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Publisher: Routledge

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Journalism Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjos20>

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Published online: 20 Sep 2013.

To cite this article: Regina G. Lawrence, Logan Molyneux, Mark Coddington & Avery Holton, Journalism Studies (2013): TWEETING CONVENTIONS, Journalism Studies, DOI: 10.1080/1461670X.2013.836378

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2013.836378>

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TWEETING CONVENTIONS

Political journalists' use of Twitter to cover the 2012 presidential campaign

Regina G. Lawrence, Logan Molyneux, Mark Coddington, and Avery Holton

This study explores the use of Twitter by political reporters and commentators—an understudied population within the rapidly growing literature on digital journalism—covering the 2012 Republican and Democratic conventions. In particular, we want to know if and how the “affordances” of Twitter are shaping the traditional norms and routines of US campaign reporting surrounding objectivity, transparency, gatekeeping, and horse race coverage, and whether Twitter is bursting the “bubble” of insider talk among reporters and the campaigns they cover. A sample derived from all tweets by over 400 political journalists reveals a significant amount of opinion expression in reporters’ tweets, but little use of Twitter in ways that improve transparency or disrupt journalists’ (and campaigns’) role as gatekeepers of campaign news. Overall, particularly when looking at what political journalists retweet and what they link to via Twitter, the campaign “bubble” seems at the moment to have remained largely intact.

KEYWORDS content analysis; elections/campaigns; internet/new technology; journalism; Twitter

Introduction

As economic and technological upheaval has rocked the news industry, media outlets are adapting unevenly to a new environment of dissolving boundaries and hyper-fast speed—developments encapsulated in the new prominence of Twitter as a reporting and news dissemination tool (Enda 2011; Farhi 2009b; Hermida et al. 2012).¹ Twitter’s microblogging capacity has offered journalists new ways to communicate with the public and with each other at warp speed.

Twitter is quickly spawning a cottage industry of research by scholars in mass communication and journalism. Not yet examined, however, is the specific niche of campaign reporting—a realm shaped by the hothouse atmosphere of the campaign bus (Crouse 1973).² The purpose of this study is to ascertain how the “affordances” of Twitter—those “features of a technology that make certain action possible” (Graves 2007, 332)—are being utilized by political journalists and commentators.

We begin with a review of the literature on campaign reporting in the decades leading up to this moment of upheaval and potential transformation, followed by a review of the emerging literature on journalists’ use of social media. We then describe the methods and results of a quantitative content analysis of tweets produced by more than 400 political reporters and commentators during the 2012 Republican and Democratic party conventions. Our research aims to discover how and to what degree campaign

reporters are using Twitter in ways that either reinforce or subvert conventional ways of covering presidential politics.

Campaign News as We Have Known It

Traditional American campaign news, like American journalism overall, has been indelibly shaped by a norm of *objectivity* that discourages reporters from expressing personal opinions about the candidates and their campaigns (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2007, 2010; Mindich 2000). As powerful as it has been in American journalism, the objectivity norm is shot through with contradictions. As Crouse (1973) revealed decades ago, reporters' personal judgments may shape their coverage of candidates in subtle and insidious ways. In addition, many studies have documented the rise of an interpretive style of political journalism that features a more prominent and analytical journalistic voice (Patterson 1993; Salgado and Strömbäck 2012). And "objective" reporting has often been characterized by a lack of basic fact-checking, as journalists pass some campaign claims on to voters without much scrutiny (Jamieson and Waldman 2003; Kovach and Rosenstiel 2010; Lawrence and Schafer 2012; Pingree 2011).

Moreover, political reporters are allowed and even expected, within the bounds of nonpartisan objectivity, to point out the man behind the curtain: to reveal to their readers the pains campaigns are taking to sway them (Bennett 2011). Ironically, candidate efforts to sway the voters are considered to be fair game, but their efforts to manage *reporters* are usually not considered part of the story.³ This *lack of transparency*—or more accurately, an illusion of transparency (Sparrow 2006), has also been called "the production of innocence": "ways of reporting the news that try to advertise or 'prove' to us that the press is . . . a non-factor and non-actor in events" (Rosen 2011, para. 29).

