her ability to integrate male and female characteristics into her political persona. In another contradiction centering on Clinton in the Benghazi hearings, they point to how not only is femininity in politics commonly deemed to be at odds with competence, but that competence and authenticity may also be at odds. In other words, that emotionality is used as either proof of incompetence, or assumed to be a manipulative display to evade responsibility (p. 193; Harp, Loke, and Bachmann, 2016). Ross has contributed quite significantly to the discipline, and evidence of her influence is seen in the number of equally relevant studies citing her many works and collaborations. In one of her more frequently cited works, Ross (1995) applies qualitative analyses with a critical theory-driven narrative, citing frequent examples. In her case study, she found that the 1994 British Labour party leadership election was biased against deputy interim leader Margaret Beckett (in favour of Tony Blair), based on the amount of coverage, tone of coverage, novelty, and even titles (e.g describing the candidates as "Mr. Blair and Margaret Beckett").

Surveying elements of the current media context provides a foundation for this research study, as the theoretical communications considerations provide an informal situational analysis. It helps map out new features in the communicative landscape housing the discursive spaces that socially construct our understanding of female politicians. Major contributions of significant

studies include Pariser's (2011) concept of filter bubbles that obfuscate our reduced autonomy in choosing information available through search engines and social networks; Colleoni et al.'s (2014) work investigating the spectrum between an idealized digital public sphere, towards the vaguely technophobic theories of political homophily and echo chambers, and Flaxman et al.'s (2016) findings suggesting that the admittedly tangible effects of the theoretical constructs of echo chambers and filter bubbles are neutralized by the opposing effect of increased exposure (pp. 317–318).

Communicative practices are the primary field of study, though related disciplines, including policy applications, political sciences, and law remain contextually relevant. They provide a foundation for this research study by highlighting the interdisciplinarity of the topic, and also by showing other—equally valid and necessary—partner solutions to the issue of how unhealthy discursive spaces socially construct our understanding of female politicians.

Major insights gleaned from policy studies include organizational management and grey literature related to gender and politics. Bohnet's (2016) book was published under the mantle of The Harvard Kennedy School's Women and Public Policy Program. There is an elegance to Bohnet's (2016) accessible and compelling narratives with concrete examples, links to theory, logically presented discussion, and plausible policy strategies for overcoming gender bias. Another relevant work is grey literature from a Canadian perspective from Rankin and Stewart (2012) that takes a cross-sector approach to women in leadership roles. According to Rankin and Stewart (2012), "since 1987, the percent of senior management positions held by women [in Canada] increased at an annual rate of 1%. If this rate of change remains constant, then we expect that 50% of senior management positions to be held by women by 2068" (p. 5). This extrapolation suggests that progress is still slow. Drawing data from numerous sources, they

suggest that women are underrepresented in positions of authority, and the problem persists across sectors. While it includes several types of leadership in addition to political office, it follows that a general underrepresentation of women in leadership roles impact normative assumptions about women's fitness for visible public leadership.

In the realm of political sciences, there are also numerous studies investigating various issues experienced by female politicians. A few studies particularly stand out, as they suggest different aspects of how merely increasing (or counting) the number of female politicians in office may contribute to a misleading narrative. For example, Fulton's (2012) "omitted variables problem," suggesting that merely looking at the presence of the female candidates in the forum overlooks how these candidates must first outperform their male counterparts in a range of qualities to be elected. Further, that failing to acknowledge how much higher their qualifications needed to be in order to be considered for office masks the additional barriers they must overcome because of their gender (p. 307). Another insightful way of looking at the numbers is work by Vanlangenakker et al. (2013) suggesting quantitative narratives need to include reasons for departures from political office, as these departures are frequently shaped by individual politicians' parties (p. 73).

Insights from legal statements provide significant insight. They also highlight the interdisciplinarity of the problem and show alternate perspectives and solutions to the issue of how unhealthy discursive spaces socially construct our understanding of female politicians. In addition to these characteristics, legal pronouncements provide contextual cues for the current status of public will towards the issues. For example, the Supreme Court of Canada's ruling that "hate speech… shuts down dialogue … [and] stifl[es] discourse" (in Koshan, 2014, para. 6)—is particularly salient, given that when confronted, those uttering hateful words towards female

politicians often invoke their right to freedom of speech. I find it interesting to approach the problem of harassment by female politicians' peers from another angle, recalling Lomic's (2014) point that ambiguity in Canadian law could construe social media attacks (by their peers in office) as workplace harassment (p. 259).

One way that critical discourse analysis provides a foundation for this research study is by compiling evidence that media coverage about female politicians is biased, contributing to the unhealthy discursive spaces that socially construct our understanding of female politicians. Major contributions of significant studies include Kahn's (1992) foundational work in differentiating evaluative descriptions applied to the candidates directly—and this research has very directly influenced many subsequent studies. Kahn (1992) analyzed coverage content surrounding "26 U.S. Senate races from 1982–1986" (p. 499) measuring frequency and space devoted to coverage characteristics—such as length of article, proportion of paragraphs, prominence, page location, issues, content of issues, horserace coverage, horserace assessment, criticism, positive and negative resources, background mention, traits mentioned in article, and tone (p. 501). In another work I found myself returning to frequently, Ross and Comrie (2012) focus on the central role that media plays in political discourse, countering the alternative explanation that the politicians themselves control the discourse. Ross and Comrie (2012) coded markers such as: the amount of coverage (directly as primary subject, and as quoted sources), tone of coverage, and discussion of attributes (sex and age). They found that the 2008 New Zealand leadership race for Prime Minister showed extreme differences in tone, with evidence of both sexism and ageism. Approaching the topic through quantitative content analysis has been very popular, as it helps bolster the argument that sensing bias is not merely a subjective matter so easily dismissed. Another application of this work as a foundation to this research study was

using Ross and Comrie's (2012) paper as a 'pearl article'—a reference point for relevance in the field. In other words, I used the references cited in their work as a trail to other relevant works.

A second way that critical discourse analysis provides a foundation for this research study is by uncovering how communicative practices are contributing to an unproductive and unhealthy discourse, which in turn socially constructs our understanding of female politicians. In this vein, major contributions of significant studies include van Dijk's (2003) definition that "critical discourse analysis... studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context." The idea of unhealthy discourse reproducing inequality is relevant. It also leads to another way this discipline is foundational to this study, the idea that we may 'resist this inequality through text and talk'—a tidy articulation of the very purpose behind communications strategies to shift the discourse.

This leads us to the third way that critical discourse analysis provides a foundation for this research study, through informing strategic communications messaging with academic findings. There seems to be a gap in applying the scores of relevant academic research to concrete, accessible applications that address the unhealthy discursive spaces that socially construct our understanding of female politicians. I feel the academic research documenting bias markers covered in this review is all relevant. Their selection for inclusion here is based on topical relevance, methodological validity, argument credibility, publication integrity (including source and peer-review status, where possible). Summarizing those contributions, I would start with investigating bias quantitatively, by measuring underrepresentation and exclusion (Chimba, 2006; Kahn, 1992; Plaster, 2002; Ross, 1995; Ross & Comrie, 2012). Investigating bias qualitatively, by looking at irrelevant personal characteristics such as gender roles (Garcia-Blanco & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012; Gidengil & Everitt, 2003; Harp et al., 2009, 2016; Kahn, 1992;

Miller & Peake, 2013; Walsh, 2000), masculine characteristics (Harp et al., 2009; Ritchie, 2013; Walsh, 2000), gendered character traits (Harp et al., 2009, 2016; Hayes, 2011; Kahn, 1992; Khalida et al., 2013; Kim, 2012; Meeks, 2013; O'Neill et al., 2016; Ribberink, 2010; Valeda, 2002; Walsh, 2000; Wiens, 1996), private lives (Kahn, 1992; Lee, 2004; Valeda, 2002; Wiens, 1996), private lives focusing on family structure (Garcia-Blanco & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012; Harp et al., 2009; Kim, 2012; Lee, 2004; Miller & Peake, 2013; Plaster, 2002), physical appearance and image use (Garcia-Blanco & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012; Ibroscheva & Raicheva-Stover, 2009; Kim, 2012; Miller & Peake, 2013; Railo, 2014), and emotion (Brooks, 2011; Harp et al., 2016; Khalida et al., 2013; Walsh, 2000). Of the works measuring details that are topically relevant to politics, measuring for issues coverage directly (Chimba, 2006; Kahn, 1992; Kim, 2012; Meeks, 2013; O'Neill et al., 2016; Plaster, 2002; Robertson, 2000; Valeda, 2002), gender ownership of issues (Kahn, 1992; Meeks, 2013), gender ownership in the newsroom (Comrie & McMillan, 2013; Ibroscheva & Raicheva-Stover, 2009; Kahn, 1992; Meeks, 2013; Plaster, 2002), and discussing qualifications (Fulton, 2012; Garcia-Blanco & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012; Ibroscheva & Raicheva-Stover, 2009; Plaster, 2002). Measuring the degree of interpretation present is accomplished by measuring coverage tone (Brooks, 2011; Chen, 2006; Ibroscheva & Raicheva-Stover, 2009; Kahn, 1992; Miller & Peake, 2013; Ross, 1995; Ross & Comrie, 2012; Wiens, 1996), reference to horserace-style coverage (Kahn, 1992; Plaster, 2002; Valeda, 2002; Wiens, 1996), and conceptions of novelty (Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012; Ibroscheva & Raicheva-Stover, 2009; Meeks, 2013; Ross, 1995; Ross & Comrie, 2012; Valeda, 2002; Wiens, 1996). In addition to similarities in research topics, all of these sources also share a goal of drawing valid, objective conclusions about whether or not gender-biased media coverage exists.

Extrapolating from this list of markers as a foundation for how to structure the discourse around female politicians, one of the most critical messages is to simply focus on discussing their issues in the debate. Beyond that, I also suggest consciously pursuing equal treatment in the quantity and tone of coverage, types of images used, and attention to actual qualifications (compared to speculation about qualifications). For those seeking gender equality, it would also be prudent to redirect conversations back to the issues, lest the discourse digress into trivialities and personal characteristics such as gender roles and gender-associated traits, details such as private lives and family, physical appearance, emotion. It would also be prudent to avoid horserace-style coverage, emphases on a candidate's novelty, and also critically think about the impact of assigning ownership of certain tasks and types of issues to any gender—for example, only assigning female journalists to cover female candidates, or only discussing the female candidate's proposed policies on child-care and educational reforms and ignoring those pertaining to industry and finance.

While not necessarily specific to the topic of the discourse around female politicians, strategic and applied communications literature contributes the framework for constructing and deploying messages. This framework then offers the means to address the unhealthy discursive spaces that socially construct our understanding of female politicians. In this review, I drew heavily from Mahoney (2013), based on his pragmatic, well-organized suggestions for applied communications, with a strong grounding in communications theory. The Communications for Development (C4D) literature especially provides a foundation for this research study in the form of case studies and examples of the elements of applied communications strategies. Liou's (2013) work contributes significantly to this study, through her concise summaries of specific social media campaigns promoting gender equality through violence reduction, organized by key

strategic communications components, with actionable checklists for producing future campaigns. While the examples of communications strategies do not specifically address the unhealthy discursive spaces that socially construct our understanding of female politicians, the cases discussed deal specifically with promoting gender equality.

The body of knowledge reviewed is admittedly excessive, owing to the interdisciplinarity of the topic—as well as what I must honestly assess as my own issues in scoping. Research gaps on the topic of the discursive construction of female politicians include: applied communications research addressing networked communications platforms (e.g. social media); content analysis of gender-biased coverage in non-traditional media—given the wealth of findings on bias in traditional media sources; scholarship further investigating the digital public sphere versus political homophily/echo chamber, and academic research specific to the Canadian political context. While I did find significant Canadian sources, the volume of applicable publications was lighter than anticipated.

Of the material reviewed, what I perceive as the most significant methodological flaw is in how to make pertinent academic research more accessible to applied disciplines. For example, there is a research gap in applying critical feminist theory and discourse analysis to communication strategies. There is another research gap in connecting theoretical communications research and potential applications to policy initiatives and legislation around evolving media platforms, and conversely, integrating relevant grey literature, policy initiatives, and legal developments on social media precedents into academic contexts. Finally, regarding topical inconsistencies in theory and findings, I notice the greatest discrepancies when it comes to gender performance (and how much, if at all, female politicians are expected to adopt

masculine attributes), as well as what I see as quota-based approaches bordering on tokenism to merely add women to the mix (both in politics, and in the newsroom).

The reviewed disciplines provide insight for exploring the research problem, in order to design productive solutions. With the stated goal of addressing the unhealthy discursive spaces that socially construct our understanding of female politicians, communicative practices are the primary field of study. I have also consulted research from related disciplines, including academic literature from gender studies, political sciences, and gray literature on policy applications. To clarify the intersections between the neighbouring disciplines, I have included a table summarizing how each discipline and topic relates to the research problem, research design, and provides a foundation for this research study.

Table 1

Relationship of key disciplines to research problem (negativity towards female politicians) and research design (concrete solutions to the negativity), and to their use in this research study.

Discipline & Topic	Relationship to research problem and research design	Foundation for this research study
Communications: Media Effects	How the negativity impacts public perceptions (and voting preferences)	Theoretical framework: how communications as a discipline can either undermine or promote positive discourse
Gender Studies and Critical Feminist Theory	Articulating correlations between gender and negative treatment	Theoretical framework: motivation for pursuing gender equality; understanding of power relationships as they are discursively re-framed and refreshed
Communications: Current Media Context	How the environment amplifies the negative effects	Theoretical communications considerations; Contextual cues contributing to the resurgence of media sexism; Situational analysis of current media forces
Related Academic and Practical (Policy Studies, Political Sciences, Law)	How other disciplines explain the negativity	Interdisciplinary forces; Contextual cues; Current status of public will; Supports and reinforces messages
Critical Discourse Analysis	How existing power relationships fuel the negativity	Compiling evidence that media coverage about female politicians is biased; Deconstructing how communicative practices contribute to an unproductive and unhealthy discourse; Informing strategic communications messaging with academic findings
Strategic Communications	Identifying steps for concrete solutions to the negativity	Applied communications framework to construct and deploy messages; Solutions, going forward
Communications for Development	Identifying successful communications solutions to sexism	Case studies as exemplars of elements of applied communications strategies

Summary

This chapter situates the study within related disciplines that are also working to promote gender equality, healthy discursive spaces, and increased diversity in representation. Media effects theory and critical feminist theory contribute the theoretical framework. These, in addition to the current media context, related academic and practical work in other disciplines (policy studies, political sciences, law), along with critical discourse analysis contribute heavily to exploring the research problem of negativity towards female politicians. Strategic communications and communications for development contribute to the research design, in constructing applied solutions to the negativity.

Following several iterations[2], the research question formally guiding the study is:

What social media communications strategies are organizations applying to advance gender equality through healthy discursive spaces?

Evidence suggests that traditional media outlets are biased in their portrayals of female politicians. Many researchers have investigated the question of whether female politicians are systematically excluded from relevant media coverage, both quantitatively and qualitatively. In discussing their results, many find that quantitative exclusions reduce the public's familiarity with female politicians' platforms, and qualitative exclusions reduce their credibility by frequently focusing on extraneous details. In light of recent current events, it also appears to be worsening. This bias manifests through fixations on gender roles, gendered character traits, private lives (particularly family structures), physical appearance, discussions of emotions, and

2 Iterations of the research question may be found in Appendix A.

in evaluative and interpretive reporting, to name a few. An applied communications approach may illuminate one aspect of this interdisciplinary problem. The following section addresses paths of inquiry which could help to generate solutions to the negative discourse surrounding female politicians.

Research Design & Methodology

This study seeks to identify solutions to the damaging social construction of our understanding of female politicians. Limiting abusive behaviour and re-creating healthy discursive spaces potentially promotes gender equality in two main ways. First, by resetting the standard for expectations around sexism, and secondly, by increasing the representativeness in our democratic institutions, and indirectly prompting more inclusive policies. More specifically, the research problem is to address the negativity towards female politicians and a research design positioned to find concrete solutions to the negativity. Through this study, I seek to answer: What social media communications strategies are organizations applying to advance gender equality through healthy discursive spaces?

Research Design and Methodology Overview

I feel that a commonly misused term deserves clarification before starting. de Vaus (2001) describes research design as the "logical structure of the inquiry," rather than the data collection methods with which it is often confused (p. 9). Using de Vaus' (2001) definition as a springboard to focus and articulate my own research design, I have structured my inquiry to qualitatively describe current social media initiatives to address gender equality.

Guided by my research question, I employed qualitative description "to obtain information concerning the current status of the phenomena" (University of Southern California, 2017, Descriptive Design). I purposefully-sampled and recruited four key informants, based on their professional expertise in promoting gender equality through social media communications strategies. The interviews took place either in-person at their workplace or over the phone. Interviews were transcribed to facilitate data analysis and uncover, categorize, and describe patterns in the participants' responses. This chapter provides additional detail on the study design

and data collection methodology, including the sampling, selection, recruitment, and consent processes, the study setting and data collection strategy, and data analysis procedure.

Study Design: Qualitative Description

Descriptive research documents salient findings in a field. While illustrative in its own right, it also maps out research gaps and structures subsequent quantitative research to test specifically-formulated hypotheses. Descriptive research designs generate concrete results, "provid[ing] answers to the questions of who, what, when, where, and how associated with a particular research problem" (University of Southern California, 2017, Descriptive design), as well as documenting "what's working, [and] what's not" (G. Gow, personal communication, February 7, 2017). Descriptive research "organiz[es] the issues, the meanings[,] and reasons participants give to the issues, and then communicat[es] these meanings in a coherent and meaningful way" (M. Lefebvre, personal communication, May 17, 2016).

For reasons outlined below, qualitative description matched my research question better than other potential research designs, including: discourse analysis, meta-analysis, grounded theory, and participatory action research.

Discourse analysis was thoroughly considered, with its strengths for uncovering hidden meanings commonly taken for granted. I found it compelling that "critical discourse analysis... studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context" (van Dijk, 2003). I dove into discursive literature whole-heartedly and soaked up everything I could find that pointed to biased coverage of political candidates, based on their gender. Despite its initial appeal, the more discursive texts I scanned, the more doubts I experienced that continuing in this vein effectively confirms the social problem exists, yet leaves me craving more answers and applied solutions.

Berger (2016) adds credence to my suspicion, as he describes the research gap that his book fills for the discipline, despite the extensive number of books already available:

> this book is different from other books on discourse analysis in that it focuses upon applying discourse analysis to popular culture, media, and everyday life. You will be able to see how the dominant concepts, theories, and topics discussed by discourse theorists function in the real world. (pp. 7–8).

The implication being that other books on discourse analysis are written as concepts, theories, and topics may not necessarily transfer seamlessly to the real world. Despite Berger's critique, discourse analysis still clearly offers incredible insight into real world problems. Returning to my earlier stated approach for the study, I aim to treat this as an intervention-oriented applied communications research, similar to the niche described by Frey and SunWolf (2009). Discourse analytic findings could certainly inform the strategies that I am applying to concrete problems in order to promote advocacy and social justice—but it still needs to be applied, in order to start shifting policies and communicative practices.

With meta-analysis, or summarizing the analyses of other theoreticians, there were several problematic issues. (1) Rather than pursuing a purely literary and academic project, I wish to focus on solutions and strategies, (2) I did pursue this extensively through my literature review, (3) an advisor explicitly cautioned that a meta-analytic approach on its own wasn't appropriate to fulfill the requirements of this study, and finally, (4) meta-analysis needs a large body of formal research. While there is a great deal of directly relevant research in discourse analysis, applied communications research, particularly in the domain of networked communications platforms (such as social media) is much lighter than required—which further serves to highlight the research gap. Meta-analysis was dismissed, owing to the gap in applied

communications research for solutions specific to my topic area. I did however pursue an extensive meta-analysis through my literature review in documenting how researchers are measuring gendered media bias.

I dismissed a grounded theory design for study feasibility. Grounded theory determines that a researcher's sample size is large enough, once they reach "saturation, [which] is usually explained as 'when no new categories or relevant themes are emerging' … [as well as the] development of categories in terms of their properties and dimensions, including variation, and possible relationships to other concepts" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 148). While possible to reach saturation in my data with only four participants, such a small sample may not provide sufficient data to ground a theory. Despite the opinion that "many researchers work in grounded ways without strictly adhering to the processes of grounded theory as they have been described" (Silver & Lewins, 2014, p. 164), I do not feel I have enough data to generate fully-grounded theories—though findings could contribute to future grounded theories.

Participatory action research's utility for empowering participants and creating social change is compelling for my topic, as is co-creating meaning between the researcher and participants. Patton (2008) uses the term "participatory evaluation" to describe and as with other types of process-related evaluation methods, emphasize that "the process of engaging in evaluation can have as much or more impact than the findings generated" (p. 175). In the case of participatory action research, this is often useful in empowering marginalized communities to collectively redefine their knowledge on a topic. Merrigan et al. (2012) defines action research as: "research that is conducted for the purpose of its practical and applied outcomes rather than for its promise to develop theory or to increase knowledge" (p. 289). In this case, this includes the knowledge that the participants create for themselves, as well as purely academic knowledge.

The latter definition brings me closer to why this method doesn't fit my needs: firstly, because I aim to both increase academic *and* applied knowledge to strengthen future studies, and secondly, process-focused participatory action research may be more effective with longer-term projects.

Qualitative description is a good study design for my research question, because it provides "a basic description and summary of the phenomenon" (Mayan, 2009, p. 53). Here, I am describing and summarizing the phenomenon of social media communications strategies that promote gender equality. Therefore, qualitative description does effectively provide the "type of evidence… needed to answer the [research] question… in a convincing way" (de Vaus, 2001, p. 9).

Data Collection Method: Semi-Structured Interviews

My goal with this study is to describe in detail the communications strategies and resulting social media campaigns that influential organizations are currently applying to advance gender equality. As such, describing informants' shared strategies and challenges helped identify patterns in their experiences and differences in their approaches, as well as the assumptions and rationales they offer for the approach. A more structured tool, such as a questionnaire can limit responses. Therefore, for this initial exploratory research, interviews instead allow us to "examine issues at length from the interview respondent's personal perspective" (Given, 2011, p. 252). Given (2011) also states "common themes and patterns that emerge from the data derived from these [in-depth] interviews can guide researchers in [assessing] existing programs and services and in [exploring] various social issues" (p. 252), indeed mirroring what this study aims to do.

