

Chapter 4

Microblogging and the News: Political Elites and the Ultimate Retweet

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ABSTRACT

A particularly important question that has yet to be addressed about microblogging is the extent to which tweeting from politicians influences the traditional media's news coverage. This chapter seeks to address this oversight by tracking print, broadcast, and online news mentions of tweets from political elites during the five-and-a-half years since microblogging started. Consistent with previous research into "new media" effects and journalistic sourcing patterns, the authors find that although reporters, pundits, and bloggers are increasingly incorporating tweets into their news discussions, the group of Twitterers who are consistently quoted is small and drawn almost exclusively from the ranks of nationally recognizable political leaders. In addition to contributing to the emerging literature on Twitter, the analysis presented here suggests a new way of conceptualizing influence on the site. Rather than focusing strictly on Twitter-centric measures of message diffusion, the findings of this chapter suggest that researchers should begin to consider the ways that tweets can shape political discourse by spreading beyond the fairly narrow world of microblogging.

INTRODUCTION

With its estimated 600 million users (who generate nearly 400 million tweets a day), Twitter – a microblogging and social networking service – has become one of the most visited sites on the Internet (Alexa.com, 2012). Unsurprisingly, political elites in the United States have taken notice of the potential communicative power of Twitter and have recently started to embrace microblogging themselves.¹ Tweeting by candidates and sitting government officials was fairly rare prior to the 2010 election cycle. Indeed, early accounts of elite tweeting found that Twitter use was the exception rather than the rule in 2008 and 2009 (Garrison-Sprenger, 2008; Senak, 2010; Sifry, 2009). By 2010, however, Twitter use among politicians had become nearly universal. In fact, only two senatorial candidates and one gubernatorial candidate did not maintain active Twitter accounts during the 2010 election campaign (Headcount.com, 2012). Nor does tweeting stop once the campaign is over. TweetCongress, an organization whose

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mandate is to increase government transparency by encouraging politicians to microblog, currently lists 387 members of Congress who use Twitter (157 Democrats, 228 Republicans and two Independents). In short, tweeting has become an integral part of the way most politicians campaign and govern.

One particularly important question that has yet to be addressed about microblogging is the extent to which all of this tweeting from politicians influences the traditional media's news coverage. This oversight is, in many ways, a curious one. Communications and public relations scholars have consistently shown that information resources from candidates and government officials, such as political advertisements, direct mail, speeches, press releases and Web page content, can have a strong influence on the content of news reporting (Gandy, 1982; Roberts & McCombs, 1994; Turk, 1986; Turk & Franklin, 1987; Tedesco, 2002; Tedesco, 2005a).² What's more, debates about the impact of so-called "new media" tools on "old media" institutions have been fairly ubiquitous in scholarly circles over the last decade. Indeed, a burgeoning literature on the political consequences of Web 2.0 has illustrated that message board debates, blog discussions and online viral videos exert an important influence over the way that traditional media outlets cover political events.³

This study seeks to address this oversight by tracking print, broadcast and online news mentions of tweets from political elites during the five and a half years since microblogging started. Consistent with previous research into "new media" effects and journalistic sourcing patterns, I find that although reporters, pundits and bloggers are increasingly incorporating tweets into their news discussions, the group of Twitterers who are consistently quoted is small and drawn almost exclusively from the ranks of nationally recognizable political leaders. In addition to contributing to the emerging literature on Twitter, the analysis presented here suggests a new way of conceptualizing influence on the site. Rather than focusing strictly on Twitter-centric measures of message diffusion, the findings of this paper suggest that researchers should begin to consider the ways that tweets can shape political discourse by spreading beyond the fairly narrow world of microblogging.

BACKGROUND

Despite the rapidly expanding popularity of tweeting among members of the American public, political scientists, mass communications scholars and journalism researchers have devoted fairly little attention to explicitly political microblogging by average Internet users. Indeed, apart from the nearly 40 research notes written by Bob Boynton on the dynamics of various political message streams within Twitter⁴, there have been only two case studies of politically oriented microblogging – a minute-by-minute analysis of tweeted responses during a controversial BBC Question time in the UK (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011) and a one week, examination of tweets during the 2010 special Senate election in Massachusetts (Metaxas & Mustafaraj, 2010).

Most of the nascent research into political microblogging has focused on how and why American political elites use Twitter. One group of studies has focused on enumerating the list of factors that lead politicians to start tweeting. These studies have shown that political, demographic and contextual factors explain why some members of Congress begin microblogging while others do not. In a study of members of the House of Representatives, Williams and Gulati (2010) found that Republicans and those with larger campaign resources were more likely to adopt Twitter and more likely to use it extensively. In a similar study of both houses of Congress, Lassen, Brown and Riding (2010) found that Members are more likely to adopt Twitter if their party leaders urge them to, if they are young, or if they serve in

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