Yet even as it allows reporters to pass on campaign claims without scrutiny and obscure their role in the production of campaign news, the evolving objectivity norm also allows reporters considerable leeway to evade campaigns' attempts at manipulation. Just as reporters can pull back the curtain on campaign stagecraft, they can also engage in what Zaller (1998) calls "product substitution." Presented with the campaign's message of the day, reporters may relegate that message to a lesser place within their story, or use that message as the centerpiece of a story about stagecraft—or occasionally, about the candidate's policy record. Journalists thus protect their prerogative to define the daily news, bringing us full circle to the *gatekeeping* function so essential to traditional journalism's claim to professionalism (see Mitchelstein and Boczkowski [2009] for a review). As Singer (2005, 178) adroitly explains, the gatekeeping role and the stance of nonpartisan objectivity are intimately related in the professional belief that "proper operation of the gates will yield unbiased news" (see also Hallin 1992; Hallin and Mancini 2004; Ladd 2011).

Political reporters gain much of that leeway by focusing on the "*horse race*" and *campaign strategy* among candidates, focusing on stories that "emphasiz[e] who's ahead and behind, and the strategies and tactics or campaigning necessary to position a candidate to get ahead or stay ahead" (Cappella and Jamieson 1997, 33; see also Aalberg, Strömbäck, and de Vreese 2011; Lawrence 2000; Skewes 2007). Handicapping the race in strategic terms "allows journalists to maintain their independence from partisan politics (and to avoid charges that they are partisan in one way or another)" (Sparrow 2006, 146) and "permits reporters and pundits to play up their detachment" (Rosen 2011, para. 31).

Digital Journalism as We Think We Know It

To date, there is some disconnect between the established research on campaign news coverage discussed above, and the rapidly growing literature on digital journalism.⁴ Observational and ethnographic studies have shed light on how newsrooms are adapting to new technological imperatives and opportunities (e.g., Domingo et al. 2008; Groves and Brown-Smith 2011; Hermida 2010; Hermida et al. 2011; Klinenberg 2005; Singer 2004). More directly relevant to the present study, some researchers have explored how reporters are using social media not just to “push out” news to consumers but also to comment on events they cover. Lasorsa et al. (2012) analyzed the tweets of 500 top journalists on Twitter to determine whether reporters are “normalizing” their Twitter activity to adapt it to established journalistic norms and routines. Holton and Lewis (2011) examined a similar sample of reporter tweets to assess their use of humor, which represents a break from traditional journalistic objectivity. Those studies built on Singer (2005), who analyzed 20 national and local political news blogs when blogging was still relatively new to mainstream news, and concluded that political journalist-bloggers were making only partial adaptations of their craft to the new possibilities offered by blogging.

Research has also begun to examine Twitter in the context of political campaigns, examining its use by both politicians (e.g., Ausserhofer and Maireder 2013) and the politically interested public (e.g., Bekafigo and McBride 2013; Burgess and Bruns 2012). Little study has focused on social media use by campaign reporters, though research has begun to examine the intersection of journalists and politicians on Twitter through network connections and source citations (Broersma and Graham 2012; Verweij 2012). Thus, questions remain regarding how social media might challenge, even disrupt, some of the basic routines and norms of campaign reporting.

One obvious potential impact of social media on reporting—one that has received the greatest attention so far among studies of digital journalism—is to open newsmaking to far more contributors. The ability to read the views of a vast number of people, and to link to and from others’ work, creates a new challenge to journalists’ control over the news agenda, potentially disrupting the gatekeeping role of traditional media by “opening up the media to new voices” (Hermida et al. 2011, 130) and allowing audiences to “easily share in the filtering process” (Lasorsa et al. 2012, 24). Singer et al. (2011, 1) describe a “transition to a world in which vast numbers of strangers contribute directly to something that . . . journalists alone once controlled.”⁵

Specifically in regard to Twitter, Hermida (2010) suggests that its linking and re-tweeting capacities can be “a system for creating a shared conversation” (303). “Traditional journalism defines fact as information and quotes from official sources,” he observes, but “social media technologies like Twitter facilitate the immediate dissemination of digital fragments of news and information from official and unofficial sources” (298). Similarly, Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) characterize Twitter as a system of networked gatekeeping, in which elite actors’ power is subject to a continually contested, publicly visible process in which non-elites play a critical role. The degree to which Twitter has indeed become a platform for wide-open, shared conversation among reporters and their audiences is, however, an open question—particularly in the world of campaign reporting with its constant struggle between the campaigns and reporters to control the message of the day (Skewes 2007).

Also unexplored to date is whether the immediacy and networked nature of social media is opening the process of campaign reporting to more eyes. If campaign reporters

are tweeting their mundane experiences on the job, the public gets a look inside the sausage factory, *increasing transparency*. Whether reporters are actually using social media in this fashion has been the question of a small body of research that has yielded what Lasorsa et al. (2012) call a pattern of “normalization”: rather than immediately refashioning political journalism, they argue, during the first phase of adaptation to new media, reporters fit new media tools to older, established reporting practices. Some scholars have wondered if normalization has begun to give way to greater journalistic transparency (Bruns 2008; Singer 2005). But again, these questions have not been explored in the context of presidential campaign reporting.