Interview styles are still widely varied. For example, "in qualitative descriptive studies… [d]ata collection techniques usually include minimally to moderately structured open-ended

individual and/or focus group interviews" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 338). This exploratory stage could equally apply to focus groups. "The aim of the focus group is… to bring forth different viewpoints on an issue" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 175). It sounds ideal, but there are drawbacks to focus group interviews. First, "the group interaction… reduces the moderator's control of the course of an interview" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 176). Secondly, in a finite study involving busy professionals, working around their schedule improved participation rates because it allowed more flexibility in timing and location.

Semi-structured interviews are a good data collection method for my research question. They fit exploratory studies, because "you have a fair enough idea of what is going on in or with the phenomenon to develop questions about the topic but not enough to predict the answers" (Mayan, 2009, p. 71). Qualitative description includes findings, such as "concerns[,]… thoughts, feelings, attitudes[,]… reasons[, and] …facilitat[ors] and hind[rances]" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 337). Exploring such complex findings merits a rounder, richer discussion than a questionnaire permits—particularly for initial inquiries. Semi-structured interviews support the study design by allowing participants to delve deeper into personal motivations than focus groups allow.

Limitations. The scope of this study limits breadth and timeframe. The sample size (discussed later) may be smaller than the typical recommended size, but was necessary to keep the project within scope. That said, carefully selecting a small group of key informants with whom to conduct rich, in-depth interviews, allowed me to explore the concepts more fully in this study than sheer quantity may have allowed. Compared to an explanatory study with a testable hypothesis, an exploratory study with a research question limits conclusion styles. The goal is "to identify who participates in an event, where and when it occurs, and what happens, without exploring the causal relationships involved in that event" (Given, 2011, p. 250). Exploratory

research is limited in defining causal relationships, explanatory conclusions, and testing quantitative hypotheses. It does however structure future studies, by "provok[ing] the 'why' questions of explanatory research" (de Vaus, 2001, p. 2). For example, qualitative research is often a "pre-cursor to more quantitative research designs with the general overview giving some valuable pointers as to what variables are worth testing quantitatively" (USC, 2017, Descriptive Design).

Participants

Sampling. The study consisted of interviews with four purposefully-sampled key informants. I "select[ed] information-rich cases to study, cases that by their nature and substance will illuminate the inquiry question being investigated" (Patton, 2015, p. 264). In this case, the study purpose is to explore communicative practices by these informants, as it relates to promoting gender equality through their professional social media strategies.

Despite "purpos[eful] sampling methods lack[ing] representativeness… randomization may not be a practical or desirable way to collect evidence about some research questions" (Merrigan et al., 2012, p.66). In this case, for example, I looked for insights from informants in a professional niche that has few practitioners. Purposeful sampling thus provided "the most and the best information [for this] topic" (Mayan, 2009, p. 62).

Participants were also asked to suggest relevant peers whose input they deemed valuable to this study, and this snowball sampling resulted one additional lead. Snowball sampling also "provides [researchers] with credibility by association" (Merrigan et al., 2012, p. 163).

Sample size. The study sample size was four participants. Potential participants were identified through my literature review. This research led me to organizations taking interest

locally and globally in the underrepresentation of women in politics, as well as the media bias directed towards them.

This initial research helped me to identify prospects via academic sources, traditional and non-traditional media sources (e.g. newspapers and blogs), conversations, social media, websites, and white papers. Throughout the initial literature review, I listed organizations and individuals cited formally and informally—particularly those practicing locally to Edmonton, Alberta, and Canada. "Following" relevant organizations on social media not only added those to my list of potential participants, but also led me to explore who influences them, uncovering more potential prospects. Finally, I reviewed these lists against the selection criteria to prioritize the most relevant informants.

Selection criteria. Selection criteria ensured informants' values and professional experience matched the study's goals. Beginning with core values, the informants promote gender equality. In pre-selecting for this, I worked off the assumption their work subject reflected their values. I sought out organizational blogs and social media posts that might indicate shared values. Over social media, they discussed issues relating to gender equality in a positive and productive voice—focused beyond fomenting bitterness. Affiliated organizations have had an active public campaign promoting gender equality through a social media component on either Facebook or Twitter for at least 6 months to a year, and actively employ a communications professional within their organization.

These professionals have a communications background, and possess an authority position within the organization—ideally with at least 5–15 years in the industry, though seniority is flexible. Their roles address communications strategically, beyond entry-level implementation. Additional logistical considerations help maintain study feasibility: individuals

were accessible for face-to-face interviews in Edmonton, Canada (or were either open to video-conferencing or a phone interview), and were conducting a Canadian campaign (increases consistency between informants' priorities and social customs).

Age range is relevant but broad, typically falling in the 25–65 range. This describes working communications professionals with enough experience to focus on strategic considerations—beyond mere implementation.

Participant health status and gender are less relevant. They are mentally and physically healthy enough to work. With this subject matter, participants are likely female, but this is by no means an inclusion criterion. Gender equality is not a "women's issue," and men's voices in the discourse are relevant and necessary. Meeting inclusion requirements for subject-area expertise and professional communications experience are more important.

Recruitment. Having established a list of seven potential informants, I contacted the top five participants directly through their professional email address, retrieved through either a public directory for their workplace or a referring colleague—including snowball sampling through prior interviews, and LinkedIn connections. Where snowball sampling identified potential participants, I approached the participants personally for four reasons: to (1) ensure participation is voluntary and explicitly offer the opportunity to decline, (2) reduce potential coercion by their peer, (3) increase participants' anonymity (unless they mutually wish to network with fellow participants), and (4) reduce the imposition made on referring participants.

The initial contact letter is included in Appendix B. I followed up a few days after the initial contact email by either phone or email, to ascertain each prospect's interest level in participating. If interested, I followed up with additional pre-interview information (discussed below).

I applied for and received Research Ethics approval. I anonymized the interview transcripts to protect the participants' privacy. Direct quotes are shared, but neither their names nor their workplaces are identified by this research. The participants were warned anonymity could not be guaranteed, given that relatively few individuals in their field meet the selection criterion. They were however assured raw data is kept confidential—except for myself, my research project supervisor, and possibly the Research Ethics Committee. Prior to the interviews, participants signed an Information Letter and Consent Form, an example of which is included in Appendix C.

Setting

When possible, I met for face-to-face interviews at a private location most convenient to them. This balanced my need for in-person richness, with the subtle cues from body language potentially lost in audio-only interviews, with the flexibility to accommodate busy professionals. If they were flexible and located in Edmonton, I recommended the interview occur at their workplace. Meeting at their office grounds meant the interview happened in their day-to-day professional setting. Workplace interviews increased the potential for interruptions, but benefits outweighed the risks compared to other options. For example, imposing on participants to visit me would have further limited their availability. In public locations such as cafes, ambient noise would both distract us and impede the sound recordings. Public locations also raised privacy issues with eavesdropping, and increased potential interruptions. In one case, we weren't able to arrange a face-to-face interview, but were able to connect by phone.

Data Collection

Data collection technique. The data collection technique is a semi-structured interview. For length, "interviews typically last from 60 to 90 minutes, although [it] varies depending on

the scope of the project and the availability of participants" (Given, 2011, p. 252). To accommodate busy schedules, the interviews were scheduled for 60 minutes—including the introductions, reviewing the consent letter, and the interview wrap-up.

Instrument. The instrument itself is an interview guide (not a script). In "semi-structured interviews… the interviewer uses a discussion 'guide' listing topics of interest rather than a strict interview schedule" (Merrigan et al., 2012, p. 115). For example, asking "what do you see as the main barriers to gender equality" and letting the participants' initial answers dictate the direction for subsequent questions. Only having eight major topics to cover in 45–60 minutes means the guide mostly includes prompts for potential follow up questions. In short, this tool suits the study because it allows more flexibility to explore their insights.

Considerations in designing the instrument. The interview guide was designed around a set of eight primary topics intended to generate insights related to the RQ. Primary topics include: goals, challenges (both in the media's framing and in the public mindset), strategies, evaluation, target audiences, language used, complementary media channels, and interdisciplinary connections (e.g. connections to policy, gender study, politics, etc.).

Interview flow. Mayan (2009) suggests starting by "introducing yourself and the topic… asking some easy questions and showing empathy [before]… asking the tough questions or addressing more sensitive topics" (Mayan, 2009, pp. 68–69). While misogyny towards female politicians may resonate emotionally for participants, it is unlikely to require as much sensitivity as a personal or stigmatized topic might require for an interview participant. My interviews started with open-ended questions, also termed "introductory questions" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 160), and "tour questions" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, pp. 159–160). For example, "in

setting goals to achieve gender equality, what are your highest priorities from a communications perspective?"

Without a specific script, semi-structured interviews required considering follow up questions. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) describe this as "the art of second questions," and emphasize that "active listening… [helps determine] which of the many dimensions of a subject's answer to pursue" (pp. 164–165). They also suggest feigning a "deliberate naiveté [wherein] the interviewer exhibits openness to new and unexpected phenomena, rather than having readymade categories and schemes of interpretation" (p. 33). One exuberant interviewer suggests fellow researchers "do interviews as through the eyes of a child, [with statements like]: 'wow! That's what that is?!' not by applying [their] own pre-conceived understanding" (M. Lefebvre, personal communication, May 17, 2016). This is particularly valuable when academic terminologies could intimidate participants and lead them to censor their responses.

Semi-structured interviews require finding the balance between flowing with the participant's direction, while covering main points. Rubin and Rubin (2005) describe this balance through question types: "main questions structure an interview by focusing on the substance of the research problem. Probes help you manage the conversation by regulating the length of answers and degree of detail, clarifying unclear sentences or phrases, filling in missing steps, and keeping the conversation on topic" (p. 164). To determine when I need to pull back the conversation to the main topics, I kept an eye on the time. The overall time, divided by eight main topics, allows approximately five minutes per main question and subsequent probes. Patience also helps balance research priorities with a conversational flow. For example, Mayan (2009) describes "interviewer pitfalls to avoid, [such as] asking multiple questions at once, changing direction before the participant is finished, or asking closed questions" (p. 68; Rubin &

Rubin, 2005). To wrap up graciously and concisely, Mayan (2009) recommends "closing while maintaining contact [by] thanking the participant and usually making a comment such as: 'you have given me a lot to think about'" (pp. 68–69).

Overall, a semi-structured interview guide suits my study because it provides structure to maintain consistency between interviews, but also the flexibility to let the conversation flow with the participants. The Interview Guide is included in Appendix D.

Procedures

Steps. Bringing together the components discussed up to this point, after receiving ethics approval, four participants were purposefully sampled, based on the selection criteria. They were recruited by an informal introductory letter (Appendix B), which was followed up by a phone call a few days later to discuss the prospect's interest in participating. If they expressed interest, the more formal Information Letter and Consent Form (Appendix C) was sent to them, along with a simplified Interview Guide with main topic areas for optional review (Appendix E). Next, I scheduled one-hour interviews, and allowed at least 30–60 minutes after each interview to review field notes, and capture additional details. I transcribed the audio recordings and field notes, and watched for data withdrawal requests over the following two weeks.

Anticipated challenges. I anticipated logistical concerns over participant availability, given the prospective participants are busy professionals, and the suboptimal timing for the interviews (summer). I also anticipated technical difficulties, such as recording equipment difficulties for either phone or video calls, when face-to-face interviews weren't possible.

It was known in advance there would be a substantial commitment for transcribing the interviews, based on numerous passes through the audio recordings to capture all data. Finally, I anticipated a substantial learning curve for the NVivo platform, though the promised features

outweighed this setback by expediting other analytic processes—for example, search filters, queries, and efficiently linking quotes to themes.

Additional challenges encountered. There were no significant changes to the instrument during the data collection. Lessons I would apply to future include shortening the interview guide and clarifying the questions. In some cases, unclear questions led to unclear answers. Clearly delineating semantic differences in advance would be helpful. Through no fault of the participants, I conflated some major terms (goals/strategies/objectives, media effects/media coverage), leading to unclear answers.

I found that we didn't discuss a few items as much as I'd expected. For example, quantitatively measuring the relative success of social media campaigns, and also how the individuals would specifically respond to the vitriol, if they were placed in that situation. I regret not being more direct about this line of inquiry. I also found that defining mid-term goals and strategies is challenging, whereas it may be easier for people to define where they're at now, and where they're headed in the long-term.

Analysis: Inductive Qualitative Content Analysis

Process. As the "analysis strategy of choice in qualitative descriptive studies" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 338), I used inductive qualitative content analysis in processing the data. Qualitative content analysis is the "process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns in the data" (Mayan, 2009, p. 94), and "induction occurs when you make a generalization based on your knowledge of particular cases" (Merrigan et al., 2012, p. 55).

I developed the "coding scheme" (Merrigan et al., 2012) or "coding frame" (Benaquisto, 2012), working inductively. "Over the course of data analysis, as categories are uncovered and refined, the coding frame evolves, helping to classify further data segments into already

established or new conceptual categories" (Benaquisto, 2012, p. 88). In other words, qualitative content analysis using inductive reasoning meant the categories for my findings developed gradually through data analysis—compared to determining this analytical structure in advance, as when working deductively with multiple coders.

I transcribed the interviews myself, using Trint—a proprietary software that creates editable transcripts[3]. After transcription, I identified patterns with preliminary hand coding. I further coded with NVivo, a qualitative content analysis software tool, and categorized the codes to summarize my findings. I moved through three stages of coding as identified by Silver and Lewins (2014): open, axial, and selective (p. 164). This process moves from "small segments of data (perhaps a word, line, sentence or paragraph) … [to a] second pass through the data when the codes generated by open coding are reconsidered… [towards] instances in the data which most pertinently illustrate themes, concepts, relationships" (Silver & Lewins, 2014, p. 164).

Qualitative content analysis using inductive reasoning meant the categories for my findings developed gradually through data analysis. This allowed me to stay closer to the data and minimize the risks of forcing the data to fit my pre-existing notions of what I expected to find.

How qualitative content analysis addresses rigor. Qualitative content analysis using inductive reasoning is exploratory, and not about testing a measurable hypothesis. Qualitative research is not constrained by the same requirements as quantitative research. This section explains how my analytical procedure of using qualitative content analysis addresses rigor within the study. First, my approach is post-positivist. According to Mayan (2009), "qualitative research

3 Available at Trint.com, including free trials. Transcripts still needed several passes to ensure accuracy, though the program sped up the process.

does not adhere to the positivist paradigm's prescriptions of rigor (validity, generalizability, and reliability), and it is detrimental to apply the quantitative rules of rigor to qualitative research" (Mayan, 2009, p. 101). Second, I take a social-constructionist approach that language is a socially-constructed tool. In short, we need to redefine rigor, and a first step in addressing reliability and validity concerns is to note the shift in terminology for these concerns in qualitative research. According to Golafshani (2003), "reliability and validity are conceptualized as trustworthiness, rigor and quality in [the] qualitative paradigm" (p. 604). Another more semantically appropriate interpretation is that "validity could be internally replaced with credibility and externally replaced with transferability, and reliability could be replaced with dependability. As well, objectivity could be replaced with confirmability (Mayan, 2009, p. 105). Prioritizing confirmability (over objectivity) is salient, given that this project's situation within the critical paradigm relies on the "subjective and interpretive view of reality" (Merrigan et al., 2012, p. 44). In short, this study aims for trustworthiness by prioritizing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Mayan, 2009, pp. 104–105).

A second step in addressing reliability and validity concerns is to situate the current work. "Although a great deal of effort has gone into the formulation of criteria for establishing rigor (trustworthiness), we will never establish consensus on an overall set of criteria to judge the quality of qualitative research… Because criteria must be chosen that best fit with the research, its epistemological underpinnings, and the discipline within which it is situated." (Mayan, 2009, p. 104). To refresh, the study is situated in the post-positivist paradigm, based on the epistemological underpinnings of social-constructionism, taking the stance that language is a socially-constructed tool. In other words, the study prioritizes the multiplicity of subjective

truths. Finally, I would describe the discipline in question as "intervention-oriented applied communications research" (Frey & SunWolf, 2009).

Inductive qualitative content analysis indeed addresses trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. First, inductive qualitative content analysis addresses credibility through the careful selection of key informants. These are the opinions of highly respected individuals in their discipline. These views have been thoughtfully and professionally articulated, and faithfully presented, staying as close to the data as possible. Second, inductive qualitative content analysis addresses transferability, by seeking multiple approaches to similar problems, and in applying informants' collective insight to discourse about female politicians, as they may not be working directly with political discourse. Most importantly transferability is addressed by acknowledging the limitations of the study. Returning to the small sample size, it is worth noting "transferable findings generally occur at the point of saturation of themes in the data, which typically arise with a minimum of 15 to 18 participants" (Given, 2011, p. 252). It is acknowledged that I cannot claim to have reached saturation in the data, and as such, make no claims of grounding a theory, based on the outcomes of this initial exploratory work. Third, inductive qualitative content analysis addresses dependability, by working inductively to allow patterns to emerge, rather than overlaying my own pre-conceived notions as a researcher. Fourth, inductive qualitative content analysis addresses confirmability, by remaining as transparent as possible in my research design and methods. Finally, I address rigor in further detail in the upcoming data analysis section, where I discuss the steps taken to address trustworthiness in analyzing my findings.

Limitations or unresolved challenges of data analysis. A first limitation of the data analysis is transferability of the findings, based the limited scope of this exploratory study.

Recalling Given's (2011) suggestion about sample size for reaching theme saturation is 15–18 participants (p. 252), this obviously directly impacts transferability. While a sample size with more candidate diversity is suggested to reliably generalize to a wider population, this is not my goal in the project. Instead, gathering insight from invested participants who share values is more relevant to this exploratory study than transferability to another population. Further, according to Bulmer (1979) "analytic induction… [is] intended to maintain faithfulness to the empirical data while abstracting and generalizing from a relatively small number of cases" (p. 661; Merrigan, et al., 2012, p. 55). Restricting sample size kept this initial study within scope.

Another limitation of the data analysis is subjectivity—at least if bias goes unacknowledged. Davidson (2009) elaborates on transcription subjectivity, "it is impossible to record all features of talk and interaction from recordings, [therefore] all transcripts are selective in one way or another. Selectivity needs to be acknowledged and explained in relation to the goals of a study rather than taken to be unremarkable" (p. 38). For example, defining why I am focusing on the verbal, audio-only content of conversation, and omitting other data such as linguistic cues and pauses (aside from field notes). Distinguishing descriptive work from more interpretive styles of research, "researchers conducting qualitative descriptive studies stay closer to their data and to the surface of words and events… In qualitative descriptive studies language is a vehicle of communication, not itself an interpretive structure that must be read" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 336; Mayan, 2009). I plan to address this by verbally acknowledging any significant visual cues (e.g. body language) explicitly during the interview, to enter them into the verbal transcript. In addition to these measures, subjectivity remains an important feature of qualitative research, provided that research design and methods—including paradigm, biases, epistemological foundations—are rendered transparent.

Summary

The study consists of key informant interviews with communications professionals to discuss solutions to the public hostility consistently facing female political leaders. Rearticulating the research question, I seek to promote gender equality through communications strategies, particularly in social media spaces when discussing female leaders.

Reviewing the methodologies covered in this chapter, I used a qualitative descriptive study design. I purposefully-sampled and recruited four key informants, based on their professional expertise in promoting gender equality through social media communications strategies. They were selected for their core values, organizational and campaign attributes, communications expertise, and logistical considerations. I gathered data through semi-structured interviews either in-person, or through phone conversations. Interviews were transcribed to facilitate data analysis and uncover, categorize, and describe patterns in the participants' responses, which I presented in a descriptive format.

The following section discusses the outcomes from the interviews and comes back to the larger context, drawing on the initial findings from the literature review. It is a "straight descriptive summary of the informational contents of data organized in a way that best fits the data" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 339).

Findings & Discussion

The research problem of negativity towards female politicians is addressed here by designing a study that explores concrete solutions to this negativity. Guiding my research was the question: "what social media communications strategies are organizations applying to advance gender equality through healthy discursive spaces? To answer this research question, my research design employed a qualitative descriptive study design to explore communicative practices, that promote gender equality through professional social media strategies. For my data collection, I purposefully-sampled and recruited four key informants, based on their professional expertise in promoting gender equality through social media communications strategies. I gathered data through semi-structured interviews either in-person, or over the phone. Interviews were transcribed to facilitate data analysis and uncover, categorize, and describe patterns in the participants' responses, which I presented in a descriptive format. This chapter describes my findings, data analyses, contextualizing these findings, and the limitations of the study.

Data was gathered through four interviews, and the subsequent findings arising from deeper analysis. These qualitative descriptions address the problem of re-creating healthy discursive spaces to answer the research question of how key organizations are applying social media communications strategies to advance gender equality—particularly when framing female leaders.

First, I present my findings from the interviews in the data presentation section. Overall, it illustrates patterns that developed during analysis, in comparing the participants' responses as they describe how they promote gender equality through their organization's social media communications strategies. I present this data as components for a communications strategy, grounded in the analytical framework of the interview guides. The research sub-questions

(RSQs) each represent different components of the overall question of how these participants are employing communications strategies to promote healthy discursive spaces for female politicians. It is further broken down into subsections as needed, to highlight any prominent themes and subthemes emerging from the conversations.

Second, in the analysis section, I outline how I analyzed the data, based on the themes and codes that merited the most attention in the reporting process.

Third, I discuss how these findings apply to advance gender equality generally, and extrapolate the findings to how we can create healthy discursive spaces for female politicians. This section seeks to explicitly answer the research question, based on the data collected through the interviews, and through further analyses of the findings. Here, I comment on the findings from the data presentation section, and overlay that with my analyses and insight gleaned from the literature review process.

Fourth, I outline this study's limitations and how I have addressed them.

Data Presentation (Findings)

Informants were interviewed over a two-week period in July and August, 2017. Four mid-career communications professionals were selected based on their work promoting gender equality through social media. They all have formal communications training and hold authority positions with strategic oversight within their organizations—either as departmental leads, or as primaries in their own consultancy firms. All four participants are female. It was anticipated with this subject matter that participants might be female, though this was not an inclusion criterion. Meeting inclusion requirements for subject-area expertise and professional communications experience were given priority. All are conducting at least one active (possibly multiple) Canadian social media campaigns that fit the criterion. Three participants were available for

face-to-face interviews in Edmonton at their places of work, one participant was in Calgary and was available for a phone interview.

