While negativity during presidential campaigns is by no means a new phenomenon, the advent and proliferation of novel social media technology could radically change how this type of messaging affects both the electorate and the campaigns that practice them. Demobilization effects might be exacerbated or reduced while the information utility that negative messaging has over positive might disappear. Additionally, the low cost, long reach and fast pace of micro-blogging sites add an extra edge of maneuverability and reactiveness to campaigns thus to unseen. Yet the feature of social media that threatens the orthodoxy understanding of negativity the most is the rise of the self-selected audience where users can nearly completely customize the slant and content of their news sources.

With these developments in mind, this thesis will focus on the micro-blogging site Twitter in an attempt to determine if negative messaging is used differently in social media as compared to traditional televised media. An important aspect of this study is the assumption that negative messaging is used strategically and dynamically. To track this, traditional ad buys will be monitored and archived throughout the campaign cycle. At the same time, utilizing Internet archives and the developers Application Program Interface (API), tweets will be collected and analyzed for negativity.

Multiple variables will be used to operationalize the phenomena of negativity. A few examples are comparing total number of negative tweets to positive tweets to create an overall negative or positive number. Each tweet can be weighted for how many times they were retweeted and liked to show messages that received more attention from the online community. By tracking FEC filings through sources like the Weslyan Media Project or Ad Sleuth, variables can be made indicating when negative ads aired and how much was spent on them in which market. Finally, the use of the twitter sample API could be a powerful tool to mine real time sentiment during potentially the most combative part of the elections: the debates. By using a Naïve Bayes Algorithm, tweets posted during and immediately after the debate can show how the general viewing audience responded to negativity. However, due to the amount of data needed to stream API through these events, it might be more feasible to track retweets and sample for sentiment then confirm it with coders. Using the API would be quick, data intensive, and potentially tricky while using coders would be slow, more expensive but more reliable.