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US POLITICAL JOURNALISTS' USE OF TWITTER

Lessons from 2012 and a Look Ahead

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"The Twitter Election"

Early in 2012, Twitter CEO Dick Costello predicted that 2012 would be "the Twitter election" (Milian 2012). While it may be difficult to quantify the effect of the platform on the presidential election, the campaign was certainly a hit on Twitter. Election topics were frequently trending, and Election Day set a record for the most-tweeted event with as many as 327,000 tweets per minute (Hockenson 2013). The two US presidential elections in the platform's short history have been major drivers of Twitter activity, causing jumps in subscriptions (Snyder 2008). By the end of 2012, Twitter reported 288 million monthly active users (Holt 2013) who posted nearly 400 million tweets per day (Tsukayama 2013).

Before the election began, a team of researchers at the University of Texas at Austin set up a system to collect tweets from hundreds of political journalists in order to study how they used the microblogging platform to gather and disseminate information about the election. The system collected more than 600,000 tweets from these journalists and almost 2 million more tweets from other users interacting with them. Unsurprisingly, activity was heightened around political events such as the conventions—typically seen as the official kickoff of the presidential campaigns—the presidential debates, and Election Day. The data offered clear pictures of challenges to journalistic norms, shifts in gatekeeping, and the ways in which journalists interact with each other and the general public.

This chapter collects and reflects upon findings from a series of studies using the data, both qualitative and quantitative, examining how political journalists used Twitter during the 2012 election (Coddington et al. 2014; Lawrence et al. 2014; Molyneux 2014; Mourão 2014; Mourão et al. 2015). A discussion of the relationship between Twitter and journalism is followed by an overview

of research methods used. Main findings across the studies are then presented, providing a broad view of political journalism on Twitter in 2012. This chapter concludes with a discussion of what has changed since 2012 and Twitter's potential role in future elections.

Twitter and Journalism

Twitter is a microblogging service of many potential uses. Although it was not intended as a journalistic tool, journalists have appropriated it as such. Journalists frequently read Twitter as the "new AP wire" (Lawrence 2012), checking what others are saying in order to keep a finger on the political world's pulse. Twitter is thus frequently considered one of many "inputs" from which journalists draw tips and raw information as they report. This chapter, however, focuses on journalistic output on Twitter. Journalists create narratives and establish their professional identity and journalistic authority through producing a new type of news output characterized by smaller or "atomized" units of information—the tweet—that travel across timelines and networks.
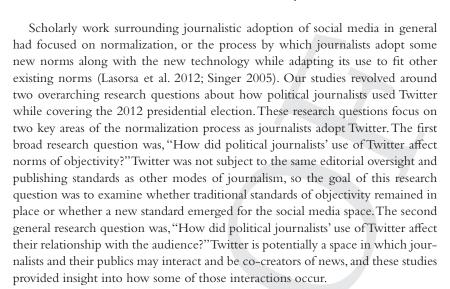
Twitter, therefore, is a locus for "collective interpretation of key public events" (Zelizer 1993, p. 219), strengthening ties of identity and interpretive community. In other words, journalists use Twitter as a channel for informal networking, negotiating narratives about themselves and their work, and engaging in discourses that define what it means to be a political reporter on the campaign trail. Thus, how journalists use Twitter has more to do with the profession of journalism than with the public's access to news.

Political journalists acting together in an insular community is not a new idea (Crouse 1973). The novelty is that the audience can now observe these interpretive and discursive processes that were previously invisible to the public eye, potentially affecting what has been called journalists' primary currency: credibility. Yet, the content produced by journalists on Twitter does not constitute total access to the backstage of campaign reporting, but rather another type of news output, produced while news is being gathered, processed, and prepared for distribution in a polished news product. Tweets from the campaign trail display real-time "atomized" content; that is, simple blocks of stenography, minor commentary, snark, and self-promotion that can be shared, discussed, and reorganized in different ways across multiple timelines (Cohn 2013; Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2012; Papacharissi 2014).

