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The more attacks, the more retweets: Trump's and Clinton's agenda setting on Twitter

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to contribute to the agenda setting theory and political campaign literature by examining candidates' tweets and their effects on voter reactions in the context of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Content analysis of Donald Trump's and Hillary Clinton's 3-month tweets ($N = 1575$) revealed that half of their tweets were attacks, and those attacks were effective in attracting favorites and retweets for both candidates. Their tweets reflected their issue agendas highlighted on campaign websites, and they mainly emphasized issues owned by their parties in both venues. Some of the issues Trump stressed in his tweets (i.e., media bias and Clinton's alleged dishonesty) drew significantly more favorites and retweets, suggesting public agenda setting possibilities through Twitter. None of the issues Clinton emphasized were significant predictors of favorites and retweets. However, visual elements such as pictures and videos were effective in bringing voter reactions for Clinton. While Clinton sent twice as many tweets as Trump did during the three months, Trump's tweet received in average three times as many favorites and retweets as Clinton's. Overall, the results show that Trump was more successful than Clinton in drawing public attention to preferred issues through Twitter.

1. Introduction

Since social media emerged as a platform for news and political discourse in the past decade (Shirky 2011; West, 2013), political actors have actively used the new digital outlets to reach out to wide audiences, raise awareness of issues they care about, promote their viewpoints, mobilize supporters, and receive feedback in real time (Broersma & Graham, 2012; Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010; Kapko, 2016). Some studies suggest that social media activities are closely related to electoral outcomes (DiGrazia, McKelvey, Bollen, & Rojas, 2013; Kruikemeier, 2014; Williams & Gulati, 2008), which seem to motivate political candidates to manage multiple social media accounts during campaigns. In particular, Twitter has become a necessity in political campaigns. Since President Obama's social media campaign, which successfully mobilized young voters, political consultants have heavily relied on Twitter to push their candidates' agendas (Kapko, 2016). According to Adam Sharp, Twitter's head of news, government, and elections, "it was less Twitter coming to politics, and more politics coming to Twitter and finding it as a platform to communicate and to organize effectively without a lot of the costs" (Newkirk, 2016). Twitter allows candidates to put forth their opinions, and gauge voter reactions without passing through mainstream media's gatekeeping process (Wang, Luo, Niemi, Li, & Hu, 2016). Also, candidates' tweets that are highly shared by people are usually picked up by journalists, shaping their news coverage (O'Connor, 2009; Parmelee & Bichard, 2011; Parmelee, 2014). In the 2012 U.S. presidential race, a 4–6% increase in the number of Twitter mentions of

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a politician was related to a 10% increase in the number of media mentions for the person (Hong & Nadler, 2012).

Twitter was indeed a key battleground in the 2016 U.S. presidential race (McCabe, 2015). In 2016, all of the U.S. presidential candidates used Twitter to deliver attention-grabbing one-liners to the public (Hwang & Wooley, 2016). In particular, Donald Trump, then Republican candidate, received huge public attention as well as heavy media criticism for his unconventional campaign tweets including a 3AM outburst against a former Miss Universe and repeated insults at the news media and other politicians. The news media criticized Trump's incendiary and uncivil tweets as un-presidential. At the same time, he was evaluated as to have "mastered Twitter in a way no candidate for president ever has" (Barbaro, 2015) and "built his brand" with "striking online dominance" (Barbaro, 2015). His Twitter account @realDonaldTrump was called "a force, a newsmaker, an agitator, and American political phenomenon that combines the high profile of a presidential candidate with the reach and velocity of social media" (Keohane, 2016). Trump won the election, and it was said that his controversial Twitter strategies worked to his advantage by getting him the most public attention and driving public discourse on the problems of the news media (see Pew Research Center, 2016a; Tabor & Wise, 2016). However, despite the increasing roles Twitter has played in political campaigns, little is known about how candidates promote their issue agendas (i.e., issues they attempt to draw public and media attention to) on Twitter and what the implications are.