There are enough shared values to reach minor "saturation of themes in the data" (Given, 2011, p. 252) with the data, despite relatively diverse areas of specialization and the small sample size. To provide some context about the selected informants, Participant A specializes in infrastructure and policy, with a high-level focus on setting strategies and objectives for achieving women's equality. Participant B is the primary of a communications firm, working with a local non-profit on a nationally-successful campaign that met the selection criteria, with an emphasis on strategic messaging, audience, and approach. Her role in this campaign was setting it up in a consultancy capacity, and providing direction for visual and verbal messaging to be carried out by the agency team. Participant C's role in her regular employment includes overseeing a communications department's strategy and implementation, but is also subject area expert for women in politics, based on her board level volunteer work with the local chapter of a nationally-reaching women's advocacy organization. Participant D is a social media strategist. Her role in these campaigns is in setting up strategic communications plans and direct implementation and account maintenance in a consultancy capacity, and she is also a subject area expert for women's equality.

All of these participants had a wealth of practical experience that was well-grounded in communications theory and strategy. Even though each of the participants were selected based on their associated organizations' social media presence, they each had very different relationships to those accounts. Please see the table on the following page for a brief summary.

Table 2

Summary of participants' specializations and relationships to organizational social media.

	Specialization	Relationship to organization's social media
A	Infrastructure and policy based, high-level focus on women's equality	Departmental oversight
B	Campaign based: emphasis on strategic messaging, audience, and approach	Setting up the campaigns, providing direction for visual and verbal messaging to be carried out by the outreach agency team (primary in a consultancy)
C	Departmental oversight: strategy and implementation, subject area expert for women in politics	Departmental oversight within day job, direct implementation through board relationship to organization of topical interest
D	Social media strategist: planning and implementation on several related accounts, subject area expert for women's equality	Strategic communications planning, direct implementation, and account maintenance (primary in a consultancy)

The interviews loosely followed the segments of the interview guide for the most part, which was roughly ordered by importance in the anticipation we wouldn't cover all of the questions. The scope of the interview questions did prove to be too broad in all cases, and where trade-offs were to be made, it felt more beneficial to dig deeper into primary questions than to ensure secondary questions were addressed, or to slavishly follow the order of the questions. Interviews were scheduled for 60 minutes, and ranged from 45 to 75 minutes. We discussed goals, strategies, and challenges specific to their campaigns, and also discussed applications for this subject area of the discourse around female politicians.

Goals & Objectives.

RSQ1: In terms of setting goals and objectives to achieve gender equality, what are your highest priorities from a communications perspective? The participants answered this question quite explicitly. Participant A says:

> We have three mandated areas. One is increasing women's safety, particularly against sexual violence. The other is increasing their opportunities for leadership and democratic participation, which includes political violence, [as] you're well aware. And the third is increasing their economic security. So making sure of fair pay, access to quality jobs, entering non-traditional work spheres just essentially boosting women's economic status.

Participant B expressed their goals as follows:

> The goal really was to identify, and… bridge the gap between… the large number of people—who are mostly women—who are largely under serviced [as survivors of sexual violence[4]] who need support, and either haven't got it, or haven't had the confidence to reach out for support... because they've been afraid that they wouldn't be believed.

Participant C says:

> What we've tried to do at [this organization] is set a sort of an outcome goal first, and then use a communications strategy as sort of a way to achieve that. And so... over the last two years, we set a goal to try to get 50 percent of the candidates in each race in Edmonton's municipal elections this fall to be women. And... and it's been really really

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4 The selection criteria could have been more specific, to include only those working directly with women in politics, and those closer to the implementation end of the strategic communications spectrum. That said, the amount of strategic insight, unwavering focus on stated goals, high level communications expertise in a focused and wide-reaching campaign, methods for measuring campaign effectiveness, message construction, audience research, and her viewpoints representing a different end of the political spectrum all readily dissolve any initial doubts about inclusion.

> interesting, and so over the last two and a half years or so, a big part of trying to achieve that has been using a communications strategy and that's been partly public and media relations and partly social media strategy. And I would argue that a lot of the events that we've done have also been part of that communication strategy, as well.
>
> Participant D says:
>
> With the municipal election coming up, trying to convince more women to run. We really do believe that the more women who put themselves out there for the opportunity... that the best candidates will win, and in hopefully lots of instances, those candidates are female. And I guess also just to parse terms a little bit… by 'female' I don't necessarily mean biologically female.

As participants elaborated on these explicit primary goals, themes emerged through content analysis. These themes are explored next.

Changing attitudes & beliefs. The idea of change came up frequently when we were discussing goals. Participant C discussed it in the context of looking at why we are still finding resistance categorically expressed towards female politicians. She explains, "a lot of that I think is how people deal with change. Politics has historically been very male-dominated of course, and we're seeing very slow, but still a little bit of change at least, around women becoming more involved in politics." Participant B advised successful communications require "focus[ing] on a change that you want to make: a change in attitude, and a change in behaviour."

Most of the participants highlighted the centrality of changing attitudes and beliefs in order to achieve gender equality. Talking about the consultancy projects she chooses, Participant D says "my personal interest really *is* around changing those attitudes and beliefs... in the social context." Participant A stressed social attitudes as a key challenge to the work they're doing, that

"what's really holding us back on gender equality... it's those pervasive attitudes, the biases that people bring forward. And again, it's not just held by men." As far as improving it, she goes on to say,

> if we're not changing the attitudes, if we're not working with children early on, if we're not setting examples, if we're not challenging misconceptions of what leadership looks like or sounds like or includes, then we are going to continue dealing with the same sorts of issues. So this can't be a single prong approach.

Informants also spoke to changing myths, which we could define as unverifiable attitudes and beliefs, nonetheless held by a group of people. References to myths included communications industry best practices "if you want to change a myth or debunk a myth, don't repeat it" (Participant B). Participants also defined myths as a narrative. In the following, the myth or narrative is the self doubt creating a barrier to entry for potential political candidates. Participant A notes

> if you have women run, they stand a chance of winning. And the anecdotal narrative we're hearing is that women don't know that. They just think that they don't stand a chance. But they do... So that sort of narrative is important to carry forward... I know there are all sorts of different myths that… underlie decisions about whether to run for office.

Several participants described increasing awareness as a core component of their goals. This could be the case of either explicitly using the term awareness, or referencing it with other expressions. For example, "call[ing] attention to things that are happening" (Participant C), in the context of framing current events from their organization's perspective. Other variants related to

awareness-raising, "barely a whisper about it," making a "big splash," "calling stuff out," helping the audience "recognize" something, or "spark[ing] some thinking."

Changing behaviour. While most participants agreed about *what* needs to change, there were differences in *how* to change these attitudes and beliefs. Participant B says "it's really about culture change, and how do you change culture?... knowing what actually does change culture is really really important." While encouraging changing attitudes, she articulates the distinction clearly and candidly, in how to achieve that:

> Knowing exactly what you're trying to accomplish in terms of your message like what do you want people to do. We didn't want to raise awareness. That is, sorry for using the term, total BS. Don't try to raise awareness because it's useless… you have to change the way people think about themselves, before they will change their behaviour… [and] if you want someone to change the way they behave, you show them what it looks like.

Despite differences of opinion on the value of awareness-raising—at least as a strategy—most participants nevertheless also discussed various behaviours they sought to change. In particular, these tended to be around promoting confidence, for example empowering and encouraging women to step up into leadership roles. For example, reminding women "they have what it takes to make this happen" (Participant A). Discussing general advice for language in the messaging, Participant B says, "it seems to me, that the message is more of empowerment… and strength for women… putting them in the place where they feel like... they have more power than they know." Discussing why this additional encouragement is needed, Participant D says, "women frequently don't view the political sphere as a viable job and are not encouraged to run from an early age."

More women. The theme of needing more women to step into leadership roles arose frequently as both a strategy for addressing gender inequalities, and as a worthy end goal in itself. Participant A posed rhetorically, "can one woman represent all women? Well, no. And that's why we're looking for more women, of more diverse backgrounds to be able to stand up, and be elected or be chosen, based on their merit." Describing a major focus at the time of the interviews, Participant D said "with the municipal election coming up, [we are] trying to convince more women to run. We really do believe that the more women who put themselves out there for the opportunity... that the best candidates will win, and in hopefully lots of instances, those candidates are female." Participants articulated that true presence in politics is not about filling a quota, or "tokenism." In describing barriers to gender-balanced cabinets, Participant A states:

> if you don't have a slate of candidates running, you can't... as a voter you can't make the choice for a woman, if she happens to hold the views that you do, too. And it gets really important for parties in a party system to be able to advance women as potential candidates. And that... has to be a priority if they want to... achieve any sort of diversity balance.

Participant A aptly reminded me that there are many forms of leadership. This is not solely a 'trickle-down' approach, where the existence of political role models normalizes female leadership and inspires other women to express their own leadership skills. Participant A emphasized the importance of viewing leadership dynamically, noting "there has to be a grassroots effort. So we're not just looking at the trickle-down, but the bottom-up, as well. So women who are disenfranchised advocating for themselves and acquiring the kind of services they need."

Language and Key Messages.

RSQ2: What advice would you give to others working in the field, as far as language in messaging to the public? (e.g. tone, verbiage, etc.) Key messages varied widely, ranging from making legislation relevant to new audiences, to access to corporate resources, to supporting survivors of sexual violence, to increasing the number of female candidates through empowerment—to name a few. That said, messaging may also transcend the specifics of individual initiatives. Participant B describes how she approaches her work by identifying the

> cause and effect equation… you have to be able to... connect some dots around around that whole question of social change. What is really at play here? Why are people doing this? …Why do some women not feel confident? … because they're potential targets, or is it something else?

After identifying specifically what's happening and starts crafting the messaging, she stresses:

> it's not pounding... into somebody's head about what [they should do], it's about emotionally connecting with an idea and a feeling that naturally becomes almost like an instinctive response rather than an intellectual response.

Participant (B) based her messages on behaviour modelling:

> we modelled the behaviour we wanted people to follow. And we didn't [tell them what to do] we showed them what [it] looks like. And it's beautiful, and it's emotional, and it's powerful, and it's human. Like, who can't connect to that idea of being that friend who puts an arm around somebody who's hurting, or being someone who is loyal to the end? You know? These are simple human emotions that… most healthy people can connect

> to… We want to be that person who is good and loyal and trustworthy, and by showing it, we made it easy for people to follow it.

Participant C offered the next point reflexively about finding balance in media discussions of female politicians' families. She talks about the benefits of

> seeing a number of women figuring it out each one in their own ways, showing there are lots of different ways to make it work, and it can work. You know you might have this resource; they might have that resource.

Participant D explicitly listed the core themes underlying the messaging across several of the equality-based social accounts as: "empathy, leadership… everyone has a role [to play in gender equality] ... and breaking stereotypes" (Participant D).

Participants also directly addressed messaging tone. It could be a matter of setting the tone, as in:

> [Notley] is very much focused on the work at hand and I think that sets the tone for Cabinet, which sets the tone for the policy of this government … this is very much a feminist-oriented government because they are very much focused on having that voice at the table. It's about decision-making, rather than tokenism. And I expect if we were to look through examples we'd find that across the Cabinet, too. (Participant A)

In many cases, tone also pertained specifically to the messaging. Participants sometimes explicitly promoted a positive tone: "we stick to pretty positive themes… it's remarkable what happens when you're positive on Twitter, because so few are" (Participant D). Connecting with their audience on an emotional level, Participant D also describes how she works with the community to "keep them feeling good about the decisions that they've made and the kinds of values that they're espousing."

Participants also touched on how to not trigger the opposition. Stating that while anger can be a "catalyst for change... I don't think change actually happens through anger" (Participant D). In addition to a positive voice, Participant B described keeping the tone "non-threatening" to the opposition, stating that "people attack because they *are* attacked." She elaborates to say that in seeking to be assertive, those on the defensive sometimes miss their mark when they call opponents out as "bigots." She suggests that people sometimes just need to feel heard: "it is so foundational to people's self-concept, and feeling like they matter, and that they are willing then to hear the other person" (Participant B).

The same two participants who emphasized positivity above, incidentally also mentioned receiving criticism for this positive attitude. This suggests that finding the right tone requires a delicate balance. Describing a time that she was publicly criticized for sharing something *too* positive (celebrating progress towards equality), Participant D recalls, "I was brutally attacked... on this Facebook post. And I'm proud of my reaction, because rather than doubling down, I listened. And I really learned from my friends' experiences." She describes this as a foundational experience introducing her to the systemic nature of sexism, and how that contributes to her approach to her work. She describes how they "continue to reach out and to continue to greet... criticism from the general public with an empathetic lens… because I feel like that's the way you get conversions" (Participant D).

Participant B also offered advice about framing gender equality initiatives in the positive. She describes how the director she works with at the outreach organization for this campaign is

> often criticized by people... because she's too positive, and she focuses too much on how far we've come, rather than how far we have to go. And I think that… her willingness to do that has actually... helped her make the kind of impact that she's been able to make. So

> I'm going to suggest… that one of the opportunities here is to focus more on how far we've come toward gender equality, rather than how far we have left to go. And that may be your biggest challenge to grapple with, whether or not you're willing to do that.

Overall, the participants suggested maintaining a positive tone in their communications strategies to advance gender equality. While some indicated that this can draw friction, these same participants nevertheless held that the benefits of a positive tone outweighed the initial friction it occasionally creates.

There were many variants that trace back to the importance of voice, whether we're talking about advocacy, amplification, a platform for speaking, or the voiceless. Participant A notes that "it's certainly not a new issue for women to be fighting for their voice to be heard," and describes this journey to political office as the "opportunity to be able to share a voice and a point of view and the merit of being in the office and making decisions." Participant D outlines her role as as a communicator in "encouraging people to find their way of using their privilege to speak up… the other thing that I have learned through this process, is that I do have a voice and I do have a platform. And so, it is my responsibility to use it, and to use it for good." Participant C also talked about publicly sharing guidelines for healthy discourse, saying:

> women running for office would be a great audience for something like that because they might look at that and say… 'maybe that's enough to push me over the edge … someone's trying to make it better. There's a resource out there... there's a network of people that would have my back. I feel like now I could go out there and... be that politician, and run for office, knowing that there's a strong voice somewhere there, holding off the wolves.'

Audience & Target Publics.

RSQ3: Who is your target audience? Before addressing specific strategies for defining target audiences, it's relevant to examine how the participants conceptualize and discuss audiences. I've ordered the following emergent themes according to the same analytical pattern as inductive reasoning, moving from individual units, towards broader generalizations.

Identity and how we identify as individuals. Individual identity came up frequently in many forms. For example, participants discussed ability, economic, ethno-cultural identity, gender (in this paper, meaning both biologically and expressively), identity marketing, new Canadians, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, tokenism, white women, women in vulnerable communities, and women of color. It's important to reflect on different aspects of identity because "it can become really insular… that we think our own experience is representative of everyone else's. [It is] absolutely not the case" (Participant A). On a conceptual level, each aspect of identity faces its own barriers. Participant C, in describing social causes behind the widespread disrespect towards female politicians, theorizes that "the discourse around women and politics and focusing on their appearance, focusing on their family, is partly just … dealing with a changing face of the legislatures. And figuring out... how we deal with these new types of people who are... in office. I kind of hope that in a way, because then that means that we'll get over it."

Also hinging on identity, Participant D particularly champions authenticity. She describes the work she does in this regard as:

> really trying to encourage people to feel free to be who they... truly are, their most authentic self in their heart and soul... rather than feeling the need to be what society dictates. And that's I think a common theme across all of our initiatives. And I think that

> that's interestingly then, also a common theme across the work that I like to do, and... even my style of consulting company is very committed to... [not blindly] follow[ing] the rules. Be who you are and express that. And so, how can we find ways to bring out the best part of your core?... I believe that in everything that I do. (Participant D)

All of the participants explored the concept of power. It came up in the softer, conceptual way—as empowerment, discussed above—and also quite explicitly. For example, having the "power of being able to talk any way you want, the power of being able to put people in their place" (Participant A). Participant B also discussed it as part of the proposed solution,

> ultimately, you have to give women a sense of their own power, and their own voice, and their confidence… So what's the key to giving women more confidence? Is it just the system that needs to change? Or is it something in women that needs to change? Or that doesn't need to change? That just needs to be acknowledged and celebrated? ...we are not men but... *we are powerful.*

Privilege as an aspect of identity came up frequently. Participant A referenced it as asymmetrical access to opportunity, and making explicit efforts to make this access more symmetrical:

> And so we look to women… in their many fashions… women with disabilities, and women who have lived experiences of violence—all need to be at the table. If you look across the board of those women who have been represented in politics, they are still largely privileged white women. And that's a challenge. So we tried to reach out to any woman who feels the calling to leadership.

Participant D suggested how those categorically granted this asymmetrical privilege have a responsibility to help others who have been denied the same privileges they may take for

granted. She defined part of their audience as those people with categorical privileges, and stated that a large part of their work involves:

> making sure that people of privilege recognize systemic problems when they don't necessarily affect them. I love the saying 'just because it's... not a problem for you, doesn't mean it's not a problem' and... engaging allies… [because] as every other intersectional group… loses some oppression—I fear... that the people who still remain oppressed will remain voiceless. So that's why... [we] continue to reach out and educate people who are privileged.

Participant D also discussed intersecting oppressions, defining their intersectional feminist approach as

> trying to view equality and equity from the perspective of recognizing [how] the intersecting oppressions that a person faces... based on their race, their gender, their sexual orientation, their gender expression, their socioeconomic status, their ability or disability... every possible form of identity, really... impacts your access to power and opportunity. And so... using the lens that... [not everyone has] equal access. And looking at the places where those opportunities and oppressions intersect. (Participant D)

Using different terminology, Participant A touched on the same concept in discussing the heterosexism directed towards Ontario Premier Wynne:

> that's a challenge for women as well, is that they're not just dealing with the sexism. And in fact, the sexism might not even be where they're experiencing the most challenge. But so the multiplicity of layers here it mean it's hard to carry that weight all the time and still feel like you're being effective or making the type of change that you're looking for in the world.

How we assemble as groups. Taking the next step from identity, another theme from the interviews was how we assemble as groups, and it took both positive and negative forms. For example, establishing kinship through shared values, "we all have... our unique strengths and weaknesses. And I guess, really trying to view... each other as individuals, as opposed to some kind of mass stereotype. So I'm excited… to connect those values with new audiences" (Participant D).

Audience specificity varied widely. Some participants define their target audience by values. For example, "[those who aren't aware] that gender equality has not [yet] been accomplished in Alberta" (Participant A). On the topic of shared values, there was also a religious element that arose. This is understandable, given communications work may involve converting and convincing. One participant chuckled over her inadvertent reliance on religious metaphors. In addition to references to the Bible and to choirs, she notes, "it's funny how there are so many religious overtones to the language of [communications]... Evangelism. I mean... it really is... conversion... I'm a born-again feminist" (Participant D). Participant B's use of the expression "stand in your own truth," may also have religious origins[5]. Participant D also parses out each segment of their audience with a tidy metaphor:

> audiences... you have your choir on one side, you have your haters on the other side. Your choir, you just need to find tools to empower them, and to encourage them to be your evangelists, and to share your message. Your haters are people who are never going to be on board, so… don't give them a lot of energy, but... mitigate the effect that they

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5 It may not be deliberate on her part, and I confess I neglected to ask the specifics of what that statement meant to her. Please note that it's merely speculation on my part, as I did investigate the figure of speech and merely suspected it may linguistically derive from a Christian biblical reference. "Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place" (Ephesians 6:14 New Testament, New International Version).

> have. But the largest swath of people falls somewhere in the middle, on the undecided. And so we always aim our communications at the undecided. And we feel that any good dialogue on social media helps the undecided to determine which side they're going to side with... to decide whether they can be persuaded or not.

Participant C was quite specific about the audience's shared goals, but it was still a broadly ranging cross-section of demographics: "women who might want to run for office... That has to be our number one audience, no question. Across the board, all the time." And finally, Participant B was perhaps the most demographically-specific: "we jokingly said our target audience is literally everyone, but recognizing that's a big audience, we… focus[ed] on younger women, really in the late teens and early 20s."

Most participants discussed empathy. Participant A mentioned an "empathetic moment," when describing Notley's steadfast professionalism. In describing how they measured behavioural changes in response to their campaign, Participant B described looking for "responses in the positive category: empathetic/compassionate." Participant D appeared to stress empathy the most though as a core value that helps us relate to those who are different. She articulated how traditional notions of gender roles impact empathy, in that "masculinity equals control and power... and... brawn and strength, at the cost of empathy." She also described employing empathy to bridge disparate perspectives. In defining one of their audiences, she stressed a

> real focus on reaching young men and boys, and trying to shift their attitudes about what it means to be a young man, and what women experience. And again, it comes right back down to... empathy and breaking gender stereotypes… [to help] young men… understand that women are not some different species who have different wants and needs.

Participants frequently referenced oppositional groups and negative expressions of group membership. (This is discussed in detail in the challenges section.) In describing these oppositions, the ideas of fighting a war and opposing factions arose. Participant A says "social media doesn't do a lot to cater conversation. You find your allies, and you fight battles against each other. It's not usually a place where people are having thoughtful dialogue with each other" (Participant A). Describing their primary goals, Participant B explicitly picked up on her use of army analogies,

> establish a beachhead if that's the right phrase—I'm using a lot of army analogies [laughs]. Establish that beachhead. And then from there, take more ground, expand where we work... what we could cover in terms of who we could attract. How big of a network could we reach? And you know kind of solidifying, providing that social proof so that the community, the people we were trying to reach, were actually the ones who were reaching the audience for us.

Continuing with the army analogies, allies figured prominently. Participant A notes,

> being an ally here is super important. Which is why it's great to see so many men who follow and re-Tweet our information as well. We've had some pretty strong allies over the years... People who will step into the conversation, too, when it's starting to go sideways.

Incorporating this observation into a specific strategy, Participant D notes,

> one of the really key priorities in that initiative is trying to create great allies in men and boys—and the incredible and very important role that men have to play in gender equality. And I think that that's something that isn't talked a lot about... in that we talk so

> much about women's issues and gender equality as a women's issue. It shouldn't be perceived as such. And men need to step up to the plate.