The studies presented here treat Twitter as an important nexus of journalistic activity, one where journalists produce a different type of news product than what appears on television, in papers, or elsewhere online. A survey of journalists suggests that microblogs like Twitter are used by a majority of US journalists and are journalists' most commonly used social media (Willnat and Weaver 2014).

Scholarly work surrounding journalistic adoption of social media in general had focused on normalization, or the process by which journalists adopt some new norms along with the new technology while adapting its use to fit other existing norms (Lasorsa et al. 2012; Singer 2005). Our studies revolved around two overarching research questions about how political journalists used Twitter while covering the 2012 presidential election. These research questions focus on two key areas of the normalization process as journalists adopt Twitter. The first broad research question was, "How did political journalists' use of Twitter affect norms of objectivity?" Twitter was not subject to the same editorial oversight and publishing standards as other modes of journalism, so the goal of this research question was to examine whether traditional standards of objectivity remained in place or whether a new standard emerged for the social media space. The second general research question was, "How did political journalists' use of Twitter affect their relationship with the audience?" Twitter is potentially a space in which journalists and their publics may interact and be co-creators of news, and these studies provided insight into how some of those interactions occur.
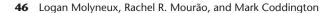
Research Methods

Data was collected and analyzed through a combination of automated and manual techniques, similar to methods advocated by Lewis, Zamith, and Hermida (2013). First, a purposive sample of political journalists was selected. The sample included campaign reporters working for prominent national news outlets and those working for 76 other outlets located in key swing states: Ohio, Florida, North Carolina, Colorado, Iowa, Virginia, Nevada, and Pennsylvania. These were the top eight states in campaign advertising spending through July 2012 (when the sample was drawn; see Associated Press 2012; Parlapiano 2012). The sample was selected to include a broad array of political reporters, including those working for print media, broadcast television, cable, radio, wire services, and online outlets such as *Politico* and *BuzzFeed*. Individual journalists were chosen using a database curated by Cision, a media contact and marketing service. Both reporters and commentators were included, but editors were excluded. The final list of 430 political reporters and commentators with active Twitter accounts included 74 identified as "analyst," "columnist," "commentator," or "contributor" (17 percent)—in other words, journalists more likely to produce opinion-oriented work.

A custom-built software program was used to monitor all 430 of these Twitter feeds for updates and save new tweets to an archive. The program used Twitter's application programming interface (API) to communicate with Twitter every 15 minutes from the day before conventions started, August 26, 2012, to November 18, 2012, shortly after Election Day. The first study conducted a content analysis of tweets sent during the conventions (Lawrence et al. 2014). Two more studies conducted qualitative analyses of the tweets—one focusing on retweets during

the conventions (Molyneux 2014) and another focusing on tweets during the first presidential debate (Mourão 2014). Two other studies conducted content analyses of tweets from the presidential debates—one focusing on fact-checking (Coddington et al. 2014) and another focusing on humor (Mourão et al. 2015). This chapter integrates findings from these five studies, identifying and discussing key themes that emerged across the analyses.

Findings

Our analyses suggest that journalists partially adapted to the new medium in an effort to self-brand and gain attention online, with behaviors that slightly challenged objectivity. Among these, we found that minor commentary, job talk, and humor were the most prevalent. Journalists also used Twitter as a way to gain attention and build a personal brand. And while the public may now be able to observe these "goings on," they are still primarily relegated to the sidelines as journalists interact with each other.

Challenges to Objectivity

The first research question referred to the challenges posed by the new medium to the norm of objectivity. In the 2012 presidential election coverage, journalists negotiated the boundaries of objectivity, often mixing their reporting with humor and commentary. However, we argue that this is part of a strategic goal to get attention online and these discourses rarely provided major opinion, thoughtful critiques, or meaningful challenges to the political players involved in the election.

