The agenda-building function of political tweets

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Abstract

This article expands the scope of agenda-building research, which has traditionally focused on the ability of press releases, press conferences, and political ads to influence media coverage. In-depth interviews with political reporters and editors at US newspapers during the 2012 campaign found that tweets from political leaders are used by journalists in ways that suggest first- and second-level agenda building. Participants gave examples of how political tweets have shaped their coverage in terms of the events they cover, the sources they interview, the quotes they use, and the background information they rely on to decide how to cover an issue. In addition, political tweets that contribute the most to coverage tend to have several elements in common.

Keywords

2012 campaign, agenda building, in-depth interviews, political journalists, Twitter

Agenda-building research examines how certain groups, such as those in politics and business, influence what issues journalists cover as well as how the public views issues (Kiousis et al., 2006; Kiousis and Strömbäck, 2010; Lariscy et al., 2009). During the agenda-building process, those who wish to shape journalists' stories and public perception often disseminate information subsidies, which include speeches, videos, and press releases. Many studies have shown that information subsidies are successful in affecting news media coverage and public opinion (Kiousis et al., 2011; Kiousis and Strömbäck, 2010; Marland, 2012; Turk, 1986).

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With the increase in social media use by journalists and politicians, there has been a call by researchers to explore how politicians use various forms of social media as information subsidies to impact news coverage (Kiousis et al., 2009: 555–556; Lieber and Golan, 2011: 61). The microblog Twitter is an especially significant aspect of social media to focus on because research indicates that journalists are heavy users of Twitter for their job (Farhi, 2009; Lasorsa et al., 2012; Sheffer and Schultz, 2010). Journalists often find story ideas and sources from tweets they receive (O'Connor, 2009; Parmelee and Bichard, 2012; Solis, 2009).

What has been lacking is a detailed understanding of the ways in which agenda building occurs between those in politics and the journalists who cover them. In other words, how do political tweets shape which issues get covered and how those issues are covered? It would also be useful to find out the reasons why political tweets can have the power to influence coverage. Those in politics and journalism would find it helpful to know what makes some tweets more influential than others. To investigate the agenda-building process on Twitter, this exploratory study uses in-depth interviews with newspaper journalists across the United States who use Twitter to cover politics and government. The study is a first step in understanding the many ways in which political tweets shape media coverage as well as why such influence is possible.

Agenda building and politics

Agenda-building research is connected to agenda-setting theory, which argues that 'the public learns the relative importance of issues from the mass media' (Wanta and Hu, 1994: 92). In other words, the choices made by journalists to cover some issues instead of others can influence what issues the public views as important. Since media coverage can be so influential on the public, agenda-building research seeks to find out who influences media coverage. Agenda-building studies examine the degree to which journalists' stories and public opinion can be shaped by outside forces. Agenda building explores how coverage is influenced with regard to many types of objects, including issues, candidates (Lancendorfer and Lee, 2010), foreign countries (Manheim and Albritton, 1984), and corporate reputations (Kiousis et al., 2007). In politics, there are many individuals who attempt to affect media coverage. Political leaders – such as elected officials (Wanta and Foote, 1994), candidates for office (Kiousis et al., 2006), political think tanks, interest groups (Huckins, 1999), foreign governments (Zhang and Cameron, 2003), and political bloggers – often try to guide what issues media outlets feature prominently. Of course, it is also true that political leaders often respond to media coverage in ways that result in leaders and journalists influencing each other (Wanta and Foote, 1994). The focus of the present study, however, concerns how leaders influence journalists.

There are two levels where agenda building occurs. First-level agenda building happens when journalists are persuaded to cover issues and other objects they otherwise might have ignored. Researchers at this level examine linkages between object salience on the part of media coverage and those attempting to influence journalists. Agenda building at the second level refers to journalists being influenced to use certain attributes to portray issues and other objects (Lancendorfer and Lee, 2010). Second-level agenda

building focuses on attribute salience links between coverage and influencers, with attribute salience often examined in terms of substantive and affective dimensions. Substantive attributes, such as conflict and human interest, provide structure to topics, while affective attributes include the positive, negative, or neutral tone being used (Kiousis et al., 2011). Frames also can be seen as attributes of objects, because salience is a key aspect of framing theory (Chyi and McCombs, 2004).

