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Shylee Garrett

Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

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The Digital Battleground: *The Political*
Pulpit to Political Profile

A content analysis of the 2016 Republican candidates on Twitter

Shylee Garrett

Introduction

In 2008, President Barack Obama utilized social media for his presidential campaign as a means for political and grassroots organizing. Joining Facebook and Twitter were some of his first steps, engaging in a new digital media age. In 2012, he took it one step further. With accounts on social media networking sites like Tumblr, Instagram, Google+, and Flickr, he was able to enter what I call the “people’s pulpit.” By melding characteristics of a personal social media presence with political figure status, Obama was able to create new opportunities to connect with voters on a more intimate level. Social media created the opportunities for “strategic as well as tactical innovation in electoral contexts where personal political communication is crucial” (Bimber, 2014, p. 131).

The “people’s pulpit” no longer allows for discussion of party platform, political issues, or blatant campaign promotion, rather seeking for authenticity from candidates. “A political leader’s authenticity has always been a site of struggle: politicians have tried to control their own image, while mass media has promised to reveal the ‘real’ self behind the electoral campaign. In recent years, social media such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube have gained a positive reputation as electoral tools” (Dumitrica, 2014, p. 1). Social media allows for candidates to bypass traditional media, connecting them directly with voters.

While previous research has been collected surrounding Twitter, political campaigns, and presidential candidates, the 2016 presidential election allows for a unique

opportunity. Not only is there a large Republican primary field to narrow, the candidates running have various different backgrounds, straying from tradition, with contenders like Donald Trump and Ben Carson. The true functionality and success of a social media campaign is not longer measured by likes or comments, but “the ability to predict when a conversation on social media has the potential to become rapidly viral or, potentially, nuclear” (Merica, 2013, p. 29).

Many studies have emphasized salience of social media use via candidates from a purely quantitative perspective as opposed to a qualitative perspective, backed by quantitative data. With the ability to analyze candidates from different backgrounds in a highly populated and competitive primary field, I propose we can make greater conclusions about the development of more effective modes of social media use in direct relationship to political campaigning by analyzing the content, rather than counting followers, mentions, or hash tags. By bypassing the traditional modes of calculating the success of political social media accounts, I hope, instead, to focus on the content itself more closely. I tracked and assigned a quantitative value to each category regarding tweets, making a value judgment of the communication and connections being made via Twitter.

Literature Review

Evaluating the messages of politicians isn't a new concept. However, evaluating their use of Twitter's 140 characters is in its infancy. Sander, Sprenger, Tumasjan, and Welp (2010) conducted a content analysis of 104,003 tweets published in the weeks leading up to the federal election of the national parliament in Germany. They collected

all tweets that contained the names of one of six political parties represented in German parliament, selecting prominent politicians of these parties especially (2010). They concluded that the Twitter messages they evaluated closely reflected the political programs, candidate profiles, and other media coverage concerning the candidates. They found that the number of personal messages tweeted was predictive of popular election winners, and even came close to the traditional election poll decisions. This contrasts with other studies, like the following, that conclude that no significant influence occurred over voters.

Recent studies of politicians' use of Twitter in the United States often centers on the past two elections, 2008, and in much higher frequency, 2012. For example, Hong and Nadler (2012) evaluated Republican presidential candidates Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich, Jon Huntsman, Ron Paul, Rick Perry, and Rick Santorum's accounts on Twitter. Cited as "some of the first empirical evidence regarding the impact of the political use of social media," their study centered on the discussion of whether the political use of Twitter had the potential to impact public agenda and opinion (Hong & Nadler 2012). Over the span of 22 days, they found evidence suggesting that candidates' Twitter activities have a positive impact on the number of mentions about them on Twitter. Hong and Nadler found a positive relationship between politicians' Twitter activities and Twitter mentions, although their findings were not statistically significant (2012).

According to Dang-Xuan and Stieglitz (2012) Twitter has the possibility to reflect collective emotive trends, which could predict certain events in the political and social

timeline. This starts to present social media as an influential political tool for candidates. If they are able to capture a digital audience, it will increase the probability of receiving a vote. Dang-Xuan and Stieglitz investigated the relationship between sentiments in political Twitter messages associated with certain political parties or politicians. They found that both positive and negative emotions articulated in tweets make them more likely to spread through the Twitter network. This starts to lead towards a trend of more specific studies, concentrating on the types of messages that are being tweeted out by politicians.

Hong (2013) who studied the influence of politicians' tweets and funding found that the politicians' social media use correlated to increased donations from outside their constituencies. Hong also found that politicians with extreme ideologies tended to benefit more from their social media adoptions. Hong addresses that the use of social media outlets like Twitter allows candidates to focus upon political issues rather than geographic location. Previously, candidates had to focus on the gaining ground in specific regions of the country, but with Twitter, it expands their potential voter pool from their previous post of office to the entire nation. Loyalties no longer consist with local or regional government officials, rather allegiances to those politicians whose one's ideals fit with best.