Beyond disrupting gatekeeping and puncturing the opacity of daily campaign reporting, the possible impacts of social media on other routine aspects of traditional campaign news are less clear. Theoretically, if campaign news can now be influenced by an exponentially larger number of people, the traditional media focus on the *horse race* might be diluted. That would be the case, however, only if social media followers resemble the general public, who are, it is often argued, less interested in the horse race and campaign strategy than they are in candidates’ stands on issues (Patterson 1994; Cappella and Jamieson 1997)—and if reporters respond to the preferences of those followers. While there is some evidence that Twitter users are quite vocally critical of strategically framed campaign coverage (Burgess and Bruns 2012), other evidence suggests that political reporters primarily “follow” other reporters and elite newsmakers, rather than the general public, on Twitter (Lawrence 2012).

Finally, the impact of social media on the bedrock routines of *objectivity* offers a fascinating question that has generated debate among those who study digital journalism. Presumably, Twitter’s ability to facilitate quick communication among a wide range of sources could begin to erode some features of traditional objectivity (in ways that various observers might find either salutary or troubling). For one, Twitter could enhance the quick fact-checking of candidate claims, enabling reporters to more easily vet claims rather than simply passing them along. At the same time, the *form* of microblogging lends itself to freer personal expression. A recent Pew Research Center (2011b) report notes that Twitter’s “trim 140-character format . . . readily invites the instantaneous observation” (para. 8). Their study of election-related tweets by a wide variety of users found few purely factual claims being made on Twitter (para. 3), leading the report to conclude that Twitter is an even more fluid and opinionated information environment than the blogosphere.

This opinionated realm might create, if not pressure, then certainly an invitation to reporters to join in.⁶ As Farhi (2009b) notes, “With their intimacy and immediacy, social networks can put journalists in murky territory: ‘Am I a reporter [when tweeting]? Am I an editor? Am I a critic? Or am I just talking among friends?’” (para. 33). In their study of reporters’ use of humor on Twitter, Holton and Lewis (2011, 12) found that “to the extent journalists immerse themselves in the culture of Twitter, they are more likely to step outside their traditional, serious persona and adopt some of the interpersonal humor and flavor of social media.” Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012) found a more complex blending of professional objectivity and personal opinion among journalists in their study of Twitter discourse during the Arab Spring.

In short, there is some reason to expect that social media may be changing campaign reporting norms and routines, yet other reasons to expect less of an impact. According to Lasorsa et al.’s (2012, 24) study, “the platform and culture of Twitter presents . . . the possibility . . . for journalists to be more open with opinions, more liberal

in sharing their gatekeeping role, and more thorough in being transparent about the news process.” Yet their own study, as well as other literature on digital journalism (e.g., Singer 2005), suggests that reporters for traditional outlets do not make full use of the affordances of social media, and that new forms are being adapted to old uses more than vice versa.

Research Questions

The overall question guiding this study, then, is: To what degree are political journalists using social media technologies in ways that disrupt gatekeeping, increase transparency, and challenge conventional norms and routines of objectivity? We first examine several specific affordances of Twitter—linking, retweeting, and information-seeking—as indicators of the degree to which traditional journalistic *gatekeeping* is being disrupted. We then examine specific types of content within political journalists’ tweets, including reporters’ “job talk” as an indicator of increased *transparency*; mentions of candidates’ strategies, personal characteristics, and the political horse race as indicators of continuing conventions of *objectivity*; and mentions of reporters’ own personal political identities, expressions of opinion, and exercises in fact-checking as indicators of changing bounds of conventional *objectivity*.

- RQ1:** *Linking:* Are campaign reporters/commentators using links primarily to “push out” their own work/work of their own outlets, or to direct their followers to other journalists’ work, or to direct their followers to non-journalistic work and ideas?
- RQ2:** *Retweeting:* Are political journalists primarily retweeting the work/ideas of other journalists and political insiders?
- RQ3:** *Information-seeking:* To what degree are political journalists using Twitter to gather information from their followers (e.g., story ideas, historical facts, examples, etc.)?
- RQ4:** *Job talk:* To what degree are political journalists using Twitter to talk about their daily work and/or their working conditions?
- RQ5:** *Candidate strategy, candidate characteristics, and the horse race:* To what degree do political journalists’ tweets focus on the strategic and horse race aspects of the election, or on the candidates’ personal characteristics, versus focusing on policy issues?
- RQ6:** *Expressing personal identity and opinion:* To what degree are campaign reporters using Twitter to express opinions versus reporting facts? To what degree are political journalists mentioning their personal identity or affiliations on Twitter (e.g., identifying their own party identification)?
- RQ7:** *Fact-checking:* To what degree do campaign reporters use Twitter to engage in counter-claims or fact-checking of claims made by candidates or their supporters and surrogates?