In addition to allies, other positive expressions of group membership came up in many forms, as camps, hives, and teams. References to working together towards shared goals, or the protective aspects of group membership also came up, such as being around a bunch of people, part of a group of people, learning from each other, lifting each other up, and general support. Community particularly resonated for several participants, for example, "creating active, vital community members" (Participant D), and "building a community stronger on the good side" (Participant C). Participant D said

> technically, a tribe is a group of like-minded people who are all communicating on the same level. I think we've really successfully formed a tribe. But I also wonder if we have successfully formed a silo. And so one of my personal goals really is to continue to reach out and to continue to greet... criticism.

Participants consistently referenced engagement, emphasizing that the intention was not merely to push out a message, but rather to engage the audience. Participant B describes how when addressing their intended audience,

> a lot of times… people [purposely] make you feel uncomfortable, because they think 'oh, that's going to get us attention" … Or 'it's going to make an impression.' Well, it doesn't, it just makes people turn away and go 'ugh, ... I don't wanna have anything to do with that,' … but when we made it accessible and non-threatening… suddenly people could engage with it.

Engagement also involved getting to know the myriad of—crucial and occasionally neglected—stakeholders. Participant D describes how she involves organizational staff in the strategy work, in order to make sure the process is relevant to them:

> there is really tremendous value from a communications perspective of involving the people who are going to do the day-to-day maintenance of any of the work making sure they're engaged in the strategy work... I don't know how useful strategy is for people if you just [say] 'here's your bible, OK, now go do it' ... that engagement [from] working together as a team, with whoever is going to be delivering the content [is] super necessary.

As components of engagement, listening and understanding were frequently discussed. This occurred in the context of getting to know the audience, as with Participant B:

> You don't start with your message. You start with where people are at. And what they care about. And when you understand what they care about, then you can communicate a message in a way that connects. It's that simple. So that was the first thing we did… we listened before we talked.

Participants frequently discussed how they are working to grow their audiences. For example, Participant A describes how they're working to "break through that little circle around us of people who have already accepted the message… that gender equality has not been accomplished in Alberta. So we're still trying to push out beyond that." Participant D described working to "build our audience and to try to connect our messaging to a broader audience." Participants also expressed it in other terms as reaching critical mass, getting our network as big as possible, a public swell of support, growing reach, build, tipping point—ultimately though, it comes down to reaching wider audiences. Describing their consecutively larger audiences,

Participant C says that after engaging with their primary audience of women who might run for office,

> we have secondary audiences that might be other groups like ours, trying to get more women to run for office… shar[ing] best practices in terms of what works. Number three audience would just be the engaged citizens of a constituency. In this case our group is really focused on Edmonton, and Alberta, and then [the national branch of this organization] as a whole organization is focused on Canada. But… I've... looked at sources in the United States and in Europe and in Australia. Groups like ours trying to do similar things, so... That's sort of, I guess a fourth audience... would be that really wide international group of people interested in... general betterment of society.

Communication Strategies.

RSQ4: What social media communications strategies are organizations applying to advance gender equality through healthy discursive spaces? Participants' advice tended to thematically fall into one of three categories when it came to "message delivery strategies, [which] indicate how the organization can reach its target publics" (Mahoney, 2013, p. 53). From their overall strategies came the following emergent themes, classing them as advice for communicators, as advice for changing the system, and as advice for female politicians.

As professional communicators, the participants frequently offered solutions and advice for communicators seeking to solve the problems we were discussing. Participants differed in styles and emphases, and their individual practical communications advice varied widely. Nevertheless, each bestowed a sense of mentorship and generously shared wisdom acquired through their years in the trade. Participant B emphasized the importance of specificity and methodological directness, laying out the foundational importance of "research[ing] and

quantifying ... [after taking a] laser beam focus on a change that you want to make: a change in attitude, and a change in behaviour… [and] the other recommendation is don't be vague about what you're doing." Participant C suggested specific ways to band together to protect female politicians who are either already in, or running for office,

> I think there probably needs to be a deliberate sort of hive around stuff like that… And something we're trying to figure out as we get into... the fall… where lots of attention is going to be happening around the election, you can bet that people will come out of the woodwork and be horrible and disrespectful. And then you think... OK, can we build some kind of like community that can flock around female politicians?

Regarding how that looks, she talks about "calling stuff out, coming to the defense—building a community stronger on the good side, than the community that is sort of spinning in their own world on the bad side." Participant D advises they've found success when they "meet people where they're at and hold them by the hand and hopefully take them… closer to our desired goal of exhibiting the values that we want them to exhibit." She also recommends self-care, and knowing the limits of your individual skill set

> from a professional communicator's perspective, self-care is becoming a really, really high priority for me. And so, recognizing you can't be everywhere, you can't do everything… for me, what fits my skill set, is... being a role model, being a... to a certain degree, a keyboard activist... I write better than I speak. So I'm better at that, but I'm also better at addressing these issues on a one-to-one level with people who are willing to have a conversation... I'm not enamoured of the angry throng… that's just not my way. And kudos to everyone whose way it is. But it's not mine.

As previously discussed, many participants viewed the problem as a systemic one, and as such provided advice for changing the system. Participants had many solutions for addressing gender inequality systemically. For example, Participant A emphasized the importance of normalizing balanced cabinets, and achieving this through support, particularly emphasizing the necessity of "making sure resources were available for women to stand for candidacy and to know that they qualify." Participant C emphasized the broader benefits of normalizing diversity:

> trying to make it normal for there to be lots of women in politics... goes a long way towards society and the media and the way we communicate about women in politics... just it being more normal to have a more diverse range of people doing different things with their personal lives. And that benefits men, too.

Participant D's systemically-rooted advice largely hinges on empowering those with privilege to adopt an intersectional lens and advocate for improved access and opportunities for those who are categorically denied. She described what that would hopefully look like, for example:

> encouraging men to mentor women. Encouraging men and boys to stand up for women. Teaching empathy. Teaching respect. I think we could all do with a great lesson in empathy... people in a place of privilege need to recognize that there are people who are not where they are.

Participant B described a widespread need to boost women's confidence, as "a lot of women really don't feel very confident and they… feel they need to be… accommodated or protected."

Several participants offered advice for female politicians, expressing the characteristics and desired skills they thought were required for individual successes. Participant A defined the

issue quite clearly as a social one, though her insight into the systemic nature of the problem could greatly empower potential female candidates and politicians. For example, she stresses the need to promote the message that

> women can do it, again based on their qualifications... [but questions arise, such as] 'how do I fit this in with the rest of my life?' and 'how do you deal with the violence on top of that?' Or, 'how do you get men to listen to you?' Those sorts of issues. And it's not restricted to the political sphere but it was really prevalent that we're talking to women in different parts of the province. They are feeling similar issues. But I think part of the narrative as well is that women have to be able to do brilliantly at everything that we do. Otherwise, we're not good enough. We haven't shaken that yet.

Participant A cautioned that even overly focusing their attentions on helping to make the system better for other women could also be detrimental for their goals and agendas:

> There's an opportunity for tokenism… [for example] hiring the woman to 'take care of the gender issues'… means she's not focusing on advancing her career necessarily, or on achieving... her own career goals… So there's always a balance to play with the leadership, it's not straight forward.

Echoing Participant A's sentiments about resources and empowerment, Participant D says,

> it really requires more encouragement and more knowledge and more understanding of what it's all going to entail because women have more demands on their time. And so, therefore... going into a campaign thoroughly understanding what's being expected of you.

Participant B recommends we "start with the politicians themselves, and say… 'you're the one who has to… stand in your own truth .... [and] be that person who is kind of made of Teflon… [to] make the trolls go away because they know they can't get you.'" Several participants referenced specific politicians as cases for modelling behaviour. For example, Jansen, McLean, Notley, Gillard, Gray, Palin, and Thatcher. Participant B mentions several examples of politicians who commanded her respect:

> Deb Gray was one of the first Reform Party politicians. She's like larger than life, sort of told it like it was. No-guff kind of person. And she just had this sort of thick, roll-with-it skin, that I think people really loved—and they may not have agreed with her but I think they appreciated that she articulated it well and…[that]—she seemed like an honest person who just truly believed what she was talking about... and I think to some extent that... you have to be willing to do that as a politician. Is kind of stand in your own truth, and the minute you start to complain about the fact that... you know 'so and's picking on me'... you lose credibility and you actually make yourself a target… I'm saying this from the sidelines… I'm not a politician and I can't imagine that I ever would be... Margaret Thatcher, you know she was the Iron Lady, she had this sort of aura of strength and determination. I think that that... created respect for her. It's not like we're asking women to become men. I don't think that that's the same thing. But I do think we're asking them... if they want to be in this world, I think we need to kind of own that truth and kind of stand steady.

Participant B also suggests that humility is crucial, "women (or any politician) who comes at it from a 'I know better than you know' point of view, is going to naturally be a target."

Participant C emphasized the need for politicians to stick to their agenda and offered how citizens could pledge to support candidates facing vitriol. As far as media attention is concerned, she cautions, "the more these women have to talk about stuff like [sexism and political violence], the less they can talk about other issues, other important things. That they should be there to talk about, you know they should have their voices contribute to... You know the business of bettering society." Her words are encouraging, saying that it's necessary to speak out against inappropriate statements, with the support of one's party—and it can inspire a sense of civic duty. Acknowledging

> this might happen to you, but if you're part of a group of people who actively are condemning it with you, and helping you get through it, that's good. I also hope that a benefit might be that... You create even more of a public swell of support when people hear something like that and say 'OK, that's not cool, and I'll come to your defense, too'… [or] 'OK, you know, now it's my mission to try to help... female politicians… even online'… [so] for all the detractors and the horrible people out there, maybe there is now a group of people saying, 'I'm going to do something about this and I'll come to your defense, as well,' [so] that you kind of start to build a community around yourself.

Participant C's approach in addressing racist posts on her organization's Facebook page are actually quite universal and apply well for politicians too, "to think about who your audience really is in situations like that, because... it's not—and it can't be—the people who are lobbing in the disrespectful conversation, it has to be everybody else who's watching."

There is also a question of how direct we need to be in acknowledging disruptive and toxic discourse. Sandra Jansen's name arose numerous times. Participant C draws a connection

to how the former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard also stood up in their parliament with her explicit speech on misogyny:

> we've seen... female politicians try to call out that type of behaviour. One really notable example here in Alberta is Sandra Jansen, when she ran for the PC... Leadership and then crossed the floor, and stood up in the legislature and copied what the former Australian Prime Minister did… [and] just read these comments out loud in a public place, in front of people. I think you start to... address what's happening and... You know, take things like that out of a hidden corner of the Internet where maybe not as many people will see it, and bring it out to the forefront... I hope that's a way to move forward and make progress and start to address the issue and then fix it. And it probably is... at the same time I worry that then, you know, even more people see that, then there there's that small corner of people who think that's a good idea, and they see it, and use that as an example to mimic it. (Participant C)

She acknowledged the difficulty in finding balance in how much attention to give this, saying,

> when you take someone's comment, who isn't willing to put their voice and their name by it. And... as a female politician you've taken your voice and your name and... Put it... in a public record... I hope that has to be a good thing because... You've filled out the reality... of what's going on in society in a really deliberate and official way. But… part of me worries that that legitimizes some of the dark… things happening on the Internet… pushing something into a corner. And not acknowledging it, you really risk it festering and growing, until it gets to a point where... it gets too big to deal with, in a way. So... I guess then I would conclude that there isn't much of a choice but to bring it to the

> forefront and address it head on and try to deal with it and condemn it. And, you know... build a community of people... enough people who say 'that's not OK' and call people out for doing that, and turn it into something that's not legitimate. (Participant C)

One participant had a different opinion about addressing political violence publicly:

> Sandra Jansen, when she left off the Tory Party and went to the NDP… her whole media conference about how terrible things were… I thought she did a great disservice to herself and to everybody else. I think it was self-indulgent. I don't think it was useful. I mean if she was trying to create some kind of red flag which could change things, she could have done much better from behind the scenes than try to do it in front of them in public view. So I think to some extent there has to be a bit of like grit involved here, and it's not necessarily an easy thing but that's the opportunity... to tough it out, and kind of take women to the next maybe iteration of what it means to be a woman politician. I actually think Notley's done a pretty decent job of that. I think she's definitely been a target, but she hasn't been, she... hasn't [dwelled on] it, she's moved on, and I think that that's helped her.

Channels (Tactics).

RSQ5: What is the extent of this campaign by your organization? (for example, other social media platforms, other communications channels, etc.). All of the participants who work directly with the implementation side spoke to multichannel approaches. Participant A really speaks to accessibility:

> we have... a news release system so that goes out to public membership as well as media. We have a highly accessed web site... So we're able to put resources and know that the likelihood of them being found is a little higher than average... We are also trying to

> focus more on public events, too ... it really is a combination of digital and face-to-face as much as possible. We are exploring ways just at the beginning now, because we have very limited resources at hand, unfortunately. But working to build that out of making sure that there are different ways of accessing that information too. For women in remote communities or who might have lower literacy as well. So we haven't escaped print entirely. I think it has its place. So we've done things like post cards and we've had some other infographics as well but we'll be exploring other ways of making sure that that women can access us... and not just on their phones.

Participant C spoke to public and media relations, alluding to variances in proactive and reactive communications:

> the media angle usually comes… when there's sort of a newsworthy thing happening. So, often our media coverage [is]... either they've approached us or we've... sent something out, a press release of some kind to sort of go out to the media. Around key events in politics whether it be an election... So when the NDP were elected in spring of 2015 that was... kind of a big time for us, because it was so historic in terms of the number of women who ran, and who were elected. So that was a really important piece, just to call attention to things that are happening. That's... at the very basic level, saying here's what's going on, whether it's an election like… the U.S... presidential election, and all of the rhetoric that was going on around that... and talking about you know how do we deal with this? Let's call it out, let's say that it's happening and then talk about how we move forward and change things. Or... We did a lot of press releases just around our goal, to sort of say 'hey, we're coming up with this goal. We're doing it, and this is why it's important.'

Participant D also speaks to maintaining a multichannel approach:

> "We have produced some videos. We have a web site. And we try to have presence at other events around the city too... where we can show our support to people who share our values… we've been really fortunate to become one of the sort of go-to voices for the media and that was really one of our primary goals. So to be able to reach people through the traditional media channels as well."

All participants employing multichannel approaches emphasized events for interacting and engaging fully with their audience. Social media is a two-way communication tool, though interacting in person allows richer personal interactions with the audience, and engages with different demographics. Participant A says, "we are also trying to focus more on public events... to bring together people and talk about the issues and hear from different voices... So that there might be the spark of a personal connection there." Participant C says, "the events are... ways to just engage women and help them learn how to campaign but also then engage the media and engage our social audiences and to talk about the events." Describing their emphasis on hosting inclusive outreach events, Participant D says

> we've got a really robust social media community and good social media presence—10,000 followers on Facebook, almost 3000 followers on Twitter—so we cover a really big swath of people in that way. But for people who are not on social media, how do we reach out? How do we share the message and how do we connect women whose values might be a bit more traditional and who might come from families where values are a bit more traditional? And they're the women who really need to hear our message. And so this has been a really cool opportunity to get to connect with those women who are not necessarily in our social media communities.

Spaces. Changing communications technologies clearly affect more than merely what channels are available for communications strategies. A few of the participants explicitly discussed the impact of technology in how we communicate with each other. Acknowledging that political discourse has changed "across the board," and not just for female politicians, Participant C notes,

> Generally, the very public nature of being a politician has become even more of a struggle with social media—and the access that citizens have to their politicians in a direct conversational way, which is such a positive thing. When you look at it from positive places... where politicians can now engage directly with interested constituents over the Internet and have—what used to be—pretty healthy, robust conversations [laughs]. But that has changed, that has changed.

Going forward, she notes,

> the weird part of social media is that... it has now totally become a legitimate place... to express opinions and... do public service. And so… you have to… shape it into a place that is as respectful as someone may be when they're talking to you... You know, face to face, using their name. (Participant C)

Social media spaces are perhaps more obvious, given the nature of this research project, but other communicative spaces are also changing the discourse. Describing how blogs and microblogs don't have the same editorial oversight as traditional news media, Participant A notes

> It's an interesting challenge too, because those spaces that we deem legitimate in terms of the journalistic sphere also give rise to columnists who aren't necessarily journalists but they have a voice that they feel represent different communities. And so they're given heightened privilege by being part of that space, but they're no more objective than a

> blogger, without the journalistic training. So… that blurring of media, is a real challenge for us and figuring out who has the voice.

RSQ6: What communications strategies do you have in the short-term? For the short-term, or Horizon 1, Participant A describes how "the awareness side is... in such a deficit position in Alberta where we're really focusing on the basics still." Participant B described growing the audience, and also expanding their reach geographically

> "we started with just a one-year horizon... We shot all of our powder all at once, and we just said we're getting this big as we can, and our goal is to just get a big change in those... data points. So that was our first goal and then... we tried to get our network as big as possible with the time that we were working with.

Participant C describes how in seeking 50% female participation in Edmonton's upcoming municipal election, at the time of the interview, they were

> nearing the end of that goal because our nomination day is in about a month... we're hoping still that more women sign up to run at this point... Considering that we've been working on it for two and half years, we're nearing the end.

RSQ7: What communications strategies do you see in the mid-term—that is, across the next 5 years? For the mid-term, or Horizon 2, Participant C spoke of the 2019 Albertan provincial and Canadian federal elections

> as our group, we'd be looking at the next provincial election in 2019... as a focus... knowing that the NDP is taken care of, we'd… [ask] the other parties … 'what are you doing to recruit women candidates?'

She also describes working with other branches of the organization, "looking at what our national level goals are and seeing how we can support them. The organization kind of... fluctuates, depending on what chapters are doing, and what the national group is doing."

RSQ8: What communications strategies do you have in place for the long-term—that is, more than 5 years from now? For the long-term, or Horizon 3, describing how the end result may look, Participant A says "I'm hopeful that once we achieve gender equality, this is just about positioning... the types of conversations that we have at that point are really different, aren't they? ... Our [organization] was structured specifically to increase initiatives the government needs for gender equality. So, you know what that end point is." Participant B offers a specific behavioural goal

> I want [our campaign slogan] to be as… instinctive as the phrase 'friends don't let friends drive drunk.' So everybody knows that. I mean, sure some people still drive drunk, but compared to what happened when I was a kid, around drinking and driving? We are in a completely different world.

Participant C articulates that "the ultimate goal is to have the number of candidates... To have 50 percent of the candidates, and 50 percent of our elected bodies be women without any effort, just because that's the way the cards are falling and that's the way our society is. But that's... that's a long, long-term goal." Echoing the same finality as Participant A, she says "ultimately it's a Canada-wide 'let's have gender parity' in politics… goal. And then once that's done, then we're done" (Participant C).

Evaluation & Measurement.

RSQ9: Have you been able to measure any shift in public mindsets through your work in social media? In quantitative terms, participants measured a variety of factors. Participant A

particularly emphasized tracking the number of women in leadership roles, naming reliable external tracking for the data:

> Alberta Securities Commission puts [the Alberta Women in Boards index] out annually in September… track[ing] the number of women who are in leadership positions or board positions in TSX and venture-listed companies... you can find it online... And you can see the incremental increases… We have to measure something, right?... the numbers are not good. Absolutely not good, but they are nudging upward. (Participant A)

Similarly, Participant C described the number of women running for political leadership, leading up to the October 16, 2017 Edmonton municipal election. This direct measure reflects a very focused, singular goal for their organization. "We've been slowly, slowly seeing more women run for office. And then in the last few years... we've seen a 50 percent candidates slate, and then caucus, and cabinet at the provincial level, which is great" (Participant C).

Participant B spoke to campaign-specific indicators, and measuring the change in behaviour stated as the primary goal for the campaign. She described a public survey that measured responses at a baseline point, and at two years into the campaign:

> of those people who had said that they would know what to say [to someone who had experienced sexual violence]—which was 65 percent of the respondents—only about 20 percent of them *actually* knew how to say anything. The right thing. Like something positive, something [empathetic and compassionate, that] wasn't like questions, or giving advice. Within the last two years, we've moved [the number of people who respond appropriately from] 20 percent to 66 percent... [and] we've moved the number of people who would [repeat our specific message] from less than 1 percent to 12 percent… We know that that translates then into the real world because you've already told me it once,

> so when it really happens and somebody actually says it to you actually will know what to say. (Participant B)

She also describes forming partnerships, allowing them to gauge the success of their message's adoption, finding that "even in that short period of time we were able to get something like 88 percent of postsecondary institutions on board within the first few months... before we even launched the campaign" (Participant B).

Participant D spoke directly about social media measurements. Discussing measuring beyond only engagement and followers, and into how platform characteristics inform their strategy, she says:

> Quantitatively... it takes a certain critical mass in order for a community to really coalesce. And generally speaking, in our experience that critical mass happens somewhere between 5000 – 7000 people... And so, on Facebook we find that the community really, really coalesces when we near about that 5000 people mark, that critical mass. On Twitter, I find it happens sooner...I find that the community... gets critical mass and starts sort of its own movement... it is its own thing… its tribe, by about the 1500-person mark and that's usually... a slower build for us. We do use very targeted Facebook advertising for all of our accounts and that helps to extend our reach. But what I think is really cool... While our audiences are significantly bigger on Facebook... in general... our reach on Twitter is almost equivalent with a much smaller audience. And so what that says to me is Facebook is really about focusing. And Twitter is about [a] sort of broad high-level communication. (Participant D)

Participant D also discussed measuring the number of women running for the 2017 Edmonton municipal elections (as compared to the previous election in 2013). Describing a

program hosted by members of one of the organizations she manages a social media presence for,

> it was a boot camp in essence, to try to teach women all the skills that they need to learn in order to run a successful campaign… And that program was so successful... I don't quite know... how many of the participants—and/or former participants from previous years—are running [in this election]. But it's a high percentage... And so the goal really was this year to try to get equal numbers of candidates [from each gender] and of course we worked really closely with [a local organization directly focused on increasing the number of women in political office], in order to try to accomplish that. And we're not there yet... nomination day hasn't arrived. But what's really cool is early on... maybe two or three months ago, we had already surpassed our 2013 record. (Participant D)

Participants were keen to discuss the context and the meaning of the qualitative progress that they're seeing. Describing qualitative measurements opened exciting narratives, and participants used a wide variety of terms, including: effectiveness, gotten its own legs, growth, how far we've come, improvement, lifecycle, measuring progress, milestones, nuanced conversations, things are really changing, waiting list (because a program is so successful), a sea change, an equal number of candidates, and critical mass.