Kruikemeier (2014) investigated the communication styles of political campaigning by candidates on Twitter, as well as strategies of online campaigning and the strength of electoral support. Kruikemeier studied candidates' emotions, professional activities, and personal life, with an emphasis on campaign and poll mentions.

Kruikemeier's method provides one of the first content analyses of the tweets by Dutch politicians. Using similar tactics, the evaluation of U.S. politicians and their campaigns can also be studied.

However, it is Julia Caplan's (2013) analysis of two candidates in the Second Congressional District of Virginia that provides the framework for this study. Previously, studies had been broad, covering tweets of large groups or studying frequency of tweets. Caplan is one of the first to take such an exhaustive approach. Using a content analysis, Caplan provides categories that allow for the detailed study of tweets. By categorizing tweets into direct communication, personal message, activities, information, requesting action, and fundraising content, it makes the process of disseminating motivations behind the messages posted. Caplan concludes in her study of how candidates use Twitter to inform and engage their publics, that Twitter creates opportunities for politicians to motivate and activate their followers and differentiate themselves from their competitor.

Therefore the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: What do Republican candidates in the 2016 primaries, personal or political tweets, more commonly post?

RQ2: Are most tweets by Republican candidates in the 2016 primaries positive, negative, or neutral?

Methodology

Using Gerardine DeSanctis' and Marshall Scott Poole's (1994) Adaptive Structuration Theory (AST) we hope to expand on the growing topic of information

technology, especially in the case of social media. AST is “the idea that advanced information technologies, like social networking sites, enable multiparty participation and exchange in organizational activities through sophisticated information management “(DeSanctis and Poole, 1994). This suggests that digital communication increases the chance of human interaction and development. AST focuses on the consistently evolving relationship between society and technology. Structures are both the medium and the outcome of social action, and systems are the means by which this information is circulated. AST defends the idea that audiences, in this case, social media users, decide what kind of information they receive and respond to.

AST views organizations as systems of communication, and political Twitter feeds are just that, organizations. By sending messages, the goal of such communication is to gain more members to the specified group, in this case, potential voters. AST has the theoretical potential to help candidates realize their influence as group leaders in the Twitter community, especially during election time. By viewing each political feed as a means to gain a group, we can examine how digital communication can further interaction between candidates and their electors. Tracking the likes and retweets of posts by politicians will allow for further tracking of whether political social media communities are strengthened or weakened by social networking sites (SNS).

I have selected four candidates to analyze, which includes Donald Trump, John Kasich, Jeb Bush, and Ted Cruz. Trump and Cruz were both selected due to their standing in the polls as the top two candidates for the Republican nomination, according to a national Quinnipiac University poll. I also selected Trump for his status as “non-

politician” candidates; meaning he has not held elected office previous to running for the 2016 presidency. Bush, Kasich, and Cruz were selected for their status as “politician” candidates, meaning they have held elected office previous to running for the 2016 presidency. I will only be using their official accounts, which is regulated and approved by the individual whose name is on the account. I did not include candidate Marco Rubio due to an irregularity in his social media campaign. As the owner of both an official Twitter account and a separate campaign account, it would not provide proper representation of data, since he is not represented from one singular candidate account.

Data Gathering

A content analysis was conducted on the Twitter accounts of four candidates in the Republican primaries, with tweets serving as my unit of measurement. Approximately 77-78 tweets were collected from each candidate. I collected tweets from December 8, 2015 until December 15, 2015, as well as tweets from January 22, 2016 to February 12, 2016. Each candidate decided the volume of posts per day, so I collected 20 from each cycle, pre and post debate. I selected four candidates that include Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, Jeb Bush, and John Kasich. I selected these candidates for the following reasons. Trump, who was the frontrunner in polling and received the largest, allotted speaking time for the debates, according to a Bloomberg poll reported on August 4, 2015 (McCormick, 2015, p.1). Jeb Bush, who is the Republican National Committee favorite and seasoned politician, was allotted the second most amount of speaking time, and is a member of the Bush political dynasty. Ted Cruz, who was one of the first candidates to announce his run for the election, and also happens to be one of the first Latino

candidates running for president. John Kasich, governor of Ohio was also selected due to his moderate conservative stance, and one of few candidates who was still currently holding office recently.

Content analysis is described as a means of “sorting messages into different categories according to some set of classification criteria” (Rosenberry and Vicker, 2009, p.1). This methodology is an efficient way of analyzing Twitter user accounts, sorting through mass amounts of posts, and organizing them into separate categories. The aim of using a content analysis approach was to attain a greater understanding of effects of content creation and the dissemination of information by political candidates.

A codebook was created to classify each tweet according to poster, timeframe, and content. The first classification consists of candidate name, to identify the account. The second classification consists of whether or not the tweet was posted pre, or post, debate. The third classification is the tweet type categorization. Tweets can be original content posts, a retweet, a video post, an article post, an advertisement, a photo post, or a conversation. Original content posts consist of content produced by the account in the voice of the candidate or his campaign. A retweet must be signified by quotation marks and/or the Internet shortcut “RT”. A video post must have a video embedded in the post, or have a provided link to a video. An article post must have an article from a magazine, journal, or newspaper. A photo post must include an embedded photo or link to an Instagram account. A conversation must consist of the candidate or his campaign directly addressing or contacting another person via Twitter.