Method

To answer these research questions, tweets from a purposive sample of journalists were captured and saved to an archive over the course of the 2012 US presidential campaign and collected and analyzed through a combination of both automated and manual

techniques, similar to the methods recommended for social media by Lewis, Zamith, and Hermida (2013). The sample included campaign reporters working for prominent national news outlets (see Table 1), as well as those working for 76 other outlets located in key swing states including Ohio, Florida, North Carolina, Colorado, Iowa, Virginia, Nevada, and Pennsylvania, the top eight states in campaign advertising spending through July 2012 (when the sample was drawn).⁷ The sample was constructed to include journalists and commentators from a variety of news outlets: print, broadcast television, cable television, radio, wire services, and predominantly or purely online outlets (such as Politico, BuzzFeed, and Talking Points Memo).

Individual journalists were chosen using a database curated by Cision, a media contact service that has collected and maintained media lists in the United States for more than 75 years. The validity and reliability of samples drawn from the Cision database have proved consistent demographically with larger surveys of journalists conducted by Weaver et al. (2007) (see Willard-Hinsley 2010). Journalists at each of the chosen outlets were included in the sample if they were identified as political or campaign reporters in the Cision database, or listed politics among the topics they cover. Both reporters and commentators were included, but editors were excluded. Many of these journalists had a Twitter account listed; for those that did not, a search of Twitter itself was performed to determine if they had an active account. Our final list of 430 political reporters and commentators with active Twitter accounts included 74 listed as “analyst,” “columnist,” “commentator,” or “contributor” (17 percent)—in other words, writers more likely to write opinion-oriented pieces.

A custom-built software program was used to monitor all 430 of these Twitter feeds for updates and save them to an archive. The program used Twitter’s application programming interface (API) to communicate with Twitter every 15 minutes over the course of the time period studied, saving updates from each of the 430 feeds plus tweets from other Twitter users mentioning any reporter in the database. The database began collecting tweets on Sunday, August 26, 2012, and stopped shortly after Election Day, on November 18, 2012.

The data for this study are drawn from tweets posted during the two national party conventions, traditionally seen as the formal start of the general presidential election season. The database captured 19,991 tweets during the four days of the Republican National Convention (August 27 to August 30), held in Tampa, Florida, and 19,005 tweets during the four days of the Democratic National Convention (September 3 to September 6), held in Charlotte, North Carolina (days were defined as midnight to midnight Eastern Daylight Time). A random sample of tweets from the total of 38,996 tweets gathered

TABLE 1
National news outlets included in sample of campaign reporters

Print	Broadcast TV	Cable TV	Web-only or primarily	Radio	Wire service
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	ABC	CNN	BuzzFeed	NPR	Associated Press
<i>The New York Times</i>	CBS	FOX	Politico		
<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>	NBC	MSNBC	Slate		
<i>The Washington Post</i>			Huffington Post		
<i>Time</i>			Talking Points Memo		
<i>USA Today</i>					

automatically was selected for manual content analysis. Using a random start point and a skip interval of 20, a sample of 5 percent of all tweets, or 1946 tweets, was selected for coding. This coding sample included tweets from 285 of the 430 journalists in the overall collection, due to the fact that some of these journalists do not post frequently to Twitter. Most of the journalists in this sample work for national news outlets (72.6 percent) across various media types: print (45.3 percent), web only or primarily (20.4 percent), cable TV (17.5 percent), broadcast TV (15.4 percent), and radio (0.01 percent), with one reporter working for a wire service.

Five coders were trained first to identify if each tweet was about the presidential elections and/or the conventions; those not about the election were not coded further and were discarded. Second, coders determined whether each remaining tweet contained a hyperlink and if so, what kind (e.g., a link to that reporter's own work; a link to other news outlets' work; etc.). Third, coders determined if the tweet was a retweet originating from another source, and if so, from what kind of source (e.g., from another journalist, pundit, or news organization; from a campaign or other political source; or from a non-journalist, non-campaign source). Retweets were not coded further. For the remaining tweets, coders coded several aspects of the content as discussed further below.⁸

Intercoder reliability was established on a subsample coded independently by each trained coder and one of the co-authors. Overall raw agreement on all variables was 96 percent, with agreement on each variable ranging from 89 to 100 percent, and Krippendorff's alpha ranging from 0.77 to 1.00 for all but one of the variables analyzed.⁹ On that variable, a dichotomous measure of tweets mentioning the journalists' own personal political identity, the presence of that characteristic was extremely rare, reducing the coders' ability to achieve conventionally acceptable levels of inter-coder reliability. Overall agreement on the variable was 99 percent, but the Krippendorff's alpha was 0.66.