Information subsidies are an important element in first- and second-level agenda building. Some of the information subsidies political leaders send journalists include press releases and digital handouts, such as photos and videos of pseudo-events (Marland, 2012). Information subsidies also come in the form of YouTube videos and Facebook posts (Ragas and Kiousis, 2010; Wigley and Fontenot, 2009). Political leaders hope information subsidies will lead journalists to focus on issues the leaders find desirable and incorporate the leaders' point of view concerning those issues.

There is compelling evidence that information subsidies, such as press releases, often result in first- and second-level agenda building. Press releases helped the Speaker of the House influence what issues The New York Times chose to focus on, as well as how issues, such as government efficiency and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, were portrayed (Kiousis et al., 2011). Candidates for office in states such as Florida and Michigan have used press releases to shape news story content (Kiousis et al., 2006; Lancendorfer and Lee, 2010). Press releases from state agencies in Louisiana were able to influence the coverage of about half of the state's newspaper articles about those agencies (Turk, 1986).

However, agenda-building effects are not uniform across all types of media in every circumstance. The ability of political leaders to shape news coverage seems to be more pronounced at small news outlets rather than at large, nationally recognized news organizations (Marland, 2012). Also, journalists who are geographically distant from political centers of power, such as state capitols, tend to be the most influenced by information subsidies from political leaders (Dunn, 2009). In addition, poor economic conditions can lead newspapers to make more use of information subsidies, such as press releases (Curtin, 1999).

Information subsidies also can vary in value depending on the perceived credibility of the source and the availability of other information (Gandy, 1982). Also, some types of information subsidies, such as press releases, seem most effective at first-level agenda building, while other subsidies, such as candidates' ads, produce more second-level effects (Kiousis et al., 2009).

Reasons to study the agenda-building process qualitatively

Much of the research done on agenda building has employed quantitative methods, such as content analysis and surveys (Kiousis et al., 2006, 2011; Lancendorfer and Lee, 2010; Lariscy et al., 2009). Conducting content analyses and surveys usually involves gathering large, randomly drawn samples of information subsidies and journalists, then analyzing the data with statistical tools to make inferences regarding the degree to which political leaders and others can shape news coverage. While quantitative methods have

greatly contributed to our understanding of the agenda-building relationship, there are several limitations with these methods that qualitative research can help with. In terms of surveys, the closed-ended nature of how participants answer questions can lead to participants leaving out key information that was not specifically asked about (Kwansah-Aidoo, 2001). In addition, agenda-building studies that use content analysis to measure how much news stories mention content from press releases run the risk of equating influence with mention frequency. Doing so may understate the totality of influence. It may be that press release content that does not appear explicitly in news stories is instead used by journalists as background information that guides how they understand, and later cover, an issue (Vermeer, 1982).

The open-ended nature of in-depth interview questions allows researchers to create a more exhaustive list of ways in which information subsidies influence media coverage. Also, in-depth interviews tend to be the best method at uncovering the many reasons why journalists can be influenced by information subsidies. Curtin, who interviewed US journalists as part of an agenda-building study, said in-depth interviews 'yield the most information concerning participants' meaning and can uncover relational patterns and concentrate on the processes involved' (1999: 58). Kwansah-Aidoo, who interviewed West African journalists in an agenda-setting study, noted in-depth interviews afford participants 'room to elaborate' in ways that provide 'a proper understanding of the context within which respondents made their claims and enhances the validity of the conclusions drawn' (2001: 528).

Twitter use in politics and government

Tweets, the information subsidy examined in this study, are messages on Twitter of no more than 140 characters that can be sent via traditional computers and mobile devices. While only in existence since 2006, the microblog Twitter has about 200 million users worldwide. In the US, Twitter is used by the president, a majority of members in Congress, most governors and mayors, as well as candidates and political operatives (Parmelee and Bichard, 2012). Millions of individuals, including journalists, 'follow' political leaders on Twitter, meaning they choose to receive leaders' tweets. In-depth interviews with political Twitter users found that Twitter is the most popular form of social media for engaging in political persuasion (2012: 141–166). Issues that are emphasized in tweets often are subsequently discussed in blogs, talk radio, and news stories. As one participant, a political insider, put it: 'Twitter has the ability to drive traffic across all platforms' (2012: 163).