One of the bedrocks of American journalism, the norm of objectivity states that journalists are supposed to report the facts, without being influenced by their own values and opinions (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2007; Schudson 2001). In practice, objectivity usually translates into "balancing" stories by quoting two sides of a dispute, and letting the audience decide who is right and wrong based on the presented facts. Tuchman (1978) contends that this type of objectivity serves as a ritualistic performance that protects journalism as a profession.

The journalists in our sample attempted to maintain this form of "professional" objectivity in the competitive landscape of social media (Coddington et al. 2014). But rather than pass judgments about who's right or wrong, political journalists chose to engage in less subversive types of opinion, most notably minor commentary. This type of opinion-sharing was present in almost a third of political reporters' tweets at the conventions (Lawrence et al. 2014). The reporters analyzed opted to offer their commentary on candidates' traits, the political parties and campaign management, focusing on the "horse race" and strategy. These are familiar aspects of political campaign reporting (see Aalberg et al. 2011 for a review), but on Twitter this reporting is injected with commentary and personal takes.

Another form of objectivity derives from the scientific method and takes shape through the practice of "fact-checking." In this mode, journalists build independence through verifying information and weighing evidence rather than from listening to the "two sides of the story." While Twitter could provide the space for real-time collaborative fact-checking, our results show that stenography—providing a simple record of candidates' statements—was a much more common use of Twitter than fact-checking involving evidence or judgments on the veracity of statements (Coddington et al. 2014). This echoes journalists' preference for "professional" objectivity, or the prevailing "he said/she said" type of reporting. In fact, less than 10 percent of all the tweets collected during the presidential debates dealt with factual claims at all. Instead, findings from all the papers in our research project suggest the bulk of the content produced by journalists on Twitter is a mix of humor, job talk, and minor opinion and commentary.

Retweets: Tweeting at Arm's Length

The findings are similar when considering Twitter's retweet function. Journalists have used it in attempting to strike the balance between objectivity and the type of discourse that is rewarded in social media. Using retweets, journalists pass along messages from others wholesale or (when quoting a tweet) append their own commentary to the original message. The key is that credit (and, importantly, blame) for the content of the message is given to the author of the original message rather than the journalist. In this way, journalists signal that the message should not be considered their own opinion, despite their role in curating it.

Perhaps not so surprisingly, our findings reveal that the retweet function was not predominantly used to spread news and information relevant to the election, but instead to send along bits of opinion and humor. This suggests that retweets had a role that was different from quoting speakers in a news story. Instead, retweets contained information that is not commonly part of finished news products at all. Journalists preferred to retweet messages that contained subtle commentary rather than strong editorial positions. While they were willing to use the function to share messages about themselves and their work, minor commentary, and humorous messages, reporters in our sample steered clear of retweeting controversial messages (Molyneux 2014; Mourão et al. 2015).

A Tweet and a Laugh

Another development related to shifts in objectivity norms is the fact that humor takes up a large part of political journalists' Twitter chatter. Humor has always had a place in US politics, from the earliest political cartoons, but it is particularly common on Twitter, where political journalists must blend with celebrities and

myriad other social connections. Jokes were one of the most common forms of retweets (Molyneux 2014). Snark, a portmanteau of "snide" and "remark," was particularly popular in connection with candidate claims during speeches and debates. Humorous narratives, such as "Big Bird," "binders full of women," and "horses and bayonets" became driving forces of journalistic discourse online, reverberating between timelines for hours. However, our findings suggest that humor only partially challenged objectivity, with journalists employing critical humor mostly to target the media themselves, and resorting to the retweet function to pass along biting satire (Mourão et al. 2015).

Overall, about one-fifth of the tweets from all types of journalists working for all types of media outlets contained an attempt at humor. This suggests a growing acceptance of the rhetorical device on Twitter and journalists' willingness to depart from objectivity through tweeting and retweeting jokes. The preferred targets were the political actors, in particular Mitt Romney, but also included the political process and the media itself (Mourão et al. 2015).