Of the 1946 tweets coded, 217 were not about politics and coders were unable to determine the focus of another 100 tweets. These 317 tweets were not coded further. The majority of the 1629 remaining tweets about politics came from national (82.6 percent) rather than local outlets (17.4 percent). Reporters representing Web outlets were the most prolific tweeters. Though they made up only 20.4 percent of the reporters in the coding sample, they accounted for nearly 4 of 10 tweets in the sample (39.9 percent), while the remainder were from print newspaper and magazine (30.9 percent), cable television (18.7 percent), broadcast television (10.1 percent), radio (0.2 percent), and wire services (0.1 percent). Only the statistically significant differences across these platforms are reported in the results section below.⁹

From this sample of 1629 tweets about politics, 392 were retweets and were coded only in part, as described above. The remaining 1237 original tweets about politics were coded in their entirety, with acceptable levels of intercoder reliability.¹⁰

Results

Variables Related to Gatekeeping and Transparency

Links. More than a quarter of all tweets (28.6 percent) in our main sample of 1629 contained a link to a webpage beyond the tweet itself. Of those, the majority pointed to that individual journalist's own work (45.8 percent) or to the work of journalists at other

news outlets (25.5 percent). Fewer links pointed to the work of colleagues from the reporter's home outlet (18.5 percent). The remainder directed readers to work not produced by journalists (10.2 percent). Therefore, 90 percent of links provided by these 430 reporters and commentators pointed the follower to another node within professional journalism, not outside of it.

Retweeting. As mentioned above, less than a quarter of the tweets (392, or 23.5 percent) in our initial sample were retweets.¹¹ Coders were instructed to determine whether each retweet came to the journalist in our sample from another journalist, pundit, or news organization; from a political "insider" source, such as a candidate or candidate's staffer, a party official, a political interest group or Political Action Committee (PAC), etc.; or from an "outsider" source not identified as affiliated with a news organization or campaign.¹² More than 8 in 10 retweets (81.7 percent) came from journalists, 10.8 percent from outsiders, 7.1 percent from campaign insiders, and the remaining 0.4 percent were indeterminable. As with our data on links, these retweets indicate a conversation on Twitter primarily among journalists that only occasionally includes voices beyond news outlets and the political insiders they cover.

Information-seeking. Our data suggest that reporters covering the conventions rarely sought information using Twitter. Among the tweets in our sample, less than 2 percent (1.7 percent) contained any kind of request for story ideas, historical facts, examples, or other information from followers (Table 2).

Job talk. Compared with information-seeking, 14.7 percent of all tweets in the sample contained some kind of information or comment on journalists doing their daily work (e.g., one commentator's warning to a colleague, "Don't bring an umbrella [into the convention hall]! They don't allow that" or another reporter's announcement: "Politico live set in Tampa convention center" with a link to an Instagram photo of the Politico booth). Interestingly, when job talk appeared, mentions of horse race coverage ($r = -0.063$, $p < 0.01$), policy ($r = -0.089$, $p < 0.01$), and candidate characteristics ($r = -0.114$, $p < 0.001$) were all significantly lower (see Table 3).

TABLE 2
Frequency of tweet characteristics during 2012 convention coverage

	Frequency (%)
Opinion	29.1
Job talk	14.7
Policy	14.1
Candidate characteristics	9.8
Voter strategy	4.8
Horse race	2.3
Information-seeking	1.7
Fact-checking	1.5
Personal	1.1

$N = 1237$.

TABLE 3

Zero-order correlations between tweet characteristics

	Opinion	Information-seeking	Job talk	Personal	Voter bloc	Horse race	Policy	Candidate characteristics	Fact-checking
Opinion	–	0.012	–0.070	0.016	0.049	0.022	–0.013	0.107***	–0.008
Information-seeking		–	–0.002	–0.014	0.029	0.022	–0.017	–0.022	0.034
Job talk			–	0.020	–0.082**	–0.063**	–0.089**	–0.114***	0.022
Personal				–	–0.024	–0.016	–0.043	–0.035	–0.013
Voter bloc					–	0.144***	0.062*	0.016	–0.028
Horse race						–	–0.015	–0.032	–0.019
Policy							–	–0.070*	0.082*
Candidate characteristics								–	0.003
Fact-checking									–

$N=1237$. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Variables Related to Horse Race and Strategic Coverage

Horse race. The typical news focus on the horse race was measured in straightforward terms: whether each tweet mentioned a candidate's relative position in public opinion polls or in fundraising. By this measure, journalists employed horse race coverage in only 2.3 percent of the sample of tweets. Broadcast television reporters presented more instances of horse race coverage in their tweets than did reporters from other kinds of outlets ($r = 0.077$, $p < 0.01$).