Participant B describes a strategic marker for a campaign's effectiveness as "when you get people to adopt your thing as their thing, then you've won." Participant C describes the interrelated aspects of the network collectively working together:

> our communication strategy has been a really big part of achieving our goal… in a lot of ways, we've moved the needle, which is great and it hasn't been just us obviously. The City of Edmonton has done lots of programming, as well, and the Government of Alberta.

Participant D shares qualitative measures that specifically relate to the environment in the social media channels they monitor. In general terms,

> the beginning of any account is often very fueled with contentiousness. But then as the account matures, either we... turn off everyone who is potentially a naysayer, or we perhaps sway them to our side, or both. I think some of our greatest successes have been around creating active, vital community members out of people who in... in earlier times, we considered trolls. Now we consider them critics, and in some cases, full-on converts. It's... super exciting to see.

She also describes what types of conversations would look like in that space:

> in [this group]. It is night and day. It is a completely different environment. We've been running it since… 2015. And so in about two-and-a-half/three years we went from it being incredibly contentious to now, we're able to have very nuanced conversations... about nuances of feminism, as opposed to: 'Is feminism a thing? Is feminism good or bad?' That was about as nuanced as it could be, in the early days. And now... I think probably, everyone who participates in the community self-identifies as a feminist.

Challenges.

RSQ10: What do you see as the biggest threats/main barriers to gender equality? Most participants acknowledged the challenges and **barriers** that potentially dissuade women from seeking political office. Participant A says, "we keep encouraging the dialogue. It has to be about people taking ownership about their views of gender equality and really twigging into what's keeping them away from [pursuing public office]."

Rationalizations for why fewer women pursued politics often referenced traditional gender roles. Several participants referenced familial constraints, such as children and having a

baby while in office, built-in help, roles as caregivers and mothers, realities of providing emotional labor and household labor, and having needs such as child care. Gender roles arose frequently when participants described anecdotal responses about challenges pursuing political careers. Participant C suggests that this dominates media accounts of female politicians because

> women... have typically held certain roles in society, and now that they're trying to hold a different role... we're seeing women in politics sort of trying to reconcile a number of ... roles, whereas we've never asked men to go through that. And I think the media reflect probably how society is wrestling with that too, and how women themselves probably are wrestling with that."

Participant D suggests that one of the ways forward is

> through encouraging women's leadership, and encouraging women to break out of the role that they have perhaps been cast in, from birth. The role of being the necessary caregiver, and... taking care of all of the emotional labor, and... encouraging their partners to carry that share and to be equal partners in the... home, and in the workplace."

Situating responsibility. Several of the participants took the position that the systemic and social nature of the problem lent itself to solutions rooted in social responsibility. While it was shared by most of the participants, Participant A was notably specific "this is society's responsibility to change attitudes—rather than leaving it to women to fight for themselves only." Articulating it as leading to her "feminist awakening," one of the participants described how as a young woman, she'd initially dismissed an unpleasant incident as specific to the perpetrator and didn't initially "recognize that as a systemic issue" (Participant D).

Several participants explicitly discussed outreach programs, which by their nature involve resourcing and organizing assistance to serve those who not only need it most, but also those who may also have the most challenges in accessing assistance. Participant D describes,

> in previous years, [this outreach group] has held a one-day symposium… with three to five hundred women... however many women can attend. And it's been a phenomenal day… about empowerment and... hearing each other, and learning from each other, etc.… But this year, they elected to put the budget… to going out and reaching out to communities who wouldn't necessarily be empowered to come to an event like that. So in particular, immigrant and newcomer communities, and going out directly into their communities, and doing... direct outreach... over the last year, [members of the municipal committee leading this outreach organization] have connected directly with over a thousand women.

There was significant discussion of opportunity. Participants framed it in the positive, as providing resources and access, for example, "focusing on the basics… [such as] making sure that women have access to the resources they need and alerting them to how the government can help them" (Participant A). Reframing issues for relevance, Participant A discussed how their organization makes general information accessible and relevant to more women in Alberta. Adopting a holistic organizational perspective, they take information that may be underutilized, and frame it in terms that are directly relevant to their audience:

> we'll look for opportunities to comment on other news releases from other departments. So, if there's a transportation strategy for example, or a consultation, we'll craft it with some information about why this might be important to rural women, and then post that so that there is there is a gendered slant to more of the messages that we're hearing…

> why is it important that the corporate tax rate is changing?... Alberta has a strong number of women who are business owners. So the small business taxes are really important to them to hear about and they might not get it through other channels... or, if you're having to make decisions about expanding your markets… Those sorts of things are really important to know… there are a multiplicity of barriers there as well for women. And so it's really important for us to frame the harder issues for them as well. And not that they don't get it, it's just that access to information, or being able to tie them into resources that are available.

Participants also framed resources in the negative, acknowledging explicitly that "not all opportunities are equal" (Participant D). These related to removing barriers to increase opportunities, for example,

> [in the social context] we are still very much focused on merit, but for women to be able to achieve what they need to, we have to get past some structural barriers that are getting in the way. Otherwise, it's every woman continuing to fight the same fight, over and over… from a political perspective the interest is in suppressing that so that more women—and more inclusive perspective of women I should say—have that chance [for] equality. (Participant A)

Participant B however emphasized individual responsibility over social responsibility. She says, "women have more potential than they... than they think. And the source of their strength is not some kind of artificial system that says... everyone has to play nice in the playground. It's something else." She also suggested that addressing the issue by creating rules potentially backfires, and "sends a red flag out, and… encourages people to go… 'see? the system is rigged... We have to walk on eggshells with these people'... I don't think that that's the

real solution." In addition to advising women to become more self confident to fend off haters and pursue politics, she suggests taking a more compassionate approach towards opposition. She says,

> people who are more likely to attack politicians and institutions are really saying... 'I want you to respect and communicate to me that you trust me as an individual, and that you trust us as people; that we have common sense, and that we would do the right thing, and we are good people at heart.'

Despite prioritizing personal accountability over societal control, Participant B still emphasized social context in shaping the audience's responsiveness to a message. Using the term *social proof*, she described behaviour modelling to help people see *how* to do the right thing:

> the second year... we talked a lot about social norms, because we discovered in the first year that people really responded to this idea. Really receptive, but there was sort of a gap between what people believed personally, and what they thought the rest of their community was doing. '*I* would [do the right thing]... but I don't necessarily know if *you* would [do the right thing] and so if I don't think you would [do the right thing] then I may be more hesitant to actually follow through with my personal beliefs because I think it's out of sync with the norm or with my peers'...the second year, the thing we focused on in addition to the modelling was… this idea of social proof that we wanted to prove to people that this [positive behaviour] was becoming the norm… we could actually prove that with the numbers because we did research to prove that we were seeing a... sea change shift in terms of how people were responding to the message and that they were really adopting [it]… by telling people that 'it's not just you… the vast majority of

> Albertans [doing the right thing]' then suddenly we gave permission to other people to do the same.

Several other participants emphasized this process of establishing new social norms. On the topic of sensationalizing the creation of gender-balanced cabinets Participant A notes, "it just has not been normalized yet because that consideration hasn't been given. And sure, they focus on geography, they focus on different experiences, but they didn't focus much on gender—or didn't make it enough of a priority to make sure that it was balanced." A few of the participants brought up Stephanie McLean. As

> the Minister of Status of Women and Service Alberta… had a baby in office… she was the first one. But now there have been four... There was tons of coverage around how she was going to handle that… But we're on our fourth now, and there's barely a whisper about it… as we see more of that normalized a little bit… by the fourth [pregnancy while in office] ... we figured it out. That's great. It might just be... people getting used to that change and just not noticing it after a while. (Participant C)

Participant A posits how laws also help to *teach* social norms:

> a study from the University of Lethbridge a couple of years ago… [had] six different questions about social issues in Alberta and rankings in different parts of the province. So one of them was about same-sex marriage, and we found comparatively speaking, older Albertans still had a bit of a problem with it but the youngest generation had no issue with it, and it was a nonstarter. Why is that? I mean, what has really changed between then and now? Well, for younger kids it has been the case that same-sex marriage has been legal in Alberta since what was it? 2005? So why even question it, if it's the law? These sorts of things all play in. It's not just a communications exercise. That would be a

> fun role to play I guess if it were just that, but being able to entrench gender equality is important. It has to be normalized. (Participant A)

Participant D also touched on the linkages between laws and social norms, but instead emphasized the importance of growing the social support to keep progressive legislation in place: "legislation can be done and undone, remarkably quickly and remarkably effectively, really. But you need the social will, in order to be able to... shift[ ] those attitudes."

RSQ11: What do you think needs to change in the conversations we're having about women? There were so many suggestions about this, much of which has already been discussed above. Participant B offered the following:

> My biggest beef… [with] this whole conversation around gender equality in politicians… is that... it's inherently negative… we're pointing at the problem, rather than a solution. And ironically, by... throwing up the red flag and saying 'this is a big issue'… people who might be really qualified and great potential political leaders are saying 'I don't want to be part of that, I don't want to be a target.' I get that. But… you have to flip it on its head and you have to change the conversation, so that you can make it safe for people to feel like they can go into that world. And by helping people believe that it's *not* the norm, and that people for the most part *are* good, and are supportive and are... balanced in their view—even though we've got plenty of examples of where they're not—I think that the challenge for you, is to go to the positive side.

Media Framing.

RSQ12: In reviewing how the media can overtly and covertly undermine female leaders, what resonated for you? Participants responded most to a qualitative gender bias in the

media, particularly the emphasis on irrelevant personal characteristics, such as gender roles and family lives. Participant A says

> There was a there was a headline in Alberta, a couple of weeks ago about these two women in Southern Alberta, who were murdered. They were sisters. And the headline was about how the two sisters leave behind 16 children. So in the headline itself the sensational aspect of it is 'there are all these children now, who have no parents.' Instead of 'here are two women who lost their lives needlessly.' So it shifted the focus away from women's inherent value as people, to their value as being mothers to a great many children.

Participant A also related media bias to Alberta's political history:

> Even [an Albertan] Minister who was the first sitting MLA in Alberta to have a baby while in office brought about a lot of headlines and a lot of questions about whether a pregnant woman should be given the responsibility of being a Minister. Let alone a Minister with two portfolios. So had this been a man whose wife had just given birth —or was about to—would that be an issue? It doesn't seem to have been. We've had a thousand male MLAs in Alberta and a total I think… just under a hundred women, in the whole history of our province.

Participant C also used the same example of Minister McLean, elaborating that it:

> is how people deal with change… The discourse around women and politics and focusing on their appearance, focusing on their family, is partly just part of dealing with a changing face of the legislatures. And figuring out how we... how we deal with these new types of people who are... in office. I kind of hope that in a way, because then that means that we'll get over it.

She continues, shifting the conversation towards gender roles:

On the other hand, it's all part of a sexist base of society... women... have typically held certain roles in society, and now that they're trying to hold a different role we sort of say "well, what about... What about their normal role, what about their normal way they do things, you know? Haven't we always talked about women in terms of how they look, and judged them on their appearance? And isn't fashion such a women's thing, and shouldn't all women care about it even if they're politicians? What about motherhood… haven't women's identities typically been defined by how many children they have, and whether or not they have children, and how they raise them, and what they do with them, and what their choices are around how they're going to deal with their family? And that hasn't been typically men.

So now, we're seeing women in politics sort of trying to reconcile a number of ... roles, whereas we've never asked men to go through that. And I think the media reflect probably how society is wrestling with that too, and how women themselves probably are wrestling with that. Because a lot of conversations now, that I have with women in politics and in... other professions, too... Are sort of like "OK, yeah. How should I deal with this? When should I run? You know, should I have kids first? What if I run while I have kids? And what about the safety issues there? ... And then, in terms of changing it, I still really believe that trying to make it normal for there to be lots of women in politics... goes a long way towards society and the media and the way we communicate about women in politics... just it being more normal to have a more diverse range of people doing different things with their personal lives. And that benefits men, too. Men of child[r]earing age, and men of young family age.

Public Mindset.

RSQ13: In terms of the challenges that you deal with over social media, what forms of sexism do you encounter in social media spaces? Participants frequently referenced oppositional groups and negative expressions of group membership. There were all kinds of descriptors, ranging from exceptionally candid to more measured: a**holes, bigots, bullies, critics, haters, jerks, less educated viewpoints, naysayers, the periphery of humanity, perpetrators, racists, regressive views, sexist, wolves, [those who] come out of the woodwork and be horrible and disrespectful, trolls, and [those who] don't even count. Participant C expressed it as "a subset of people in the world who feel like respect is not necessary on social media towards public figures." There were also slightly ambiguous ones whose context and tone clarified distaste, such as NIMBY[6], old boys' club, men's rights (used to undermine women's rights). Participant A suggests the following insight about the nature of the opposition her organization occasionally experiences:

> some of the troubles that we're seeing… are around [the word feminism] and misunderstanding… what it means. So, surprisingly… (for me when I came in)—I was anticipating a lot of pushback from men's rights organizations... It's often from women. And not in an organized fashion. It's not that we've got organizations of people who counter the things that we're saying through social media. It will be individuals who don't feel that [a mandate focused on social supports] represents them appropriately… That they fought for where they are, and they've earned it on their merit.

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6 NIMBY: Not in My Back Yard, or those hypocritically accepting something they dislike—on the proviso that it only happens at a distance.

When it came to describing oppositional actions and statements, the participants again used a range of descriptions: contentious, disagree, garbage, gross, hate, locker room talk, misunderstanding, negative feedback, political violence, pushback and counter arguments, and gender-based violence. Participant C described it neatly as "gendered ways to be disrespectful," and Participant A summed it up as "it doesn't matter who the woman is. It's just the type of language… that is used against her to put her in her place." In terms of describing how opposition affects their work: some of the participants also mentioned how they watched what they said, lest it trigger these groups. They used expressions like "red flag," "fuelled the fire" and "alarm bells" in reference to mitigating the triggering effects of their own language use. Participant D explains, "we've had enough bad experiences that we have learned what we can and cannot say as women on Twitter."

Describing how opposition affects the political environment: Participant C says

> it's a real problem because it then of course creates more of a barrier for women than men, even though... male politicians receive some horrible comments on social media as well... for women, it's of a certain nature. It can be very threatening. It can be more of a problem, *and* more of a perceived problem, in terms of personal safety.

Participants discussed behaviour modelling in the positive, but occasionally also discussed negative behaviour modelling—generally as something that needed to be counteracted. Describing a political commentator who'd recently expressed that he found "political correctness too restrictive," Participant A adds:

> when you have somebody of profound influence in parts of the world who can say something like that on a national and international platform and still be ok, still have that power. What does that say? You know there are a lot of people who want to take power

> from that and it changes the discourse. So I think these sorts of things have not been ameliorated yet. And that's why we're seeing that the types of conversations that we do about women who are in politics... back to the vitriol again, and the challenges they face just getting heard.

Examples of negative behaviour modelling frequently referenced American President, Donald Trump. Participant C says,

> having politicians feed back into that loop [of horrible comments on social media] like the current American president for example… makes it worse of course... And then you see politicians in certain ways around the world see how... for some reason that's given him an advantage and decide that... they could use that advantage, as well, and then [they] participate in it. And it's a self-fulfilling sort of spiral down to the bottom of the barrel of terrible discourse.

Participant D also described the process passionately, adding that she's noticing a shift in the accounts she's managing:

> Trump... has given social license to regressive thinking... I shouldn't just 100 percent blame Trump because I don't think one person is ever that popular... or that that powerful, but Trump and his cronies, the culture that [they have] ... encouraged... has really set the movement back in a very significant way and we feel it on a daily basis... we really feel it here. I'm curious if other jurisdictions feel it in the same way that we do. (Participant D)

RSQ14: Do you try to redirect the conversation with people outside your target audience?[7] When it came to their response to violence, while approaches differed, the general consensus seemed to be that of firmly addressing it. Another consideration was to prevent it from distracting from the agenda. Commonalities in their general outlook on key messages have been covered thematically and above, messaging applicable to this topic come down to their responses to violence. Despite any good intentions behind doing so, Participant A suggested that focusing too much on the violence directed towards female leaders was another way of diverting the agenda away from discussing their platforms. In discussing her stance on overall media attention to the political violence, she advocates strongly for a balanced approach:

> it's important to talk about it certainly because we shouldn't let the violence go. And those sorts of threats are really important to act upon. And we should… we should let others know that we don't tolerate it. On the other side if we continue to focus on that as women's experience and politics, and again, missed the whole issue of why they've run, and what they're focused on in their tenure. Then we're still not hearing women's voices. We're hearing about the threat instead. (Participant A)

Participants described it as coming from the "periphery of humanity, [and] they don't even count" (Participant B), and that they are "not worth even engaging with" (Participant C). In the case of persistence, "we talk about muting the people who are trolls and I understand why you'd want to do that. But at the same time, you stop hearing that perspective so you are starting to shape the kind of conversation that you're privy to" (Participant A).

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7 Note: this prompt was moved from its original place in the target audience section

Regarding how much attention to give them, "your haters are people who are never going to be on board, so... don't give them a lot of energy, but also you have to... mitigate the effect that they have" (Participant D). Participant C elaborates on a similar sentiment:

> we have this issue at [my day job] as well... outside of this context, but in a similar way, lots of people who come and post on our Facebook walls some kind of racist thing. And we have constant discussions about how to deal with it. the types of people who post messages like that aren't going to be convinced of anything... [but] there are other people who are seeing those posts. So it's actually at the end of the day not about the people who are posting those messages. It's about *everyone else* who sees that person post that message and then watches how we react as a person, a politician, a company. And the discussion there has been... it's… time to take a stand.

So if we don't focus on them too much, then how do we respond to bullies? Suggesting strategic kindness, Participant B offered anecdotal advice:

> I once had a bully when I was in Grade 8... And I figured out how to not get him to bully me... I couldn't say "stop bullying me" because that didn't work... I was overly nice to him... when I'd see him, instead of running away from him, I'd say "hi," and I smile at him, I'd go over and talk to him... I had to do something that almost embarrassed him. That almost made him feel guilty. How do you be a bully to someone who is nice to you?

Many participants empower the community to take charge in the face of opposition. Noting progress on an account that they've fostered over several years, Participant D says

> the community has really coalesced and we rarely have to step in with... to control the conversation. And generally speaking, if anyone espouses a viewpoint that we strongly disagree with, we try to leave it up to the community to take care of it first, to see what

> happens. If the community doesn't step in, then we'll definitely step in. But like nine and a half times out of 10 now, the community steps in first. And so that community has really gotten its own legs.

Leading up to the 2017 Edmonton municipal election, Participant C suggested how to create a healthier space for female politicians:

> let's make this election about healthy debates and discourse and talking about the issues and being respectful... here are some guidelines, if you're wondering how to engage with people in a respectful way. Think about doing this and avoiding that, or… ask yourself these questions: "Would you say this to someone's face? In person? With your name behind it?" ... with my communications background, thinking about who your audience is, is so key, because I don't know that your audience is the people who are not going to see that, or read it, or pay attention to it, or care about it. I think it's the... the audience of people who... have always known that's the right thing to do. They didn't need to be told, but they can point to someone saying it, to say "There's a legitimate source, giving you guidelines. You know, now I feel like I can say this too, and come to the defense and be part of this movement.

Participant C also suggests we "deal with stuff like this, head-on." As far as *how*, she says "let's call it out, let's say that it's happening and then talk about how we move forward and change things."

Data Analysis

I analyzed the collected data using inductive qualitative content analysis. This section outlines how I performed this analysis. I discuss the procedures used to arrive at which themes and codes merited the most attention in the data presentation section.

Procedures. I used inductive qualitative content analysis in processing the data, in order to "identify… cod[e], and categoriz[e] the primary patterns in the data" (Mayan, 2009, p. 94). I developed the codes gradually through data analysis.

I identified patterns with preliminary hand coding. Then through consecutive passes through the transcripts in NVivo, I "lean coded" entire paragraphs, and progressively decreasing the size of the units of meaning I was looking for, and including in vivo codes that were specific to individual speakers.

As Morse (2007) says, "qualitative researchers don't count" (p. 287). While my research method doesn't aim to generate quantitative data, it helped me to prioritize where to start, as it all felt important. By reverse-sorting codes by the number of references made to them, I looked for patterns among what seemed to be the most common topics. I searched for intersections between where I'd coded particularly salient passages in my lean coding and from my field notes, and the codes that were most saturated.

Based on emerging patterns, I then began categorizing the codes into related conceptual groups or subthemes. Using the search and query features within NVivo, I pulled out the most salient representations of quotes that reflected the individual themes and subthemes and cross-referenced and re-categorized as needed in order to reach cohesive yet sufficiently descriptive categories. I continued categorizing those subthemes until I reached what I deemed was finally a cohesive narrative under the 6 individual themes.

If I were to undertake this again, I would likely refine my lean coding into 5–15 categories, before digging deeper. I would keep the units of meaning larger initially, at least until establishing a coding frame. Alternatively, basing a coding frame on categories found in the initial literature review may also be more efficient without sacrificing inductive process. Initial

passes included multiple codes for several sizes of data units (lean coding at the paragraph level, individual words, phrases), both conceptually and literally. This led me to 850 initial codes, which arguably are so granular, they are barely codes anymore. The benefit of starting with so many codes, with too many categories, was that it really helped me to resist my urges to apply my preconceived notions onto the data. Another lesson that I learned the hard way was that it would be more efficient working with NVivo to initially sort all responses (vs. interview questions) into folders to more easily exclude prompts—not just separated into transcripts that still have the interviewer's prompts. That way, queries automatically exclude the interview questions when looking at numbers for comparative purposes.

Steps.

1) Transcribed interviews (using Trint transcription software)
2) Lean coded interviews manually on hard copies of the transcripts
3) Further coded interviews (using NVivo qualitative data analysis software)
4) Exported all codes into a spreadsheet
5) Sorted by themes, then by descending order of the number of references
6) Tagged each them so that I could find the top codes and subthemes in each theme
7) Reorganized emergent themes into the framework of the interview questions.

   (Samples of the following tables are included in Appendix F).

   a. Table 3: List of emergent themes and subthemes
   b. Table 4. Matrices: theme quotes
   c. Table 5. Matrices: framework quotes

Steps taken to address rigor in data analysis. I address rigor in further detail here, where I discuss the steps taken to address trustworthiness in analyzing my findings. Picking up

from the research design section, to address reliability and validity concerns in qualitative research, we must first shift in terminology. I use the term rigor as an umbrella term to describe what Mayan (2009) describes as trustworthiness, and in qualitative research translates to credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability (pp. 104–105). Second, situating the research, its epistemological underpinnings, and discipline as post-positivist, social constructionist, intervention-oriented applied communications research.