Because tweets have a track record of being persuasive, Democrats, Republicans, and other politically active groups use tweets to try to shape public opinion. One analysis of thousands of Congressional tweets found that tweets are used primarily 'to disperse information' about issues politicians find important and as 'vehicles for self-promotion' (Golbeck et al., 2010: 1612). In addition, federal and state agencies also use Twitter to promote their activities and raise public awareness of issues they deem important. For example, the US Environmental Protection Agency tweets about public safety issues, and the US Department of Agriculture tweets about actions it is taking to fight childhood obesity (Howard, 2010).

To increase how many Twitter users see political tweets, those in politics and government often include hashtags in their tweets. A hashtag is a word or abbreviation that has the '#' sign in front of it. For example, those on the political left tend to use hashtags such as #p2, which stands for Progressive 2.0. Those on the political right often use #tcot, which means Top Conservatives on Twitter. The political value of using hashtags is that all tweets that use a particular hashtag are grouped together on Twitter and can be searched by anyone, including journalists. Hashtags allow political leaders to spread their views beyond their followers.

Twitter and journalism

Twitter's popularity with journalists has astonished even those inside Twitter. Co-founder Biz Stone said, 'The news applications [of Twitter] surprised us', adding that news organizations 'jumped in and impressed us with how they engaged' (quoted in O'Connor, 2009). Many media outlets encourage their staffs to open Twitter accounts to interact with the public and promote stories (Gleason, 2010). Partly because of this, most major news organizations have millions of followers.

Twitter has the potential to change the newsroom. Twitter gives journalists new crowdsourcing abilities, access to real-time information from many types of sources, and useful marketing capabilities to increase their readership (Ahmad, 2010). The asynchronous and always-on nature of Twitter gives it an 'ambient' quality that offers 'more complex ways of understanding and reporting on the subtleties of public communication' (Hermida, 2010: 1). Finally, Twitter is popular with journalists because it is free, and economic pressures on newsrooms increasingly force journalists to look for cost-saving alternatives for newsgathering and story promotion.

Despite journalists' attraction to Twitter, it is not clear whether tweets can result in agenda building. While many public relations executives believe Twitter can help them shape media coverage (Evans et al., 2011), some studies suggest tweets have little to no influence. A survey of business journalists found the tweets they received did not result in agenda building (Lariscy et al., 2009). On the other hand, Broersma and Graham found that political tweets that contributed to news coverage served three functions for journalists: 'They were either considered newsworthy as such, were a reason for further reporting, or were used to illustrate a broader news story' (2012: 403). In another study, an interview with one newspaper journalist also found that tweets that were perceived to have news value could shape coverage:

> The best part is any inside information that comes out or when a politician like Sarah Palin or someone else makes news with their comments. Because it's on Twitter, it's fair game to use for the news media. … As a journalist, that's what I look for in tweets: nuggets of interesting, new and exclusive information. (Quoted in Parmelee and Bichard, 2012: 152)

Another reason to suspect that political tweets can influence journalists comes from a survey of political Twitter users. It found that some political tweets can be as persuasive as family members in terms of influencing one's political beliefs (2012: 211). In addition, one analysis of the tweets of politicians and journalists found that 'journalists and

politicians are mutually dependent on each other' in terms of 'finding news and spreading news' (Verweij, 2012). Yet the study does not fully explain the various ways in which tweets are influential or why tweets can have that power.

Finally, it is important to properly define what constitutes influence. Even if the content in a tweet is included in a story or leads to a story idea, the end result might not be agenda building in the way the political leader intended. As Curtin (1999) found during in-depth interviews with journalists, information subsidies promoting an issue could spark story ideas, but journalists would sometimes cover that issue in an unfavorable light. As a result, the concept of influence in an agenda-building sense should be understood as shaping coverage in a way that assists a political leader's agenda.

Based on previous studies on agenda building, social media, politics, and journalism, two main research questions are addressed:

- RQ1: In what ways do political leaders' tweets influence political journalists' news coverage?
- RQ2: Why are some political tweets especially able to shape coverage?