Candidate strategy. Here coders measured whether each tweet mentioned any specific voting bloc or demographic group (e.g., "white voters"; "women"; "social conservatives")—a signal, we reasoned, of a focus on campaign strategy. Our data indicate that journalists included this kind of strategic reference in only 4.8 percent of their tweets, pairing it most often with mentions of the horse race ($r = 0.144$, $p < 0.001$) and policy ($r = 0.062$, $p < 0.05$) (see [Table 3](#)).

Policy. Coders noted whether each tweet mentioned any policy issues, such as the economy, jobs, health care, education, taxation, or immigration. Issues of policy appeared in 14.1 percent of the tweets, and were positively associated with fact-checking ($r = 0.082$, $p < 0.05$); such tweets were less likely to discuss candidate characteristics ($r = -0.070$, $p < 0.05$) (see [Table 3](#)).

Candidate characteristics. Candidate characteristics were mentioned in 9.8 percent of tweets in the sample and, as noted above, were often paired with opinion. Local outlets rarely mentioned candidate characteristics ($r = 0.074$, $p < 0.01$) while national outlets did so more often ($r = -0.074$, $p < 0.01$). Reporters from Web outlets were more likely to produce tweets that mentioned candidate characteristics ($r = 0.068$, $p < 0.05$).

Variables Related to Objectivity

Fact-checking. In order to assess the degree to which political reporters are using Twitter to fact-check the candidates, we asked coders to ascertain whether each tweet offered any counter-claim or verification/falsification of claims made by candidates or their supporters/surrogates, specifying that the tweet must include a judgment about a claim (e.g., one reporter's tweet that "Romney has access to the same type of gas-guzzling Secret Service bus Obama does") and must point the reader toward a documentation of that judgment (e.g., a hyperlink to a substantiating news story). While fact-checking appeared in only 1.5 percent of tweets, it was positively associated with mentions of policy ($r = 0.082$, $p < 0.05$). Web outlets put it to use marginally less often than other types of outlets ($r = -0.052$, $p = 0.068$).

Personal identity. Equally rare was the inclusion of any personal information about the journalist's own political identity or affiliations. Only 1.1 percent of tweets in our sample of 1238 included any such information—too few to register any meaningful correlations.

Opinion. Adapting an approach from Lasorsa et al. (2012), tweets were coded as containing opinion if they used evaluative language or offered unattributed commentary beyond the facts of an occurrence or issue. These ran the gamut from idle commentary not substantively related to politics (e.g., "Free Fallin' by Tom Petty is not an anthem for political glory. But it's playing as OH delegates wait for Newt Gingrich to speak"); to mildly

opinionated commentary on politics (e.g., “CNN poll: Obama’s up in Florida, down in N.C. Maybe the parties should have switched convention cities”); to more flagrantly opinionated statements (e.g., “Romney needs to improve with Latino voters. Maybe boast his dad was born in Mexico, but no one asks for his birth certificate”).

Approximately 29.1 percent of tweets contained these kinds of opinionated statements. If self-described commentators, columnists, and analysts are removed from the sample, these numbers go down slightly: 23.5 percent of tweets by those identified in the Cision database as reporters, writers, and correspondents included opinion. Among those defined as commentators, columnists, and analysts, 46 percent of tweets contained opinion. The difference between these two groups is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 56.9(1)$, $p < 0.001$).

As indicated by Table 3, opinion was significantly related to mentions of candidate characteristics ($r = 0.107$, $p < 0.001$). Journalists with national outlets included more opinion in their tweets ($r = 0.133$, $p < 0.001$), while local news outlets included less ($r = -0.133$, $p < 0.001$). Reporters and commentators with cable outlets were more likely to include opinion ($r = 0.143$, $p < 0.001$), while reporters with broadcast outlets steered away from opinion ($r = -0.118$, $p < 0.001$).