The present study aims to contribute to the political campaign and agenda setting literature by examining major-party presidential candidates' Twitter issue agendas and Twitter users' reactions in the context of the 2016 U.S. election. First, by content-analyzing tweets of then U.S. presidential nominees, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, posted during the last three months of the campaign until a week before Election Day (Aug 1–Oct 31, 2016; $N = 1575$; 1024 for Clinton, 551 for Trump), we examined if the issues they emphasized on Twitter reflected each party's issue ownership and the issue agendas highlighted on their campaign websites. We also investigated the prevalence of attack tweets during the final stage of the campaign. Next, with a series of regression analyses, we examined if attack tweets attracted significantly more retweets and favorites. Finally, we tested if issues each candidate emphasized received significantly more retweets and favorites, which would suggest public agenda setting possibilities through Twitter. The results will shed light on how President Donald Trump used Twitter during his campaign and what effects it might have had.

2. Literature review

2.1. Agenda setting and agenda building

McCombs and Shaw's (1972) initial agenda setting theory revolves around the transfer of the media agenda to the public agenda and its contingent conditions (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981). It posits that the media tells people what to think about by heavily reporting on several issues that the media think are important. The corresponding object salience between the media and the public became an important evidence of the media effect in the 1970s. The theory implies that only the media can set the public agenda.

Agenda building research appeared as a natural expansion of the original agenda setting research, and focused on the process by which the media agenda or policy agenda were engendered (i.e., how and why certain objects or attributes are selected and emphasized by journalists or policy makers). The theory assumes that while the media set the agenda, political actors, such as governments, political organizations, and activist groups, can influence the media to set the agenda in a way they want, which is a process called agenda-building. Political actors are keen on utilizing the effect of information subsidies they provide journalists with, which includes press releases (Kioussis, Laskin, & Kim, 2011; Kioussis, Mtirook, Wu, & Seltzer, 2006; Lieber & Golan, 2011), video news releases (Harmon & White, 2001), and political advertisements (Holbert, Benoit, & Hansen, 2002; Roberts & McCombs, 1994). By offering such information subsidies, they attempt "to intentionally shape the news agenda by reducing journalists' costs of gathering information" (Berkowitz & Adams, 1990). Studies have found the agenda building effects of information subsidies. Politicians' press releases often appear verbatim in news coverage, and video news releases are used in various TV news programs, influencing story leads, salient issues, and organizational points of view (Kaid, 1976; Kioussis et al., 2011; Kioussis et al., 2006; Ohl, Pincus, Rimmer, & Harrison, 1995).

2.2. Campaign websites and Twitter as agenda setting tools

With the rise of digital and social media in the past few decades, political actors have gained new tools to influence the public agenda – directly or indirectly – such as official campaign websites and social media platforms (Kioussis, Kim, McDevit, & Ostrowski, 2009; Lassen & Brown, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2016b). Most campaign websites contain candidates' short biographies and their stances on several key issues, along with constantly updated campaign news. Unlike older agenda building tools such as media interview or TV ads, campaign websites enable candidates to have almost exclusive control over content with almost no time or cost restrictions while giving voters ubiquitous access to the content. On top of these advantages, social media platforms allow direct, instantaneous, and reciprocal communication with voters (Enli & Skogerbo, 2013; Lassen & Brown, 2011). Candidates' social media messages can be immediately distributed to a wide variety of voters, inviting them to personally respond to the candidates (Kreiss, 2016). In theory, it is possible that candidates set the public agenda through social media even without successful media agenda building. Kellyanne Conway, Donald Trump's senior aide during the campaign, said in an interview that Trump "saw an opportunity to communicate right to people by cutting through the noise or the silence through the social media platforms" (Gurdus, 2016), which implied his public agenda setting effort.

Political candidates also hope their tweets will guide the news media to feature them and the issues they raise prominently or to

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