The fourth classification is whether or not the tweet has a negative, positive, or neutral message. A negative tweet consists of an attack upon another candidate, or attack upon an existing politician, viewpoint, etc. If it is not an attack, a negative tweet must consist of diction that provides negative connotations (i.e. words like bad, no, etc.) A positive tweet consists of a compliment towards another candidate, or existing politician, viewpoint, etc. If it is not praise, a positive tweet must consist of diction that provides positive connotations (i.e. words like good, yes, thank you, etc.). A neutral tweet is one that does not have the characteristics of either a negative or positive tweet. Neutral tweets are often distinguished as informative posts, such as location of appearances or announcing debate times.

Results

With a sample size of 310 tweets, my results demonstrated patterns concerning what methods of communication were most effective for each candidate given the population of tweets selected. 77% of Trump's tweets were political, while 9% of Trump's tweets were personal, and 14% were both. These findings concluded that Trump tweeted the most about political issues, while placing a heavy emphasis on political tweets. 90% of Kasich's tweets were political, while 10% of his tweets were personal, and 0% were both. These findings concluded that a significant majority of Kasich's were political tweets, he did not participate in combining political and personal posts on his account.

68% of Jeb Bush's tweets were political, 15% were personal, and 17% were both. These findings concluded that Bush, while mostly political, attempts to combine political

and personal. The standout finding was Ted Cruz, who seems to be most similar to Kasich. 87% of Cruz's tweets were political, 13% were personal, and 0% were both. This confirmed that there was a significant relationship ($\chi^2(6, 310) = 28.74, p < .00$) between whether or not the candidates chose to post political content, or non-political content.

However, when we compare the percentage of tweets overall, the analysis creates a different social media narrative. Donald Trump's political tweets made up 24% of all political tweets, while his non-political tweets made up 19% of all non-political tweets. This displays exactly how frequently Trump tweeted versus the other candidates on non-political content. Producing almost half of the total tweets, Trump has a clear personally fueled account. Kasich's political tweets made up 28% of all political tweets, while his non-political tweets made up 22% of all non-political tweets. The percentage of posts between candidates is much closer than their individual breakdown.

Jeb Bush's political tweets only made up 21% of all political tweets, while his non-political tweets made up 32% of all non-political tweets. While Bush may have tweeted more about political issues within his own account, Jeb produced the lowest amount of political tweets out of the group. Ted Cruz's political tweets made up 27% of all political tweets, while his non-political tweets made up 27% of all non-political tweets. Cruz provides the most balance of the group.

Our results also demonstrated patterns surrounding whether or not the candidates' tweets were positive, negative, neutral by candidate. 44% of Donald Trump's tweets were positive, while 48% of his tweets were negative, and 8% were neutral. 87% of Kasich's tweets were positive, while 13% of his tweets were negative, and 0% were neutral 46%

of Jeb Bush's tweets were personal, while 40% of his tweets were negative, and 14% were neutral. 81% of Ted Cruz's tweets were positive, while 18% of his tweets were negative, and 1% were neutral. This confirmed that there was a significant relationship ($\chi^2(6, 310) = 57.6, p < .00$) between whether or not the candidates chose to post positive, negative, or neutral content. All of my findings for this section were consistent with the decision to tweet about political content.

My second research question was made invalid, as all of the tweets by the candidates turned out have political content.

Discussion

While there were many limitations for my content analysis, including intercoder reliability, the need for a larger sample size, as well as a more specific coding scheme, it provides insight into the greater shifting sociopolitical landscape and provides a gateway for further research. A larger pool of coders (3-4) would be necessary for more accurate results. By tracking the progress of presidential candidates, Democrat or Republican, we can analyze whether or not social media is being used as an effective tool to influence potential voters. By testing whether positive or negative tweets garner more retweets.

Another study could be produced solely based on individual candidates, like Donald Trump, who produced differences unseen in typical candidates. By analyzing a larger sample of tweets over an extensive period of time, 6 months to over a year of content, we can track whether or not politicians are innovating efficient methods of social media campaigns, and popularity in the general election, especially within such a polarized political climate.

When testing the community aspect, the number of likes and retweets were continuously shifting, making it difficult to capture a quantitative base. By collecting screen captures of each tweet within one hour, I was able to isolate their count on a singular day. However, it will be necessary to calculate a time frame in which the numbers solidify.

It is also worth noting that as the election cycle continues, candidates will drop out, making their social media posts less relevant, which may skew the number of likes and retweets. The loss of a candidate and the number of new fans on social media populating towards other accounts would be an interesting observation and study. However, the most beneficial study based on this research would be a study of the audience responses to these tweets. Recording the reactions of Twitter users can provide insight into which methods of communication are considered the best practices when it comes to drawing candidate support on social media.

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