Discussion

Taken together, the results of this study suggest that some dimensions of the conventional style of political reporting emerged more strongly on Twitter than others among political journalists covering the 2012 Republican and Democratic conventions. Political journalists tended to use Twitter’s orientation toward openness and personal expression to practice a somewhat more transparent form of campaign journalism that is less bound by the norm of objectivity. Yet they also employed it in ways that reinforced their own gatekeeping authority over political information and commentary, rather than opening the conversation up to those outside the profession.

The data indicate that journalists covering presidential politics during the conventions expressed opinions in ways and to a degree that has not traditionally been permissible in their primary professional forums. This finding may be a manifestation of journalists’ attempts to negotiate the complex tensions between an objectivity norm to simply observe and report, and the expectations of their fellow Twitter users to provide a stream of wry commentary on live events—perhaps giving rise to an emerging form of opinionated online journalism. Reporters for national outlets, especially cable news, appear to be leading this embrace of opinion. At the same time, our data suggest that political reporters who use Twitter have become more comfortable passing along judgments about candidate appearances, mannerisms, or other personal characteristics than sharing opinions on policy issues.

Twitter also appears to contribute to somewhat greater transparency about the daily work of journalism. Yet our data do not suggest a very substantive form of transparency: the job talk found here was not connected to many of the issues or people the reporters were covering (since it was negatively correlated with voter strategy, horse race coverage, policy, and candidate characteristics), and did not necessarily constitute the sort of meaningful transparency that allows the public to see how political news is shaped (e.g., a tweet by a prominent CNN reporter that mentioned a “soggy, but fun conversation” with

other reporters outside the convention hall). What looks at first sight like transparency might actually be more like narcissism—a journalistic version of the “lifecasting” that critics of Twitter have bemoaned.

Meanwhile, reporters and commentators in this study were fairly consistent in not allowing Twitter to disrupt traditional one-way gatekeeping flows. They overwhelmingly linked to themselves and their fellow reporters, retweeted their fellow reporters, and only very rarely sought any information from their followers. There was almost no evidence of any gatekeeping influence being exercised by anyone outside the ring of professional political reporters. The traditional campaign journalism “bubble,” in other words, does not appear to have burst.

Our findings regarding horse race and strategic coverage on Twitter are puzzling. Our data suggest that these conventional, predominant frames for covering politics in traditional news outlets do not translate to Twitter, but we are not convinced that horse race and strategic coverage is on the decline in the Twitterverse. One explanation for this non-finding is methodological: perhaps our simple measures of mentions of candidate polling and voter blocs were an inadequate proxy for horse race and strategic coverage. Twitter’s highly condensed form (a maximum of 140 characters per tweet) may make it challenging to train coders how to recognize the strategic news frame that suffuses typical campaign coverage.

Another noteworthy finding here is how little Twitter was used for fact-checking. This is especially notable because vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan’s Republican convention speech was widely criticized for making a number of factually incorrect claims (see Calderone 2012). But again, this finding may be an artifact of the difficulty of defining “fact-checking” in the context of Twitter.

The relative lack of horse race coverage, fact-checking, and information-seeking might leave one to wonder what *did* appear in the more than 1600 tweets generated by these journalists during the conventions. A significant proportion were mere brief descriptive notes on convention theatrics, such as this stream of tweets that appeared in the wee hours of the last night of the Republican convention: “balloons?,” “Lotsa balloons still in the rafters,” “More balloons,” “The balloon drop . . .” Many others offered slice-of-life tidbits from the convention floor, some laced with subtle commentary (e.g., “Paul Lycos, AZ delegation, w Hispanics for Mitt sign,” with a link to a photo; “Protesters not greeted well . . . hit with ‘USA’ chants. Romney has to stop. Mission accomplished?”). In other words, a great deal of the Twitter traffic contained little substantive content regarding the candidates, policies, or issue debates.

Conclusion

This study contributes to an under-studied population of reporters using Twitter—*political* journalists—and its findings should not be generalized too widely. Although our sample of journalists and their tweets is relatively large and varied, our data are based upon tweets generated around the 2012 party conventions. It is worth considering that journalists may use Twitter differently during these multi-day periods of pre-staged activities than during less fully orchestrated moments in the campaign. Journalists might use Twitter somewhat differently when they gather with large national

audiences to watch the conventions—a format that perhaps invites a more heckling, opinionated style.

Certainly, this study opens as many questions as it answers. Our data suggest important lines of future inquiry, and contribute to a rapidly developing literature on how reporters are incorporating social media into their reporting routines. Political reporters used Twitter during the party conventions, we find, in ways that adhered to some standard conventions of political journalism—tight management of the “gate” in particular—but seemed to stray from others. It will be important to more fully examine differences across media types that, having different audiences, use social media in varied ways, and to examine more closely how the conventions of objectivity on social media platforms are evolving.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank Jose Araiza, Jonathan Lowell, Rachel Mourao, Magdalena Saldaña, and Pei Zheng for their research assistance, and Mitchell Wright for designing and maintaining an innovative data-capture system.