Mayan (2009) suggests "five verification strategies [that] incrementally and interactively contribute to ensure rigor" (p. 111). This section lists her five strategies and how I've addressed them to the best of my abilities. First, "researcher responsiveness, [which] refers to the researcher's creativity, sensitivity, flexibility and skill" (Mayan, 2009, p. 109). Assessing my own strengths fairly, I believe that I rate highly in the first three, though admittedly lower on the last—skill, based on my limited experience as a researcher. Second, "attention to methodological coherence… will ensure congruence between your ontological and epistemological viewpoints, your theoretical position/perspective, the method you choose, your research question, and so on" (Mayan, 2009, p. 109). I would answer this by outlining an example Mayan (2009) herself gives, that outlines elements I've chosen in my design. She states "the theoretical perspective for qualitative description is based on general tenets of naturalistic inquiry and may take on 'hues' of others (e.g. feminist…), sampling is purposeful, data collection is likely through interviews, and data analysis is a content analysis" (p. 53). Third, "your sample must include participants who can speak to the topic or phenomenon and can provide sufficient data to enable an in-depth and rich description of the phenomenon." (Mayan, 2009, p. 109). Participants were carefully selected, based on specific criteria determined in advance, in addition to being highly articulate—as anticipated, based on their vocation. I address this by stating that the volume and

quality of the in-depth information provided by the participants far exceeded my expectations. Fourth, "shifting back and forth between data collection and analysis allows the researcher to move with the data and learn about unique and untold aspects about the phenomenon" (Mayan, 2009, p. 110). I addressed this by allowing time after sessions to review field notes, and capture additional details. As well, interviews and field notes were transcribed promptly, which allowed me to analyze and clarify my notes while the session was fresh. This also allowed me to start noting themes as they arose in subsequent sessions. Fifth, "thinking theoretically requires working with the data from a macro-micro perspective [and] cautiously using the literature… If a researcher does not dwell with the data but instead leaps to conclusions after… reading the first few interviews, the research is not rigorous" (Mayan, 2009, p. 110). To address this, I dwelled with the data, and I confess that conclusions are difficult to make, given that there were only four interviews. I respond to this by refreshing that this study is a starting point for further research, either qualitative or quantitative, and provides suggestions for future research rather than anything conclusive, in itself. That said, if we recall that interview data represents the subjective truths and opinions of highly respected individuals in the field of communication, there is still considerable valuable insight we may draw from their contributions to the study.

To recap, I have addressed rigor in my analysis by shifting the terminology and attending to how I situate my research. I have further addressed it, by addressing Mayan's (2009) five verification strategies for achieving rigor in qualitative research (p. 111) to the best of my abilities. Again, these are "researcher responsiveness… methodological coherence… participants who… can provide sufficient data to enable an in-depth and rich description… shifting back and forth between data collection and analysis… [and a] macro-micro perspective [that] cautiously us[es] the literature [and doesn't leap to conclusions]" (Mayan, 2009, p. 109–111).

Discussion

In this section, I discuss how these findings apply to advance gender equality generally, and extrapolate from this to create healthy discursive spaces for female politicians. This section seeks to explicitly answer the research question, based on the data collected through the interviews, and through further analyses of the findings. This section is laid out as components for a communications strategy, grounded in the analytical framework of the interview guides. Again, the study seeks to address the problem of re-creating healthy discursive spaces to answer the research question of how key organizations are applying social media communications strategies to advance gender equality—particularly when framing female leaders.

This research project investigated how influential communications professionals are promoting gender equality through social media initiatives. A secondary goal was to develop a strategic framework for future communications campaigns seeking to revive a healthier discourse around female politicians. I aim to contribute to communications research by addressing a pressing social concern which has received significant media attention of late.

Goals and objectives.

RSQ1: In terms of setting goals and objectives to achieve gender equality, what are your highest priorities from a communications perspective? When we discussed goals and objectives, there were really interesting discussions on the themes of changing attitudes and beliefs, changing behaviour, and the importance of more diversity in leadership (women, in this context). Key codes within those themes included: change, myths, increasing awareness, and empowering and encouraging.

When we examine these in more detail, we see that the individual explicit goals differed widely in some cases. I found this interesting, given how participants all fit the stated selection

criteria. If we're only looking at campaign topics, perhaps Participant B's campaign initially seems only tangentially relevant—focusing on supporting survivors of sexual violence. An interesting parallel I found has to do with what seems to be a default social setting that on some level accepts violence towards women, whether it is either political violence or sexual violence. To extrapolate from Participant B's means of making progress on the latter, the solution is to (a) obviously not blame the victim, but also (b) to empower them to speak up on the topic. When we look at the Participants' responses to Sandra Jansen public denunciation of the harassment she'd received, it's clear that this isn't a unanimous solution for all parties, and there are inconsistent viewpoints on the matter, even amongst study participants.

Changing attitudes and beliefs came up unsurprisingly often when we were discussing goals. When it comes to socially-held beliefs about gender, it was initially startling (though obviously relevant) that participants described these as myths and related these back to communications industry best practices "if you want to change a myth or debunk a myth, don't repeat it" (Participant B). It's worth noting how this statement mirrors advice from the framing literature. For example, Lakoff (2014) says

> not only does negating a frame activate that frame, but the more it is activated, the stronger it gets. The moral for political discourse is clear: When you argue against someone on the other side using their language and their frames, you are activating their frames, strengthening their frames in those who hear you, and undermining your own views… It means that you should say what you believe using your language, not theirs. (p. xii)

Several participants described increasing awareness as a core component of their goal—either explicitly using the term awareness, or referencing it with other expressions like

"spark[ing] some thinking." What I like best about sparking thinking is how it emphasizes the audience's active role—the idea that the campaign acts as a spark to ignite the audience's active role in thinking and considering the issue. Most participants were in agreement that awareness was a worthy goal, in itself.

An inconsistent, but highly compelling point was however made by Participant B. While tempting to disregard the startlingly direct outlying opinion that negates the goals held by the majority, she clearly has a point. To refresh, she described awareness-raising as "useless," and as "BS," saying that "you have to change the way people think about themselves, before they will change their behaviour… [and] if you want someone to change the way they behave, you show them what it looks like." Her stance on awareness segues nicely to the theme of **changing behaviour**, both of which relate back to the C4D literature. For example, Avis (2017) suggests that in defining communications objectives, "in order to shift harmful social norms, programmes need to: shift social expectations not just individual attitudes, publicise the change, and catalyse and reinforce new norms and behaviours" (p. 8).

Most of the participants described in explicit terms that their goals include empowering and encouraging **more women** to consider and pursue political careers. While most participants seemed to be in agreement that we need to increase the number of women (running and holding) political office, according to some researchers, we do still need to consider how and why they are leaving. To refresh, Vanlangenakker et al. (2013) say quantitative narratives about quota-based approaches to political representation need to include departures and exits from political office, as they are shaped by individual politicians' parties (p. 73). The vilification forcing former Albertan Premier Alison Redford's hand in her 2014 resignation was admittedly a scandalized media piece that particularly piqued my interest in this topic area. There were rampant

allegations about fiscal mismanagement but the part that really popped for me was in questioning if this would have happened with a male politician who had made similar choices. For example, "Redford's former communications director, Stefan Baranski, has said he believes she was the victim of a 'smear campaign' by members of her own caucus and party—one that threatened her family" (Adkin, 2014, p. 37). Regardless of whether or not I agreed with her political platform or the decisions she was criticized over, it remained for me a disturbing case to witness unfolding in the media—one that someone in my inner circle colourfully described as a "witch hunt" (S. Brewster, personal communication, May 1, 2014). Admittedly, "while masculine norms of leadership and patriarchal views of respectable femininity played a role in Redford's unpopularity within her party, sexism is far from being the only the cause of her downfall" (Adkin, 2014, p. 37), it nevertheless remains that these forces may have played some part. A final note about adding more women to the mix, I would like to reiterate Participant A's point that "there's an opportunity for tokenism… [for example] hiring the woman to 'take care of the gender issues'… means she's not focusing on advancing her career necessarily, or on achieving... her own career goals." Rankin and Stewart (2012) also address tokenism, stating that "Canada is not yet at the 30% representational threshold usually described as a critical mass, but each election seems to be getting closer" (p. 19). In their notes, they explain, "critical mass theory argues that women's impact on legislative outcomes requires them to form at least a minority of all legislators rather than just a few token members" (p. 45). Another nuance worth refreshing is Fulton's (2012) conclusion that an "omitted variables problem" conceals voter bias—that merely looking at the presence of the female candidates in the forum overlooks how these candidates must first outperform their male counterparts in a range of qualities to be elected.

Bringing it back to the research question of how key organizations are applying social media communications strategies to advance gender equality, I interpret these results to mean that our goals need to include a nuanced understanding of how we encourage and empower more women (and diverse identities in general) to pursue political office—remaining vigilant against tokenism and observing how politicians are—or are not—supported by their parties. It is also clear to me that to effect real social change, we need to focus on changing behaviour, in addition to—what I continue to view—as the important initial step of creating awareness.

Language and Key Messages.

RSQ2: What advice would you give to others working in the field, as far as language in messaging to the public? (e.g. tone, verbiage, etc.) There were really interesting discussions about the theme of **voice** that came up when we discussed language and key messages—not in the sense of a physical/aural utterance, but rather as an implicit sense of duty for the professional communicator. Items coded for message tone were also quite interesting. Key messages themselves in the participants' own words were really the most compelling part here, and I've done my best to represent these in the Findings section; both how they came up with these messages, and what they are for the individual initiatives. Process-related findings were particularly helpful, and I found it fascinating to hear about how Participant B identifies the causal relationships underlying the behaviour she seeks to change—particularly through positive behaviour modelling.

One aspect of the key messages that really sparked something for me was when Participant C discussed balancing media discussions of female politicians' families. She talks about the benefits of

> seeing a number of women figuring it out each one in their own ways, showing there are lots of different ways to make it work, and it can work. You know you might have this resource; they might have that resource.

That really resonated for me in how some authors suggest that ignoring familial roles altogether might erase the additional challenges that individual politicians overcome because of their gender roles, and make it appear unattainable to participate in politics. For example, how Lee (2004) suggests that idealizing female politicians as "perfect" is a form of uncritical positive bias that masks active and destructive sexist forces. He concludes that we need to adjust how we talk about the successes of female officials so that we don't erase the need to continue working on gender-based inequalities.

It raises the uncomfortable question of how to achieve this balance—you talk about it just enough that it shows the "omitted variables problem" (Fulton, 2012) also occurring in the personal arena, but not so much that it sidetracks the conversations about a politician's actual agenda. While Fulton's (2012) "omitted variables problem" refers to electoral considerations, it is perhaps another example of how the presence of the female candidates in the forum overlooks how these candidates must first outperform their male counterparts in a range of qualities (in personal and professional areas) to be elected.

I found an interesting pattern when coding for messaging tone. As formulating messages in a positive voice was one of my selection criteria when assessing which organizations to contact, it is not surprising to hear the participants themselves speak to prioritizing positive tone. That said, I think it's still interesting that we find the same pattern not only in their direct messaging to change the discourse, but also quite significantly (and perhaps subconsciously) in their meta-discourse concerning their various campaigns and in how they express themselves in

general. Recalling how Participant B talked about people on the defensive who sometimes miss their mark when they call opponents out as "bigots," and that people sometimes just need to feel heard, and "feel[ ] like they matter, and that they are willing then to hear the other person." When Participant B said this, it resonated quite deeply for me, as it so directly and effectively paralleled the official media response that Premier Notley released, following a flurry of death threats she'd received in the preceding months[8]. In it, Notley acknowledges that the violence is from a small number of individuals, and that valid conversations will continue to happen with valid dissent (Jackson, 2015).

A few points that I found interesting here. Communicative voice was an interesting indicator of their general approaches to communications. While not surprising, it is interesting that their word usage frequently (perhaps subconsciously) came back to this concept. Also, Participant D outlines her role as as a communicator in

> encouraging people to find their way of using their privilege to speak up… the other thing that I have learned through this process, is that I do have a voice and I do have a platform. And so, it is my responsibility to use it, and to use it for good.

What I like best about this statement is how it also connects with other key themes: that of privilege (discussed in the Audience section), and also that of social responsibility (discussed in the Challenges section).

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8 It bears noting that Notley explicitly says in the video that she doesn't think the threats are related to her gender. Based on my research, I would tend to disagree, and find myself (perhaps incorrectly) assuming that this is a carefully-constructed (and necessary) strategic statement to keep the conversation on track about policies. I recommend watching the Jackson (2015) video for yourself, and I think it would be an interesting question to unpack. What I found most startling about the video was that I stumbled onto it later in the course of this project (midway into data collection), and Notley's statements so closely reflect responses from the participants. The interview with Participant B was so close on some points that it almost sounded like she could have worked behind the scenes on that release—and yet when asked, she actually hadn't seen it.

Bringing it back to the research question of how key organizations are applying social media communications strategies to advance gender, I interpret these results to mean that language and key messages are necessarily positive in tone, grounded in empirical techniques to uncover the causal relationship between the behaviour and attitudes we seek to change through positive behaviour modelling, and also relate to advocacy by professional communicators who lend their voices.

Audience & Target Publics.

RSQ3: Who is your target audience? When we discussed audience and target publics, there were really interesting discussions about identity and how we identify as individuals, and how we assemble as groups.

Key codes within the theme of **identity and how we identify as individuals** included: authenticity, power, privilege, and intersecting oppressions. Identity and authenticity are so intertwined, in celebrating diversity. Power and privilege are equally intertwined—for this context, I define privilege as being categorically afforded the opportunity to exercise power. Several participants not only acknowledged their own relative privilege, but also how that impacts their communications strategies. While only one participant expressly used the term 'intersecting oppressions,' it remains a poignant expression of the forms of privilege, based on individual identities, that other participants spoke to. Returning to feminist social media strategies in the literature, this is a good segue to Fischer's (2016) reminder that as a tool in online activism, "social media, do not miraculously provide transformative civic and political engagement because intersecting oppressions, particularly the centrality of whiteness in organizing, continue to permeate online activism" (p. 756). Returning to some conclusions from her ethnographic study of the #Free_Cece campaign, this limitation was successfully mitigated

by co-creating meaning across stakeholder groups—referred to as the "collective organizing that traverse[s] online and offline spaces" (p. 756).

Key codes within the theme of **how we assemble as groups** included: shared values, empathy, positive and negative expressions of group membership, allies, engagement, and seeking to not only listen, but to understand their audiences. Establishing kinship through shared values, "we all have... our unique strengths and weaknesses. And I guess, really trying to view... each other as individuals, as opposed to some kind of mass stereotype. So I'm excited… to connect those values with new audiences" (Participant D). What I liked most about that statement was the emphasis on individualism despite group membership, given that we often bond along these aspects of personal identity—e.g. gender, ethno-cultural identity, sexual orientation, etc.—but when observed by outsiders, we can be reduced to these characteristics or stereotyped, based on them.

Unsurprisingly, given the topic, and that discussing challenges was one of the main lines of inquiry, participants frequently referenced oppositional groups and negative expressions of group membership. (This is discussed in detail in the Challenges section.) In describing these oppositions, the idea of fighting a war, or of opposing factions was an interesting and even potentially subconscious expression in these discussions. What I found surprising in all this though, was that having often casually discussed allies as potential roles for men seeking gender equality, it took Participant B explicitly noting her army analogies for me to consider the militaristic connotations of seeking allies. Another interesting observation came up in that context, "social media doesn't do a lot to cater conversation. You find your allies, and you fight battles against each other. It's not usually a place where people are having thoughtful dialogue with each other" (Participant A). What I find interesting here is that, having experientially

witnessed this absence of constructive dialogue in social media confrontations, I absolutely agree. On a theoretical (and perhaps idealistic) level though, I would often distinguish social media from traditional push-transmission communications, typically considering social media more conducive to dialogue and two-way conversations. For example, Wolfe (2012) notes that treating social media as forum to "push[ ] pre-conceived language… in some form of text-based spin information" (p. 4) merely embodies "legacy styles of communicating" (p.29). Ideally though, social media conversations would move towards "communication that seeks mutual and productive understanding in the immediate and bigger pictures" (Wolfe, 2012, pp. 30–31).

In this regard, Participant D really digs into positive expressions of group membership. She refers to forming tribes as a technique for bridging disparate groups, evoking McLuhan's tribalism. For example, McLuhan (1964/2007) famously spoke of radio's ability to "retribaliz[e] mankind, [with] its almost instant reversal of individualism into collectivism" (p. 238).

In terms of the research question—how key organizations are applying social media communications strategies to advance gender equality—the participants all had compelling insight into both identity and how we identify as individuals, and into how we assemble as groups. In defining their audiences as part of an overall strategy to advance gender equality, I would synthesize the different perspectives of the participants as follows: defining your target audience, based on conceptually-aligned values and aspirations, focusing strategically on those who can be persuaded, and defining as specific a demographic as possible, in order to focus your message appropriately. When it comes to engaging that audience, the answer lies in listening and seeking to understand where they might be at, so that you can connect with them better. And finally, as a strategy for growing the audience, the answer relates to finding allies and empowering those who can help promote your message.

Communication strategies.

RSQ4: What social media communications strategies are organizations applying to advance gender equality through healthy discursive spaces? Participants offered a great deal of advice when we discussed message delivery strategies to advance gender equality in the political forum. Participants' advice tended to thematically fall into one of three categories when it came to communications strategies: advice for communicators, advice for changing the system, and advice for female politicians.

When it came to their **advice for professional communicators**, Participant C suggested an interesting idea for protecting female politicians who are either already in, or running for office: to build a "community that can flock around female politicians." Regarding how that looks, she talks about "calling stuff out, coming to the defense—building a community stronger on the good side, than the community that is sort of spinning in their own world on the bad side." I've started envisioning this defense team—or community, or hive, or safety net, as she terms it—as a group that could allow politicians to stick to defined agendas, in the face of opposition.

Overall, I would summarize their strategic advice to communicators seeking to create change as: striving for specificity and directness, creatively finding ways to band together to protect female politicians who are either already in, or running for office, and to gently empower allies, in the most authentic way that fits your skill set.

When it came to their **advice for changing the system**, an interesting inconsistency arose. Participants had different opinions about how much systems-level intervention is required to solve the problem of political violence towards female politicians. As previously discussed, most participants viewed the problem as a systemic one, and as such provided advice for

changing the system. That said, it is worth highlighting Participant B's reminder that making a point of accommodating and protecting women in these situations can backfire:

> a lot of women really don't feel very confident and they… feel they need to be somehow… accommodated or protected or whatever. And... it just sends a red flag out, and it actually encourages people to go 'see, I told you' or 'see, the system is rigged' ... We have to walk on eggshells with these people'… I don't think that that's the real solution.

From this, we can infer that the solution is *not* unanimously a systemic one. Having explicitly restated that, so as not to misconstrue her words, and noting my own bias for systemic solutions, I suggest it would be beneficial to apply Participant B's valid points as cautionary and constructive feedback for those who *are* seeking to make systemic changes. Overall, I would summarize their strategic advice for changing the system as normalizing diversity, engaging those with privilege to improve access and opportunities across the board, boosting women's confidence, and remembering that over-regulation can potentially backfire.

Despite most participants situating the problem as a systemic one, several offered **advice for female politicians**, expressing the characteristics and desired skills they thought were required for individual successes[9]. I'm mindful that providing suggestions to female politicians is problematic, as it falsely situates them as the source of the problem—potentially setting up a victim-blaming mentality. That said, as subject area experts who are committed to improving how women experience political offices, participants have provided suggestions that may be

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9 Anecdotally, one question I'm frequently asked in casual discussion is: "what's your advice for female politicians, to deal with this?"

helpful to those seeking office. Key codes within those themes included: desired skills and specific politicians.

When it came to discussing specific politicians as behaviour models, one of the most inconsistent findings was participants' response to how Sandra Jansen handled gendered political harassment with a public press release. Most participants felt she was brave and served as a positive role model in standing up to the bullying, but it bears noting that one participant had a vastly different opinion:

> she could have done much better from behind the scenes than try to do it in front of them in public view… there has to be a bit of … grit involved... to tough it out, and kind of take women to the next… iteration of what it means to be a woman politician.

Perhaps it is that we hold politicians to a higher standard than regular citizens. Consider though if it were our friend, for instance, who'd experienced bullying in the workplace—would we expect them to tough it out? Perhaps it is that this vulnerability feels like a betrayal of the progress made for female leadership; that this display of vulnerability sets the movement back. It was interesting to see the diversity of responses though, and it would be interesting to examine audience responses to standing up to bullying as a type of emotional response. It is also helpful to recall that Brooks (2011) found that female audiences tended to censure female politicians more than male audiences for displaying emotion, describing this occurrence as "distancing responses" (p. 610), where the audience is distancing themselves from behaviour that they feel could reflect badly on them, as fellow women.

Bringing it back to how they are applying social media communications strategies to advance gender equality when framing female leaders, there was a wide range of advice, depending on these three thematic categories. Overall, I summarize their suggestions as follows:

overcome the internalized expectation to be perfect in all aspects of life, focus on your own authentic agenda for your solution to improve society in this role, be wary of tokenism and discussions that pull you from that agenda (even media fixations on political violence—unless that is your authentic agenda for the change you want to make), know that this role will demand a lot, but there are many resources and supports available, strive towards a sense of unshakeable confidence tempered by humility and a willingness to listen, and seek supports to help you call out and address political violence.

Channels (tactics).

RSQ5: What is the extent of this campaign by your organization? (for example, other social media platforms, other communications channels, etc.) Situating relevant discursive spaces was an interesting aspect of discussing communications channels and tactics. Participants involved with the implementation side of strategic communications all seemed to supplement their social media campaigns with multichannel approaches, with particular emphasis on in-person events. Events were particularly emphasized as a means to connect with individuals not present on social media, and also as a way to engage more richly, with a broader and more diverse group. This also supports Fischer's (2016) finding that effective social media activism requires the "complex and arduous communicative 'on-the-ground' processes of meaning-making and collective organizing that traverse online and offline spaces" (p. 756).

New communications technologies change the spaces where we converse, impacting public-facing political roles, regardless of gender. With more direct access for all politicians, there are also new rules and social norms emerging, such as the fair expectation that people would treat each other online similarly to how they treat each other to their faces. Privilege is an important consideration when it comes to acknowledging voices of dissent. Furthermore,

influential voices of dissent in these new discursive spaces sometimes lack the editorial control needed to provide unbiased accounts—a tenet of journalism generally inspired by formal training.