Yet a deeper look at the type of humor employed revealed that professional journalists were reluctant to employ the more sophisticated form of satire, especially when targeting political actors. Only 11 percent of all the humorous tweets were satirical; that is, including elements of aggression, play, laughter, and judgment (Caufield 2008). When employing satire, journalists targeted the moderator and the media themselves, avoiding political criticism toward candidates and campaigns (Mourão et al. 2015).

Humor was also more prevalent on retweets than original tweets, and the difference was bigger for satirical pieces: satire was twice as likely to come in the form of a retweet as in an original post. Once again, we speculate that the retweet function allowed reporters to distance themselves from the critical jokes, retaining the appearance of objectivity.

While it is unclear if the format of Twitter is too short to be conducive to satire, we did observe that the sophisticated form of humor was used in self-deprecatory jokes about the role of the media in covering campaigns. As such, we suspect that journalists have mastered the format, but have opted to stay away from major controversies, using humor and minor opinion as a way to gain attention without really challenging entrenched norms of campaign reporting.

To summarize our studies' findings related to the first research question, about Twitter's influence on traditional norms of objectivity, it is clear that political journalists push the boundaries of objectivity on Twitter but do not entirely redraw them. When engaging in commentary, journalists chose to stay away from opinions that could be perceived as partisan. When engaging in humor, they avoided the more sophisticated form of critical satire. When fact-checking, they resorted to stenography more often than they offered judgments on the veracity of claims. Together, this suggests that rather than a major challenge to journalistic norms, Twitter serves as a place for minor disruptions.[1] In the next sections, we argue that these disruptions are part of a performative strategy and that journalists

have attempted to find balance between professional objectivity and the type of openness rewarded in social media.

Tweeting as Personal Branding

The second broad research question asked what effect political journalists' use of Twitter had on journalists' relationship with their audience. Our findings add to those of Marwick and boyd (2011) on micro-celebrities on Twitter who adapt content to an imagined audience through strategic self-commodification—that is, deliberately appealing to followers in a way to publicize oneself as a good or service being offered. Self-commodification becomes more evident by the way journalists, especially those working for national news outlets, have tried to distance themselves from news organizations. Through self-referential tweets and retweets, the reporters in our sample invested in their personal brand through an openness about their lives that is not traditionally permissible in main media outlets.
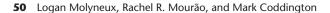
The process of personal branding took shape in two particular ways: direct self-promotion and through the retweet function. When engaging in direct self-promotion, journalists frequently tweeted links to stories produced by themselves. When using the retweet function, journalists shared with their followers selected messages about themselves, which included not only praise, but also hate mail. This process of curating and sharing messages about themselves with the public represents an attempt to develop a personal brand, breaking the "fourth wall" between media practitioners and their audiences (Molyneux 2014). This finding has inspired other studies, which have confirmed that journalists consciously work to create a personal brand by engaging their audiences and building relationships (Molyneux and Holton 2015).

Keeping Twitter's Gates

Even though great potential exists for journalists and the public to use Twitter as a shared space in which to collaboratively collect and distribute news and information, our research suggests that this potential was not reached during the 2012 election. Journalists retweeted other journalists and political insiders more than 80 percent of the time, giving very little attention to members of the general public. A qualitative look at retweets found that journalists rarely incorporated audiences' comments and opinions into their output on Twitter, allowing other journalists and political actors to dominate their retweets (Molyneux 2014). Additionally, less than 2 percent of the tweets in the conventions sample were calls for information or crowdsourcing, another potential way to involve the public (Lawrence et al. 2014). So while the public may have been engaging with the news about the conventions on Twitter, political journalists reserved the spotlight for themselves.