NOTES

1. Twitter use is expanding quickly but is much more common among journalists and politicians than among the general public, only a small percentage of whom use it (Pew Research Center 2012; see also Farhi 2009b; Pew Research Center 2011a).
2. Today, reporters are less likely to ride the bus, or the campaign plane, than in Crouse’s time, in part because of the expense and partly because of new media tools that make it easier to cover the campaign virtually rather than from inside the “bubble,” as reporters often refer to it (see Farhi 2009a).
3. This lack of transparency about campaigns’ often meticulous efforts to manage the news explains the firestorm surrounding the *New York Times*’ revelation that journalists who covered the 2012 presidential race had allowed campaign officials to vet quotations from the candidates and surrogates before publication—in exchange for reporters’ continued access to the candidates (Peters 2012). This so-called “quote approval,” the *New York Times* reported, “has become accepted in Washington and on the campaign trail” (para. 3). What had not become accepted, it seems, is public knowledge of the practice.
4. As Mitchelstein and Boczkowski (2009, 575) observe, in the emerging research on social media and journalism, “most studies continue to apply existing lenses to look at new phenomena,” although “the potential for theoretical renewal is becoming increasingly evident.” The opposite problem seems also to be the case: that too little effective use is being made of research conducted on mainstream or traditional news by scholars taken with the novelty of new media platforms and tools. Indeed, as Mitchelstein and Boczkowski also observe in their review of that literature, “Historical matters have not figured prominently in the scholarship about online news production [which] runs the risk of overemphasizing novelty and gives a sense of shallowness to the empirical findings and associated theoretical conclusions of many studies” (575).
5. Of course, as Singer (2001) has noted, this gatekeeping function has been eroding since the advent of online news. Debates have continued, however, about the degree to which

gatekeeping persists even in seemingly non-editorial processes like citizen bloggers-as-aggregators.

6. The tension between the professional objectivity norm and how reporters might really use social media is evident in a recent version of the *Washington Post's* social media policy, which states: "nothing we do must call into question the impartiality of our news judgment. We never abandon the guidelines that govern the separation of news from opinion, the importance of fact and objectivity, the appropriate use of language and tone, and other hallmarks of our brand of journalism" (Hohmann 2011, 44).
7. We chose states to include in our sample based on advertising spending at the time the sample was compiled (see Associated Press 2012; New York Times 2012). Pennsylvania was later surpassed by spending in Wisconsin and New Hampshire and was No. 10 in campaign ad spending as of October 23, 2012. Because many state and local outlets have at best one reporter assigned to cover national politics, we chose all reporters who listed politics as a beat who were available in the database within each state.
8. The full coding scheme is available upon request from the authors.
9. The final sample of 1237 tweets did not differ from the main sample of 1629 in terms of distribution across platforms: tweets from Web journalists (37.4 percent), print newspaper and magazine (30.5 percent), cable television (20.1 percent), broadcast television (11.2 percent), radio (0.5 percent), and wire services (0.2 percent); national outlets created the bulk of the tweets (82.1 percent), while the rest came from local or regional news outlets (17.9 percent). Full results of zero-order correlations between news outlet types and tweet characteristics are available from the authors on request.
10. Overall agreement and Krippendorff's alphas by variable: Tweet focus, 89 percent, $\alpha = 0.84$; link source, 94 percent, $\alpha = 0.91$; retweet type, 100 percent, $\alpha = 1$; retweet source, 100 percent, $\alpha = 1$; opinion, 89 percent, $\alpha = 0.78$; information-seeking, 99 percent, $\alpha = 0.80$; job talk, 93 percent, $\alpha = 0.77$; personal information, 99 percent, $\alpha = 0.66$; voter bloc, 99 percent, $\alpha = 0.94$; horse race, 99 percent, $\alpha = 0.89$; policy issues, 99 percent, $\alpha = 0.96$; fact-checking, 100 percent, $\alpha = 1$.
11. Interestingly, 86.3 percent of those retweets contained no additional comment by the journalists passing on someone else's tweet.
12. Coders were instructed to determine the identity of the Twitter user whom the journalist in our sample directly retweeted—not the Twitter user who originally wrote the tweet. While the latter would certainly be a good measure of the degree to which outsider voices can be included in journalists' Twitter conversation, as a practical matter it can be difficult to trace the progeny of retweets, particularly those that are retweeted widely.

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