RSQ6 – 8: What communications strategies do you have in the short-, mid-, and long-term? When it comes to explicitly mapping out goals and strategies according to **timeframe**, the distinctions are sometimes fuzzy—between for example, mid-term strategies and long-term goals. I confess that I didn't properly distinguish these during the interview process, and as such, the resulting responses in some cases reflect my conflation of goals and strategies. That said, it still provides a good framework for understanding how participants conceived of the various elements required to achieve gender equality in the long term.

For timeframes in their individual communications strategies, several articulated they had already passed Horizon 1, as initially outlined. In hindsight, I would say that trying to define timeframe priorities is incredibly organizationally specific, and difficult to generalize from. As the participants tended to share similar long term goals, as achieving gender-equality—despite sometimes divergent areas of specialization—this is where we can perhaps compare and contrast most effectively.

Bringing it back to the research question of how key organizations are applying social media communications strategies to advance gender equality, I interpret these results to mean that in the shared future that these initiatives are working towards, the audience would ideally have internalized the productive messages into instinctive responses, achieve measurements of gender equality without effort, and that participants' roles as communicators would be to maintain constructive conversations when we get there.

Evaluation and measurement.

RSQ9: Have you been able to measure any shift in public mindsets through your work in social media? To measure the success of their communications strategies quantitatively, participants offered a number of indicators. A few emphasized measuring the number of women in leadership (politically, and by sector). They also suggested measuring behavioural changes (as indicated by specific verbal responses in a survey format), and audience size on social media platforms. To measure the success of their communications strategies qualitatively, the participants were again quite diverse but largely connected back to how audiences internalize the messages and also to the formation of a community. I interpret these results in relation to the research question of how key organizations are applying social media communications strategies to advance gender equality, that qualitative and quantitative measures were both equally important and relevant in measuring for campaign success.

Challenges.

RSQ10: What do you see as the biggest threats/main barriers to gender equality? There were really interesting discussions about how we situate responsibility that came up when we discussed challenges. **Gender roles** figured heavily, as did **social responsibility for the problem**. In discussing the social nature of the problem, prominent codes included outreach, opportunities, resources, barriers, individual responsibility, social proof, social norms, normalization, and laws.

In situating responsibility, Participant A was particularly explicit “this is society’s responsibility to change attitudes—rather than leaving it to women to fight for themselves only.” Articulating it as leading to her “feminist awakening,” one of the participants described how as a young woman, she’d initially dismissed an unpleasant incident as specific to the perpetrator and

didn't "recognize that as a systemic issue" (Participant D). This comes back to her earlier point about privilege and engaging those who have power to step up and advocate for those who do not. While most participants emphasized social solutions, Participant B made a compelling case for individual responsibility. She says, "women have more potential than they... than they think. And the source of their strength is not some kind of artificial system that says... everyone has to play nice in the playground. It's something else."

Working on the assumption laws tend to reflect the prevailing social norms, there is a feedback loop between them. Recalling how Participant A described laws' role in reinforcing social norms:

> older Albertans still had a bit of a problem with [same-sex marriage] but the youngest generation had no issue with it, and it was a nonstarter. Why is that? I mean, what has really changed between then and now? Well, for younger kids it has been the case that same-sex marriage has been legal in Alberta since what was it? 2005? So why even question it, if it's the law? These sorts of things all play in. It's not just a communications exercise. That would be a fun role to play I guess if it were just that, but being able to entrench gender equality is important. It has to be normalized.

Building off her point, those aiming to revoke laws that reflect social progress can potentially appear foolish when you look at what they're questioning. Participant A's statements on normalizing same-sex marriage connects to the section of the literature review discussing the intersection of freedom of speech with hate speech. For example, in the case of Motion 502, where the proponents reportedly found Section 3(1)B of the Alberta Human Rights Act too restrictive, if they couldn't "expose a person, or a class of persons, to hatred or contempt, based

on race, religious beliefs, color, gender, physical disability" (in Koshan, 2014, para. 2). Avis (2017) also suggests that

> campaigns are likely to be more successful when they include messages about legal penalties for non-compliant behaviour, fresh information (i.e. a new recommended behaviour to solve a health problem) and reaching a large proportion of the intended audience. Digital campaigns must therefore work alongside laws and policies. Legislation can be a key tool in changing behaviour and perceptions of cultural and social norms. Laws and policies that make violent behaviour an offence send a message to society that it is not acceptable. (p. 3)

I interpret these results in relation to the research question that our chosen solutions may also depend heavily on our political paradigms. Participant B made a really interesting point that "the only difference between right-wing and left-wing people are that right-wing people really trust people. And left-wing people tend to trust organizations and institutions." It's one of those comments that has stuck with me, and I catch myself mulling through it and still unpacking it when I'm not actively thinking about this study. I most appreciate the non-judgmental approach that it takes to ideological differences—which I feel is a crucial first step in establishing real, honest dialogue that bridges disparate viewpoints. While most of the participants tended towards solutions rooted in social responsibility, such as outreach, opportunities, resources, barriers, individual responsibility, social proof, social norms, normalization, and laws—it's important to note that this isn't unilateral, and may also depend heavily on an individual's political bent.

RSQ11: What do you think needs to change in the conversations we're having about women? There were really interesting discussions when we discussed what needs to change in the discourse. The most surprising of these for me was when Participant B said,

> My biggest beef… [with] this whole conversation around gender equality in politicians… is that... it's inherently negative… we're pointing at the problem, rather than a solution. And ironically, by... throwing up the red flag and saying 'this is a big issue'… people who might be really qualified and great potential political leaders are saying 'I don't want to be part of that, I don't want to be a target.' I get that. But… you have to flip it on its head and you have to change the conversation, so that you can make it safe for people to feel like they can go into that world. And by helping people believe that it's not the norm, and that people for the most part are good, and are supportive and are... balanced in their view—even though we've got plenty of examples of where they're not—I think that the challenge for you, is to go to the positive side.

I've already shared that quote in its entirety, though it shook me so much that it bears repeating. As a researcher, this was a starkly uncomfortable realization at this stage in the interviews. This was the point when I started really questioning my research, and started wondering if the solution to the issue was to… not talk about the issue? But after dwelling on it quite significantly, her point is actually different. It's more about focus, about the importance of providing solutions instead of overwhelming with problems, about not inadvertently framing bad behaviour as 'normal,' and about not allowing the discussion to derail the agenda. And the issue of political violence clearly needs to be addressed, but it can't be permitted to either take over the conversation, or deter potential candidates from pursuing political office. Much of this is echoed in Premier Notley's video response to the numerous death threats she'd received (Jackson, 2015), where she acknowledges that the violence is from a small number of individuals, and that implementing the controversial legislation is still in progress. It is a striking example of (a) addressing the threats so it is clear that this is inappropriate behaviour and will be dealt with by

law enforcement agencies, (b) downplaying the issue to mitigate how it could potentially dissuade other women from seeking political office, (c) keeping the discussion on track about the controversial legislation, (d) reassuring those in polite agreement that this was a form of impolite disagreement by a minority, and (e) reassuring that minority that their legitimate concerns will be addressed—provided they are expressed appropriately.

I interpret these results in relation to the research question of how key organizations applying social media communications strategies to advance gender equality, in short, that we need to keep it positive and solutions-focused.

Media Framing.

RSQ12: In reviewing how the media can overtly and covertly undermine female leaders, what resonated for you? There were really interesting discussions about double standards that came up when we discussed media framing. For example, when Participant A discussed the media rhetoric around an MLA with two portfolios elected to office while pregnant: "had this been a man whose wife had just given birth… would that be an issue? It doesn't seem to have been. We've had a thousand male MLAs in Alberta and… just under a hundred women." This directly reflects the current edition of the Canadian Press Stylebook's (2018) suggested test to determine whether sexism is present: "Would this information be used if the subject were a man?"

As discussed above, media effects set agendas for what we talk about, frame how we talk about it, and prime how we make subsequent political decisions (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). In the context of this research, this all shapes how we perceive a candidate. Participant C also cautioned how discussion in the media about political violence can be detrimental, if given too much focus, "the more these women have to talk about stuff like [sexism and political violence],

the less they can talk about other issues, other important things. That they should be there to talk about, you know they should have their voices contribute to... You know the business of bettering society.

In relation to the research question, I found that fixating on the vitriol experienced by female politicians was potentially another mass media effect that shifted the agenda away from salient candidate information, and also served to deter other potential candidates who could also further normalize the presence of women as political leaders.

Public mindset.

RSQ13: In terms of the challenges that you deal with over social media, what forms of sexism do you encounter in social media spaces? Participants had a lot to say about sexism and challenges felt with the public mindset, as expressed over social media. Key codes included: negative expressions of group membership, oppositional actions and statements, how opposition affects their work, and negative behaviour modelling.

One of my favourite examples of negative expressions of group membership was how Participant C expressed it as "a subset of people in the world who feel like respect is not necessary on social media towards public figures." That statement reminds us that even while it tends to be qualitatively and quantitatively more severe, the kind of verbal abuse over social media towards politicians isn't limited to female leaders. In relation to the research question, most participants focus on addressing it directly, but not giving it too much attention.

RSQ14: Do you try to redirect the conversation with people outside your target audience?[10] There were really interesting discussions about responding to political violence that came up when we discussed addressing secondary audiences. While most participants indicated they felt it was important to discuss and address, it still requires a delicate balance. Participant A summed up the risks of focusing on it too much:

> on the other side if we continue to focus on that as women's experience and politics, and again, missed the whole issue of why they've run, and what they're focused on in their tenure. Then we're still not hearing women's voices. We're hearing about the threat instead.

Recall Scheufele and Tewksbury's (2007) description of how opinion leaders and media sources set the agenda for what the public discourse focuses on, frame how that information is presented so that the public can make sense of it, and prime the audience to use that information to evaluate political candidates (pp. 11–12). Participant A's comment thus ties directly into the scholarship about how much news media focus (or don't focus) on female politicians' issues, leading to less understanding of their platforms when it comes to priming the voting public to select a candidate who represents their values.

Another important observation I'd like to come back to is Participant C's description of how they address inappropriate comments on their corporate social media accounts "to think about who your audience really is in situations like that, because... it's not—and it can't be—the

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10 Note: this prompt was moved from its original place in the target audience section.

people who are lobbing in the disrespectful conversation, it has to be everybody else who's watching."

Finally, another point I'd like to come back to is Participant D's approach:

> your haters are people who are never going to be on board, so… don't give them a lot of energy, but... mitigate the effect that they have. But the largest swath of people falls somewhere in the middle, on the undecided. And so we always aim our communications at the undecided. And we feel that any good dialogue on social media helps the undecided to determine which side they're going to side with... to decide whether they can be persuaded or not.

I interpret these results in relation to the research question—how key organizations are applying social media communications strategies to advance gender equality—that those outside of the audience occasionally need to be addressed, but it is truly about balance and focusing on the primary target audience and agenda.

Limitations of the Study

I would define myself as simultaneously both an insider and an outsider. An insider, as I understand the theories and processes driving these campaigns, as well as having individual analyses and academic insights into some of the theoretical dynamics. I am also an insider, experiencing this through a female lens. An outsider, as I have limited experience in applied communications, and as a cis-gendered white woman, I admit I do not have a lived experience of all intersecting oppressions.

In terms of how this might have impacted my findings and interpretations, it would increase the likelihood of attributing causation to gender-based explanations. Returning to the statement that:

> evaluation and criticism are impossible to avoid and, in fact, they are desirable ends. Since the researcher [in the critical paradigm] cannot escape the subjective and interpretive view of reality, then this standpoint should be made explicit and clear. Otherwise, the researcher misrepresents research as objective when it simply reinforces the existing hierarchy of power. (Merrigan et al., 2012, p. 44)

I address this by acknowledging my own relative privilege and subjectivity.

This study's small-scale qualitative approach limits how much we are able to generalize the findings to a larger population. Particularly, I would like to include a larger and more diverse participant sample that includes all genders, and also different forms of identity-based privilege. Arguably, more candidate diversity would also have been preferable, though as stated in the methodology chapter, shared values are more important here than demographic breadth. Scope limits this study in breadth and timeframe. While a larger sample size would better ensure that the findings were transferable (Given, 2011), restricting sample size kept this initial study within scope.

This study focuses mainly on challenges, goals, and strategies for Canadian communications professionals in promoting gender equality as a whole, and as such an exploration specific to women in political office is largely extrapolated from similar situations involving changing public perceptions about gender. Taking a specific look at political messaging would also contribute to the literature.

Finally, another limitation with my approach is that applied communications and academic gender studies research are generally not integrated, and pulling them together created quite a bit of scope creep, ultimately leading to a study that is at times admittedly unfocused. Overall, I think that I went too broad in attempting to examine so many interdisciplinary

connections. While neighbouring disciplines help to contextualize the study, it was unrealistic and taking on too much, given the scope of the actual project. For example, I focused too much on discourse analysis and tried to fit that into a strategy. It may have been more effective and linear as two shorter, separate studies. In hindsight, given my interest in this aspect of the problem, it perhaps needed to be emphasized more in the interview questions—at least for the sake of continuity throughout the paper.

Summary

To summarize, this study's results suggest that in answer to the research question, the solution to stopping the negative conversations about female politicians is to acknowledge political violence—without focusing on it, to the exclusion of discussing politicians' actual agendas.

Participants primarily view their roles as professional communicators to involve changing attitudes. They tended to overlap in their opinions that this was achieved most effectively by listening to the target audience, empowering candidates to overcome it, modelling examples of positive behaviour, forming positive communities, and shifting the media agenda away from its fixation on discursive violence. Finally, there tended to be agreement that we need more diversity in political office.

Looking at message generation in these social media communications strategies, participants' individual messages differ greatly in the specifics. However, there are many lessons in their approaches that are adaptable to other campaigns. For example, framing external messages for their audiences to find relevance—this can be inter-organizationally, or intra-organizationally, in order to present a holistic, unified front that is adaptable to new audiences. As far as messages, strategic steps include: identifying causal connections underlying what

you're looking to change, connecting emotionally to promote an instinctive response, providing resources and positive role modelling. Topically, emphasizing empathy (and not reducing people to stereotypes), promoting leadership, and civic responsibility. In addition to positive role modelling for the audience, we must also remain mindful of the effects of negative behaviour modelling. Appropriate responses to the violent discourse experienced by female politicians include calling it out, expressing zero tolerance, and shifting the dialogue back to the established agendas. Synthesizing the participants' divided stance on this part of the question, I recommend that we acknowledge the presence of violence, but clarify that it is not the norm. Regarding actual front-lines engagement, without giving them too much attention, addressing opposition to the satisfaction of the intended audience—and listening to opposing viewpoints with compassion and kindness so that your organization doesn't become a silo. Finally, allowing for heuristic learning opportunities within the community of your intended audience allows them to step up and field questions from the opposition in a safe environment.

In relation to the research question of what social media communications strategies organizations are applying to advance gender equality, these results suggest that there are adjustments needed at several levels: by communicators, within the system itself, and by prospective political leaders. Following this chapter, I present my conclusions of the study as a whole.

Conclusion

The research study's topic is the unhealthy discursive spaces socially constructing our understanding of female politicians. The research problem is that despite signs of progress, negativity remains common towards female politicians. My research sought to answer the question: What social media communications strategies are organizations applying to advance gender equality through healthy discursive spaces?

This final chapter is broken into four main sections: in the first, I summarize my findings, the second provides a broader context for those findings, the third section discusses how this study can contribute to future inquiries, and the last section concludes the study.

Key Findings from the Study

Participants' shared thematic goals and objectives hinged on changing attitudes and beliefs, changing behaviour, and encouraging more women to pursue political office. On this last point, the literature makes a cautionary reminder for the importance of making nuanced observations of systemic reasons for exiting office, and party support. Participants' advice for language and key messages emphasized behaviour modelling, providing a voice, and maintaining a positive tone. In defining their audiences and target publics, they celebrated identity and how we identify as individuals, tending towards a high level of awareness of the concepts of authenticity, power, privilege, and intersecting oppressions. Group membership tended to intersect at shared values, empathy, allies, engagement, and seeking to not only listen, but to understand their audiences. When it came to communication strategies, participants offered numerous suggestions, thematically split into whether they were working with fellow communications professionals, making suggestions for how to approach systemic change, or whether they were advising female politicians. When it came to communications channels and

tactics for implementing communications strategies, most participants spoke to using multichannel approaches, and hosting events. For the implementation and timeframe for communications strategies, the most salient overlaps occur in the long-term: audiences internalizing the messages into instinctive responses, achieving gender equality objectives and milestones effortlessly, and maintaining constructive conversations after achieving gender equality. For evaluation and measurement, most participants discussed using quantitative and qualitative measures to monitor any shift in public mindsets. Some of the core challenges to gender equality we discussed include gender roles and the complexity of achieving systemic change. One of the biggest changes in the conversations we're having about women is how much we're focusing on political violence—it needs to be addressed, but not to the exclusion of women's actual voices and policies. Dealing with challenges in how the media can overtly and covertly undermine female leaders, double standards, and media fixations on private lives and gender roles seemed to elicit the most intense responses. Dealing with challenges in the public mindset, participants unsurprisingly had a lot to say about oppositional actions and statements, how this opposition affects their work, and negative behaviour modelling that they need to combat in their work. Participants in some cases do aim to redirect the conversation with people outside their target audience, provided that it serves the primary goal of empowering those who are their target audience. Participants' responses to negativity over social media ranged from zero tolerance, towards breaking down some of the barriers to productive conversations, using humour and kindness.

Some of the most significant findings for me were that discursive fixation on political vitriol towards female politicians (to the exclusion of their actual agendas) is another media effect that impacts how much we hear the actual voices of the politicians before us. As far as

approach, modelling appropriate and positive behaviour is more effective than telling people what they can/can't or should/shouldn't do. I personally relate this to trying to reach a destination through an unfamiliar route: it's much easier to get there if you have a road map, rather than a list of pitfalls to avoid.

There were also a few observations encountered in my literature review that didn't necessarily tie into the findings and discussion, that I nevertheless feel deserve repeating. First, social media is another platform for workplace bullying that creates additional barriers for politicians in our current media context. Second, for those seeking gender equality, it would be prudent to redirect conversations back to the issues, lest the discourse digress into trivialities and personal characteristics such as gender roles and gender-associated traits, details such as private lives and family, physical appearance, and emotion. We must continue to ask questions like: "why aren't we talking about her platform?" and "would this be said if she were a man?" Continuing to ask these questions needs to be an instinctive response (echoing Participant B), when we see political conversations digressing into pettiness and ad hominem attacks. Third, I also suggest consciously pursuing equal treatment in the quantity and tone of coverage, types of images used, and attention to actual qualifications (compared to speculation about qualifications). It would also be prudent to avoid horserace-style coverage, emphases on a candidate's novelty, and also critically think about the impact of assigning ownership of certain tasks and types of issues to any gender.

Overall, the social media communications strategies that organizations are applying to advance gender equality through healthy discursive spaces tend to include multi-channel approaches (with live events), with the goals of raising awareness (in the early stages), tending towards shared goals of engaging, empowering, and changing attitudes and behaviours.

Context

This research project investigated how communications professionals are promoting gender equality through social media initiatives. A secondary goal was to develop a strategic framework for future communications campaigns seeking to revive a healthier discourse around female politicians. I aim to contribute to communications research by addressing and contextualizing a pressing social concern (across national divides) which has received significant media attention of late. I am optimistic that these findings may contribute to professional practice by rendering theoretical research in neighbouring academic disciplines slightly more accessible to an applied communications context. Given recent developments on the world stage, there will hopefully continue to be research in many of these disciplines working on different angles of the problem that we're seeing—whether it's communications work on media effects, gender studies and critical feminist theory, communications theories on the current media context, related academic and practical (such as policy studies, political sciences, law), critical discourse analysis, strategic communications, or Communications for Development. Each of these sources of literature provides additional insight and perspective into the interdisciplinary problem. Bridging where these disciplines meet also contextualizes how strategic communications can play a role in translating these findings for larger audiences.

Future Directions

One of the major limitations in this exploratory study is that it does not attempt to define causal relationships, explanatory conclusions, or test quantitative hypotheses. Transferability is also a challenging prospect, given the small sample size. The findings here still suggest a few ideas for future communications research. Possibilities worth exploring include: conducting key informant interviews with a larger number of participants, in order to reach saturation in the data

and thus articulate a grounded theory; segmentation according to political leanings to explore how this impacts participants' views on whether they view systemic solutions as necessary to stop gendered political violence; how individual participants respond from a communications perspective to specific concrete instances that various politicians face; measuring changes in attitudes. I also see merit in conducting content analysis of gender-biased coverage in non-traditional media (e.g. via social media platforms, blogs, and microblogs). I still feel that extending this discourse analytic approach to quantify gender bias in social media coverage of female politicians is highly relevant—though in this particular study instead opted to pursue applied communications solutions. I also feel that a discourse analytic approach to traditional media (particularly one that addresses research gaps in a Canadian setting and current timeframe) is illuminating for those who still have doubts that bias exists. That said, I do have mixed feelings about creating more regulations and guidelines for professionally trained journalists who are already tasked with maintaining editorial quality and journalistic integrity, yet keeping pace with what I consider to be the largely unregulated blogosphere.

Finally, measuring specific responses to divisive topics could also generate some interesting findings. For example, what do you say to the opposition? Do you call them out? Call them racist or sexist? And let them know you have zero tolerance for it? Another divisive topic that really intrigues me is the question of who is responsible for making this better—for example, society? The politicians? Allies? It would be interesting to map it on a spectrum, as it's likely not a binary (either/or) but rather a continuum. Another line of inquiry that interests me is what the public can do to solve the problem—experientially speaking, when I discuss these topics in casual conversation, people often express interest in solutions, though admittedly, a shortcoming here is that my paper chiefly addresses communicators, academics, and politicians. Even the

advice for changing the system—which has a public focus—is still more from a civic responsibility perspective. For future reference, I would also recommend including a list of resources for appropriate legal entities to follow up on any instances that require such further action.