This suggests that gatekeeping still plays an important role on Twitter, at least in the political arena. While it may be that, with an abundance of online information sources, the value of any one of them is diminished (Williams and Delli Carpini 2000), individual journalists still make gatekeeping decisions about what to pass on to others. Some suggest that the locus of journalistic gatekeeping has now shifted to social media (Zeller and Hermida 2015) because journalists are seizing the opportunity to connect with their audiences directly, cultivating followings and relationships (Molyneux and Holton 2015). This positions journalists as curators or guides in a sea of digital information. Many journalists in our samples seemed happy to fill this role, highlighting and commenting on key moments of the conventions and debates. But it's worth repeating that the majority of what came through political journalists' Twitter feeds was not what would normally be considered news for the purposes of filling a newspaper, television broadcast, or website.

Tweeting's Thin Transparency

Because tweets are public by default, Journalists' discourse on Twitter holds potential for a more transparent form of news production and political communication. Journalists' increased use of opinion in their one-liners as they live-tweet political events—and their retweets of similarly opinionated comments by others (Molyneux 2014; Mourão et al. 2015)—help reveal to the public the attitudes and beliefs that lie behind the comparatively poker-faced political coverage of their main professional output. And their real-time tweeting of disputed factual claims and counterclaims helps render the contested process of fact-checking more visible to audiences (Coddington et al. 2014). In our study of journalists' tweeting from the 2012 conventions, we found that 15 percent of their political tweets contained information or comments on the daily work of journalism itself; the journalists at the conventions talked about their own work more often than policy, the candidates' characteristics, or political strategy (Lawrence et al. 2014). Through Twitter, political journalists are giving a segment of the public a window into some of the processes and attitudes that affect their production of news. Compared to a decade or two ago, audiences—at least those who follow these journalists on Twitter—are getting much more of a glimpse into the worlds of the journalists who produce their political news.

But the window that journalists on Twitter provide their audiences into their work is just that—a window. The transparency they provide is a thin version of the concept, one devoid of significant interaction and tending heavily toward the frivolous and minute rather than the substantial and insightful. The 2012 conventions study found that tweets in which journalists commented on their work weren't connected with substantial issues but were instead negatively correlated with mentions of policy, candidate characteristics, and political strategy (Lawrence

et al. 2014). The information journalists offered in their tweets consisted more of superficial details of their work conditions, such as the weather or the movements of the media pack, than of the organizational or epistemological processes by which their news reports were produced. Self-disclosure on Twitter can toe a fine line between transparency and narcissism, and political journalists often appeared to fall on the latter side.

Media sociologist Michael Karlsson (2010) breaks the concept of journalistic transparency into disclosure transparency, through which journalists are open about how they produce news, and participatory transparency, which aims to involve the audience in the news production process itself. If political journalists' Twitter discourse displays little in the way of substantial disclosure transparency, it holds even less participatory transparency. Audiences may be able to vaguely see what is happening within journalists' bubble on Twitter, but they cannot puncture it in any substantial way. The transparency political journalists offer on Twitter is primarily performative, a way of broadcasting a highly selective view of their work to present themselves to their colleagues and audiences as savvy, witty observers of the political process. It is not meant to open the process of political journalism to a larger group of people in a truly transparent sense.

Looking to Twitter's Future in Political Journalism

By now, the novelty of Twitter has worn off. Supervisors at news organizations are beginning to clamp down and impose regulations regarding use and conduct (Holton and Molyneux 2015). Standard practices are beginning to be widely adopted. In other words, Twitter has become incorporated as part of the news ecosystem, and journalists' tweets constitute a news product. In upcoming elections, we expect to see less experimentation and more homogeneity in style and approach. There are a few important developments to watch, however, including changes to Twitter that emphasize images and video. In addition, Twitter now interacts with other social media in ways that separate its role from that of other media.

Changes in the Platform

Twitter has been in existence for nearly a decade, which may seem like a lifetime in social media years, but is in fact quite a short period for a technological platform to be considered stable and settled. Indeed, the technological affordances of Twitter are undergoing significant changes almost monthly, especially as the company aims to keep its user base and revenue continually growing to please its public shareholders. These changes are sure to affect the way journalists, politicians, and their various publics interact on this network in ways scholars have not previously examined. One major change that could

prove a particularly fruitful arena for researchers has been the rise of images posted on Twitter, as the company has moved to more deeply integrate images into users' timelines. Since the 2012 election, Twitter has put image previews and auto-playing videos in users' timelines (Sippey 2013b; Vranica 2015); launched the six-second video app Vine, whose videos have shown remarkably fast propagation within large and dense networks (Sippey 2013a; Zhang et al. 2014); and bought and launched the live-streaming video app Periscope (Koh and Rusli 2015). In addition, it is also now common for people wishing to post longer blocks of text to Twitter to take a screenshot of text written in a notes app. The practice, called "screenshorting," is particularly common among celebrities (Williams 2015).

While social media images and memes have received significant scholarly attention (e.g., Bayerl and Stoynov 2014; Kharroub and Bas 2015; Peck 2014), the images and videos posted by politicians and journalists, particularly on Twitter and within a campaign context, have received relatively little scrutiny. Images and videos are playing a growing role in how campaign news and messages are being framed on Twitter, and scholars studying political communication through Twitter and other social networks would do well to examine the images posted there as thoroughly as they have the texts. However, we must be careful not to overstate the influence of social media images on political outcomes. For instance, some suggested that Periscope, which allows users to stream live video to their followers, would transform the campaign media, a claim of which we remain skeptical (Calderone 2015; Moody 2015; Nielsen 2015). Even so, social media images are an increasingly important part of online political discourse that must be attended to.

Differentiating between Twitter and Facebook

As Twitter matures, we have also begun to see more specialized uses for it, particularly in relation to politics. While Facebook and Twitter can be associated together as the two major US social media companies of the moment, they serve distinct purposes within the online political information environment. Facebook continues to be major driver of web traffic to news sites and other political content, and the largest single online location for political discussion and sharing of news content. Twitter is much smaller by comparison and not as significant a traffic source, but serves more as a forum for chatter among journalists, politicos, and highly engaged users, as well as journalistic tool for gathering information and opinions from those users. Thus Twitter may be shifting toward a place where journalists, political actors, and heavily invested users can interact and compete to set campaign frames, while Facebook is more of a mass network in which those frames stabilize and spread more widely. This top-down flow is a characteristic of Twitter's network that was identified relatively early in its history (Kwak et al. 2010), but researchers should be closely attuned to how Twitter and Facebook,

as well as other social network sites, are crystallizing in those distinct purposes as those scholars seek to contextualize their work.

Conclusion

Interestingly, Twitter's growth has slowed somewhat. The company reported 287 million monthly active users at the end of 2014, growing by between 1 and 5 percent each quarter since then, except for in the final quarter of 2015, when growth was flat. The company reported the same number of users—320 million—at the end of 2015 as it had in the third quarter of that year (Twitter 2016). Upcoming elections offer a host of opportunities to answer questions about political journalism in a digital, mobile age. Will Twitter continue to be a hub of news and political activity? Will the conversation continue to be dominated by elite political journalists? Will journalists be participating using images and video alongside text tweets? Now that the normalization process is largely complete, have there been any changes in behavior? If journalists primarily commune with other journalists on Twitter, how will campaigns tailor their messages there?

Whatever changes await for Twitter, journalism and campaigns, the findings presented here from 2012 provide a firm foundation to address these questions in future elections. Our research suggests there have been minor disruptions to objectivity, mainly characterized by superficial job talk, attempts to humor, and the injection of opinion. Political journalists use Twitter as a tool for personal branding and community-building. And while all these activities are conducted in plain view of the public, participation in the conversation is mainly restricted to other journalists and political elites. Thus, even as journalists and the public mingle on Twitter, journalists have reserved for themselves a gatekeeping position.

Note

1   It is important to note that national journalists, especially those working for newspapers and online outlets, were more likely to use humor and invest in self-branding than local reporters. Overall, local journalists shared less opinion, less personal content, and less backstage information.
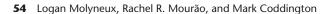
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