Conclusion

The unhealthy discursive spaces socially constructing our understanding of female politicians creates additional barriers for them—in choosing to pursue office, remain in office, and even to be heard over yet another distraction from their policies. Organizations applying communications strategies to advance gender equality through healthy discursive spaces can take note that discursive fixation on political vitriol towards female politicians (to the exclusion of their actual agendas) is another media effect that impacts how much we hear the actual voices of the politicians before us. As far as approach, modelling appropriate and positive behaviour is highly effective, as is continuing to ask questions like: “why aren’t we talking about her platform?” and “would this be said if she were a man?”

This study has explored some of the ways that we can translate some of the rich academic literature from neighbouring disciplines into applied communications to work towards building solutions that mitigate the effects of uncritical approaches to the media coverage of female politicians. I hope that we will continue to bridge these disciplines and learn from each other to enrich the narratives of each approach to a complex interdisciplinary problem.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Evolution of Research Questions

Phase I: Identifying the Research Problem and Topic

- What markers are other scholars using to track gender-biased media effects in reporting on female political candidates (fourth and fifth estates)?
- How is this connecting to progressing policy around gendered language? That is, journalistic integrity, and the hate speech/freedom of speech divide?
- How do mainstream print newspapers use words and images to construct perceptions of Albertan Premiers—during elections, and within their first weeks in office?
- More specifically, how does the gender of these politicians impact this media content?

Phase II: Start of Literature Review

- What markers are scholars tracking to determine the presence of gender-biased media effects (framing, priming, and agenda-setting) in traditional media accounts of female political candidates?
- How does the current media environment further shape the public discourse on female political candidates?
- How can we translate academic knowledge about gendered language into policies in the digital media environment to promote inclusive and balanced political discourse?
- Questions to ask of the literature: Does it describe methods that other people have used to study similar questions? How does it describe the new media environment's impact on public discourse?

Phase III: Following Literature Review

- What markers for gender bias are other scholars using to track media effects (framing, priming, and agenda-setting) present in fourth and fifth estate accounts of female political candidates? (More about how they are talked about, than how they are talking)
- How is this knowledge contributing to policy around gendered language, particularly when addressing the contentious division between hate speech and the freedom of speech?

Phase IV: Preparing for Data Collection

- What social media communications strategies are organizations applying to advance gender equality, particularly when framing female leaders?

Phase V: Following Data Collection

- What social media communications strategies are organizations applying to advance gender equality through healthy discursive spaces?

Appendix B: Letter of Initial Contact

I'm contacting you because of **your communications expertise in promoting gender equality**. I obtained your contact information *either (a) through a public directory, or (b) through a colleague who recommended you. (Colleague name: _____)*

I'm writing to see if you'd be interested in participating in a brief research study, seeking solutions to the **negativity directed towards female politicians**, particularly over social media.

If you are interested, participation would consist of **one-hour interview**, scheduled at a time and location convenient to you, sometime over the next few weeks.

I hope that the information coming out of this study will help us to better understand how to **create productive conversations about female politicians**, and about gender equality in general. The results of this study will contribute to my Capstone project, in completion of my Master of Arts in Communications & Technology (MACT) degree through the University of Alberta.

I'll follow up with you over the next few days, once you've had a chance to process this initial contact. **Feel free to reach out to me first, if you have any questions**.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Colleen Shaw

ccshaw@ualberta.ca
(780) 123-4567

Appendix C: Information Letter and Consent Form

Study Title: Promoting gender equality through social media framing strategies

Research Investigator:
Colleen Shaw
University of Alberta Enterprise Square
10230 Jasper Avenue
Communications and Technology Program
Edmonton, AB, T5J 4P6
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(780) 123-4567

Supervisor:
Dr. Gordon Gow
University of Alberta Enterprise Square
10230 Jasper Avenue
Communications and Technology Program
Edmonton, AB, T5J 4P6
ggow@ualberta.ca
(780) 123-4567

Background

- You are being asked to be in this study because of your communications work promoting gender equality
- I obtained your contact information either (a) through a public directory, or (b) through a colleague who recommended you. (Colleague name: _____)
- The results of this study will be used in support of my Capstone project, in completion of my Master of Arts in Communications & Technology (MACT) degree.

Purpose

This study deals with negativity directed towards female politicians, particularly over social media. Healthy democracy needs to constructively criticize policies, but instead we're seeing attacks directed at the individuals themselves. This negativity includes hate speech, as well as subtle—but common—media exclusions. The study interviews communications professionals about possible social media interventions and strategies for these and related issues.

The proposed research seeks communications solutions to a broad social problem, which could benefit several disciplines. Political sciences, gender studies, communications theory, and applied communications could all potentially benefit from the proposed research.

Study Procedures

- Research procedure: Conduct semi-structured interviews with industry professionals. Transcribe the audio recordings of the interviews to identify and explore patterns in the responses.
- Participant responsibilities: One 60-minute interview, at a time and location of your choosing (e.g. I am happy to meet you at your office, or wherever else works best for you).
- I plan to schedule the interviews over a two-week period. The overall length of the study will be approximately three months (from interviews to final reporting).
- You have been selected, based on your professional experience in promoting gender equality through communications initiatives.

- Please note that while transcripts will not be sent back to you for review, you will still have two weeks after the interview to withdraw your data from the study.

Benefits

- You will not directly benefit from being in this study and the benefits are an extension of the work that you are already conducting in the field. However, based on some initial conversations, discussing the topic appears to actually reassure those working in the field—by providing solidarity, and a sense that others are also seeking solutions to shared challenges. Any solutions coming out of this research could contribute to your efforts to create social change and move the field forward. I hope that the information coming out of this study will help us to better understand how to create productive conversations about female politicians and gender equality in general.
- There are no direct costs involved in being in the research, though you will also not receive any compensation (or reimbursements) for your time or incidental costs.

Risks

- The risks are equal to typical work in this field.

Voluntary Participation

- You are under no obligation to participate in this study. The participation is completely voluntary. You are also not obligated to answer any specific questions that you prefer to decline, even if participating in the study.
- You can opt out without penalty and can ask to have any collected data withdrawn from the data base and not included in the study. Even if you agree to be in the study you can change your mind and withdraw at any time, up to two weeks after the interview.
- In the event of opting out, the withdrawal of data will be handled promptly and professionally. Please contact me immediately, if you wish to withdraw at any point between the interview and up to two weeks following the interview. I will respond within three business days, and the raw and working files linked to your name will be deleted within ten working days of receiving the request. At this point, a confirmation message will be sent to you, letting you know your data withdrawal from the study is complete.

Confidentiality & Anonymity

- Direct quotes may be shared, but neither your name, nor your place of employment will be directly linked to your responses in the dissemination of the research. Please note that anonymity cannot be guaranteed, given the small sample size of candidates working in the field who meet the selection criterion.
- If you *do wish* to be acknowledged for your contribution, you can indicate this interest by checking the appropriate box at the end of this form. In selecting this option, quotes will not be attributed to you directly, but you will be thanked by name at the beginning of the paper.
- Data will be kept confidential. It will be collected and viewed by a single primary researcher (Colleen Shaw). The Research Ethics Committee maintains a right to access all study data. My research project supervisor (Dr. Gordon Gow) may also need to view the data to offer feedback.

- One backup copy of the original transcript will be kept in a password-protected file on a flash drive stored in a secure location until the submission of the final report, at which point raw data will be erased. Data will have all identifying details replaced with appropriate anonymizing placeholders to maintain the context of the interview dialogue. One working copy of each interview transcript (anonymized) will be maintained for minimum of five years following the submission of the final report after the study completion, should there be a need to revisit the data.
- The research will be used towards a Capstone project in completion of a Master's degree, and may be incorporated into future research articles, and conference presentations. You will not be personally identified in any of these.
- I may use the data I get from this study in future research, but if I do this it will have to be approved by a Research Ethics Board.
- If interested, you will receive a copy of the research findings report, and you can indicate an interest in receiving such materials by checking the appropriate box at the end of this form.
- If you are interested in networking with fellow colleagues in your field who have also participated, you have the option of releasing your name to those who have selected the same option. You can indicate an interest in exchanging contact information with them by checking the appropriate box at the end of this form.

Further Information

- If you have any questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact myself, Colleen Shaw, by either email or phone: ccshaw@ualberta.ca, (780) 123-4567.
- The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.
- I have attached a copy of the interview guide for your perusal.

Consent Statement

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

_____ _____

Participant's Name (printed) and Signature Date

_____ _____

Name (printed) and Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date

☐ Yes, please send me a copy of the finished report.

☐ Yes, please exchange my contact information with the other participants in the study (to a maximum of five other participating peers).

☐ Yes, please include my name in the acknowledgments.

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Introduction

Thank you for joining me for this interview, your time is appreciated.

- This study deals with negativity directed towards female politicians, particularly over social media. Healthy democracy needs to constructively criticize policies, but instead we're seeing attacks directed at the individuals themselves. This negativity includes hate speech, as well as subtle—but common—media exclusions. I'm interviewing you to find out about possible social media interventions and strategies for these and related issues.
- I'm interested in what you've learned in the course of your work as a professional communicator who actively seeks to promote gender equality. I'll follow up by summarizing your anonymized insight and combining conclusions from your feedback with that of some of your industry peers who have also agreed to be part of the study.
- I hope you won't worry about 'right' or 'wrong' answers. Realistically, the 'right' answers are those reflecting your experience working in the field.
- Once we get started, this session will be audio-recorded so that I don't miss any of your suggestions during transcription. After the session, I will review my notes and the audio file to make sure I've captured all of your ideas and suggestions. I will edit names out of the transcription before doing my analysis.
- If you don't have any objections, I will start the recording.

1) Starting interview with: _____, Date: _____
2) Have you had a chance to read and complete the consent form that I sent you?
3) Great! Just to refresh, you are not obligated to answer any specific questions that you prefer to decline. You can also opt out without penalty and can ask to have any collected data withdrawn from the data base and not included in the study. Even if you agree to be in the study you can change your mind and withdraw at any time, up to two weeks after the interview. Date: _____

Interview

1) These questions are intended as a guide to help structure the interview. It is unlikely that we will cover all of the material in the time provided.
2) Points in italics, in a lighter text colour are intended for my reference, as an interviewer.

Goals

1) In terms of setting goals to achieve gender equality, what are your highest priorities from a communications perspective?
    - I.e., there are many definitions for equality, so what does gender equality look like to you?
    - What do you identify as the root cause for sexism that we need to overcome?
    - E.g.: is it to do with the workplace (access to childcare and higher education, equal pay for equal work and experience), role models and democratic representation (proportional representation in leadership), gendered violence (domestic and sexual violence, verbal harassment, acknowledging racist/classist exclusions in reporting about gendered violence), etc.

Challenges

(This is similar to the previous question, but focuses more on the negative aspect of priorities.)

1) What do you see as the biggest threats/main barriers to gender equality?
    - I.e. What's preventing equality, here and now?
    - E.g. misogyny, anti-feminist rhetoric, traditional gender roles, absence of representation in leadership, underrepresentation and exclusion from sports coverage or cultural production, etc.

2) Possible directions for follow up questions:
    - How could we solve these challenges/threats/barriers through a communications strategy?

    (Lead with media framing, to provide a framework for discussing the public mindset.)

Media Framing

Beginning with the understanding that media (traditional and non-traditional outlets) shapes public perceptions, we can look at how professional traditional media sources can undermine female leaders.

I'll share a bit of information from my initial research, to give you context. Researchers have been measuring for evidence of gender bias in the media for over 30 years, yet it continues

to be a concern. For example, researchers have been measuring the *amount* of coverage that female politicians receive, and also a difference in the *type* of coverage they receive. This can take the form of fixating on gender roles, private lives, physical appearance, and displays of emotion. It can also take a subtler form, by focusing on their novelty or status as an "other," repetitive rhetorical questioning of their qualifications (beyond that of their male peers with similar qualifications), taking a consistently critical tone, spending less time covering their platform and issues, and even how often they are quoted directly (versus distilled interpretations of their statements), as compared to their male peers.

For my reference (to note responses the participant makes as I read through the preamble):

- Investigating bias quantitatively
  - Underrepresentation and exclusion
- Investigating bias qualitatively
  - Irrelevant personal characteristics
    - Gender roles
      - Gender performance and enforcement
      - Masculine characteristics
      - Gendered character traits
    - Private lives
      - Private lives: family
    - Physical appearance and image use
    - Emotion
  - Details topically relevant to politics
    - Issues coverage
    - Qualifications
  - Interpretation
    - Coverage tone
    - Horseraces
    - Novel

1) In reviewing how the media can overtly and covertly undermine female leaders, what resonated for you?

   - What are your thoughts about how the media subtly undermines female politicians?
   - Can you discuss if/how these pose challenges to the work you're doing?
   - Do any of these markers for bias strike a nerve for you?
     - If so, how might you respond to statements like these?

2) How would you frame female leaders positively?
   (That is, to mitigate media bias that female leaders are experiencing)
3) Possible directions for follow up questions:

- How would you respond to an audience member focusing on this perspective?
- How do you see this shifting in light of changes to the environment of media and journalism?
- What are some barriers to gender equality in leadership?

Public Mindset

Next, I'm hoping that we can discuss some of the challenges that you deal with over social media.

4) For example, what forms of sexism do you encounter in social media spaces?
5) What do you think needs to change in the conversations we're having about women?

- What do you think needs to change in the conversations we're having about female leaders? *(N.B. possibly already answered above)*
- (what we need to change leads into strategy of how they see us getting there)

Strategies & Interventions

Having chatted about some of the challenges to gender equality and what needs to change in the conversations we're having about women, I'd like to hear your views as a professional communicator in crafting solutions to some of these issues.

1) How would you describe your overall social media strategy?

- How does that fit into some of the goals we discussed?

2) Let's start with the premise that we can bring about social change by adjusting the dialogue that we're having about women in general, and female leaders. The media effects models of framing, priming, and agenda-setting work together. Opinion leaders and media sources set the agenda for what the public discourse focuses on, frame how that information is presented so that the public can make sense of it, and prime the audience to use that information to evaluate political candidates (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, pp. 11–12).

- "[Framing] adds meaning to a seemingly disconnected list of facts… [and] help the facts make sense" (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p. 176).
- How do you frame your messages about women?
- How do you frame your messages about female leaders (if applicable)?
- How do you set the agenda for change?
- How might you prime an audience to support female candidates?
- What we can do to mitigate the damages of gendered media bias towards female leaders?
- How do you think your framing strategies can impact the public consciousness to the point that we can change the discourse?

Mahoney (2013) structures his strategic communications plans with three phases, or horizons: now, mid-term (up to 5 years), long-term (or more than 5 years from now).

6) Starting with "current business," and more immediate communications, like creating "day-to-day media, crisis communication, and marketing communication" (Mahoney, 2013, p. 30), what communications strategies do use in the short-term?
7) Moving on to "emerging business," like "issue identification, policy development, [and] tactical lobbying" (Mahoney, 2013, p. 30), what communications strategies do you see in the mid-term (That is, across the next 5 years).
8) Finally, if we look at "future business," like "strategic issue identification, strategic communication through relationship management, ongoing government relations, [and] community relations" (Mahoney, 2013, p. 30), what communications strategies do you see in the long-term (That is, more than 5 years from now?

- What needs to change about the dialogue or discourse as it stands?
- How do you see us getting there?

(Returning to some of the goals we discussed earlier)

- How does the existing media bias inform your communications strategies?
- What are some strategies that you use to address some of these challenges we talked about earlier?
- How do you address negativity in your conversation channels? (e.g. openly sexist comments)
- How do you deal with nastiness directed at female leaders?
- Make a table with examples of nastiness and how it was handled?
- Looking at examples like Notley, Redford, Clinton, Janz, etc.
- Can you think of communications breakdowns that you would have addressed differently?
- Harassment from peers/within the party: Glanz Janz
- Harassment from the opposition: Clinton/Notley
- Harassment from public
- How do we get more female leaders across industries? (government, business, etc)

Evaluation & Measurement

1) Have you been able to measure any shift in public mindsets through your work in social media?

- e.g., "visibility/exposure/reach; interactivity level, type and number; engagement level, percentage and type of content; influence (virality); impact (relevance and dominant audiences); advocacy (contributors)" (Castillo-Esparcia, Almansa-Martnez, & Smolak-Lozano, 2015, p. 235)

2) Potential follow up questions:

- How do you see the work you're doing improving gender equality?
- What are signs that social media campaigns reclaim the conversation space and productive discourse?
- Do you have any statistics you could share about your work to this effect?
- Do you have any way of tracking whether or not you're changing perceptions?

Audience

1) Who is your target audience?
2) Do you try to redirect the conversation with people outside that target audience? (e.g. haters/hateful groups)

- How would you respond if someone claimed you were infringing on their freedom of speech by critiquing their hate speech?
- How do you equip your followers to respond to messages from the haters/hateful/dissonant/controversy-stirring/oppositional groups?
- Do you wait for "haters" to come to you? (or do you approach them on their turf?)

Language

1) What advice would you give to others working in the field, as far as language in messaging to the public? (e.g. tone, verbiage, etc.)

- That is,, Would positive, inclusive, non-discriminatory messaging be less likely to trigger negativity and incite anger? (assuming anger is counter-productive)
- How do you want your audience to feel when they experience the content that you're sharing with them?

Channels & Interdisciplinary Connections

1) What is the extent of this campaign by your organization? (for example, other social media platforms, other communications channels, etc.)

- How do your communications strategies across other platforms connect with what you're doing in this space?
- How does a two-way conversation add value? (compared to traditional media's transmission model or one-way communication)
- How communications can change mindsets?
- Why do you use social media channels to get the message out?
- Why are social campaigns the correct tool?
- How can PSA type campaigns change minds?
- How are the conversation spaces of social media more effective for this than push/transmission type PSA?

2) How do you see your work in communications connecting to other related aspects of the issue (for instance, policy, law, etc.)

- Could increasing the number of female leaders stand to change the overall status of women?
- What support do you get from the current political atmosphere?
- What challenges do you foresee because of the current political atmosphere?

Wrapping up

- Can you recommend any peers whose input you think would be valuable to this study?
- EITHER We have ____ minutes left. Is there anything else you'd like to add?
- OR We're coming to the end of our time and I need to be respectful of your schedule.

If you change your mind about anything we discussed today, you may still withdraw your responses until (Date: _____). Thank you again for your time. You've given me a lot to think about, and I look forward to spending some more time reviewing what we've discussed today.

Appendix E: Simplified Interview Guide

Goals

1) In terms of setting goals to achieve gender equality, what are your highest priorities from a communications perspective?

Challenges

2) What do you see as the biggest threats/main barriers to gender equality?

Media Framing

Researchers have been measuring for evidence of gender bias in the media for over 30 years, yet it continues to be a concern. For example, researchers have been measuring the *amount* of coverage that female politicians receive, but also a difference in the *type* of coverage they receive. This can take the form of fixating on gender roles, private lives, physical appearance, and displays of emotion. It can also take a subtler form, by focusing on their novelty or status as an "other," repetitive rhetorical questioning of their qualifications (beyond that of their male peers with similar qualifications), taking a consistently critical tone, spending less time covering their platform and issues, and even how often they are quoted directly (versus distilled interpretations of their statements), as compared to their male peers.

3) In reviewing how the media can overtly and covertly undermine female leaders, what resonated for you?

Public Mindset

4) In terms of the challenges that you deal with over social media, what forms of sexism do you encounter in social media spaces?
5) What do you think needs to change in the conversations we're having about women?

Strategies & Interventions

6) How would you describe your overall social media strategy? (in terms of current business, emerging/mid-term business, long-term business)
7) How do you frame your messages about women?

Evaluation & Measurement

8) Have you been able to measure any shift in public mindsets through your work in social media?

Audience

9) Who is your target audience?
10) Do you try to redirect the conversation with people outside that target audience?

Language

11) What advice would you give to others working in the field, as far as language in messaging to the public? (e.g. tone, verbiage, etc.)

Channels & Interdisciplinary Connections

12) What is the extent of this campaign by your organization?
(for example, other social media platforms, other communications channels, etc.

Appendix F: Sample of Content Analysis Matrices

Table 3

List of emergent themes and subthemes.

Theme	Subtheme
change	attitude
	behaviour
communications	changing face of technology
	metaphor: convert and convince
	model
	modelling-negative
	voice
	negative
groups	negative: opposition, military metaphors, and political correctness
	positive: allies
	values and bridging
	positive
identity	aspects of identity: authenticity, inclusion, and diversity
	empathy
	intersectionality
	perspective and point of view
	subjectivity and perception
leadership	reasons to excuse ourselves from leadership: gender roles
	reasons to excuse ourselves from leadership
	agendas
	more women
	polarization
society	individual responsibility
	law and policy
	norms/normalizing diversity
	opportunity: barriers and resources
	outreach
	social responsibility
	power and privilege

Table 4

Matrices: theme quotes

Theme	Subtheme	Participant	Quote
change	(general)	B	"You have to flip it on its head and you have to change the conversation, …
		B	"focus on a change that you want to make: a change in attitude, and a …
		C	"A lot of that I think is how people deal with change. Politics has historically …
		D	"I think catalys[is] for change happens through anger. But I don't think …
	attitude	A	"if we're not changing the attitudes, if we're not working with children …
		A	"what's really holding us back on gender equality, and it's those …
		D	"changing those attitudes and beliefs in... in the social context, as opposed…
		D	"in terms of shifting those attitudes, that's... that is basically... I guess …
		D	"real focus on reaching young men and boys, and trying to shift their …
	behaviour	B	"you have to change the way people think about themselves, before …
		B	"If you want someone to change the way they behave, you show them …
communi cations	changing face of technology	C	"tone out there in society right now which is the problem that we have …
	metaphor: convert and convince	overall	religious overtones: converts, evangelism, conversion, born-again …
	model	A	"when you have somebody of profound influence in parts of the world who …
		B	"If you want someone to change the way they behave, you show them …
		C	"seeing a number of women figuring it out each one in their ways, showing …

Note: Only the first 16 rows are shown here for illustrative purposes.

Table 5

Matrices: framework quotes

Participant	Goals		
	Change attitude: Increase awareness	Change behaviour/structures: Empowerment + encouragement	Grow audience (goal)
General	awareness, barely a whisper about it…	encourage, empower, influence, persuade …	
A	what's really holding us back on gender…	increasing women's safety, particularly …	break through that little circle around us of …
B	knowing exactly what you're trying to …	we wanted to change the way people thought...	within that goal... we tried to get our network as big …
C	call attention to things that are happening	get 50 percent of the candidates in each race …	
D	I think... catalyst for change happens …	more female representation in …	build our audience and to try to connect our …

Note: Only the first three columns are shown here for illustrative purposes.