Method

The focus of this study is on political journalists at US newspapers who use Twitter. Political journalists at TV or other media outlets were excluded to keep the research scope narrow, which in qualitative research aids in doing in-depth analysis and achieving 'saturation', the point at which no new themes are found (Morse, 2000). Also, previous research has found that print journalists tend to use Twitter differently than broadcast journalists (Schultz and Sheffer, 2010) and, therefore, may be influenced differently by tweets. More than 100 political journalists from 20 states and the District of Columbia received interview requests via their office email. They were initially identified by the researcher looking at membership lists of associations of political journalists and the politics section on newspaper websites. Those who expressed interest were sent a consent document, information about their right to use a pseudonym for confidentiality, and information about them having the choice of doing the interview via email or on the phone. They were also told to use whatever phone number or email address they felt comfortable using. Of the 20 who expressed interest, 11 gave consent and were interviewed. All interview procedures were approved by a university institutional review board.

Interviews were done with 11 political journalists from May to July 2012. Two are editors, and nine identified themselves as some variation of reporter or writer. The newspapers the participants work for are diverse in terms of geography and size. Some are national newspapers, while others focus on a region or city. Some participants cover Congress, while others report from state capitol bureaus or cover politics and government in their cities. One participant identified as African-American; the others identified as white. All participants have work-related Twitter accounts, which they use frequently. More information about the participants can be seen in Table 1.

The sample size and non-random sample selection are in line with in-depth interview guidelines, especially for an exploratory study such as this. As Marshall notes, 'The probability sampling techniques used for quantitative studies are rarely appropriate when

Table 1. In-depth interview participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Years in journalism	Years in political journalism	State in which the newspaper is located	Description of job title
Marc	39	Male	16	13	Florida	Political writer
Andrae	60	Male	39	28	Ohio	Political/government reporter
Eddy	55	Male	28	17	Oregon	Political reporter
Sydney	42	Male	20	1	New York	Assignment editor
Butter	27	Male	5	3	Georgia	Washington correspondent
Tracie	40	Female	19	7	Pennsylvania	Government policy reporter
Anniezebra	49	Female	15	15	Florida	Political reporter
Alan	45	Male	25	4	New York	Political editor
Lawrence	31	Male	12	9	California	One-man state capitol bureau
Maria	51	Female	31	13	Pennsylvania	State capitol reporter
Robbie	32	Female	9	3	Florida	Political reporter

conducting qualitative research' (1996: 522). That is because, according to Crouch and McKenzie, an in-depth interview study 'scrutinizes the dynamic qualities of a situation (rather than elucidating the proportionate relationships among its constituents)' (2006: 483). Reaching saturation in a sample of 11, which was done in this study, is common with in-depth interviews (Starks and Trinidad, 2007). McCracken's seminal book on in-depth interviewing notes that 'eight respondents will be perfectly sufficient' in most cases (1988: 17).

The construction of the semi-structured interview also was guided by McCracken's (1988) advice, which calls for asking open-ended questions to stimulate conversation and using follow-up questions, called probes, to get at the deeper meaning of what is being said. The interview questions inquired about the ways in which information in tweets from political leaders help generate story ideas or contribute to how existing story ideas get covered. Participants were asked to think of a tweet from a political leader that really contributed to their coverage and to explain to the interviewer what made it so useful for their coverage. In addition, participants were asked to describe the types of political leaders who provide the most useful tweets. Finally, participants compared political tweets to other forms of social media, such as Facebook, that political leaders use to persuade.

Of the 11 interviews, five were over the phone and six were via email. The phone interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour and were transcribed. No compensation was provided to participants. Email interview probes were done with follow-up emails. Email interviewing has several advantages, including extra time for participants to reflect on questions and feeling free to say things they might not say in a face-to-face setting (Hunt and McHale, 2007). While there are disadvantages, such as impersonality

and the interviewer not seeing non-verbal cues, Hunt and McHale argue that 'the e-mail interview is an effective interview technique' (2007: 1415). In the present study, both interview formats resulted in similar findings, although email interviews produced shorter answers and often required more follow-up questions.

The researcher analyzed the transcriptions and answers sent via email by using a grounded theory approach, which includes the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This approach involved first open coding to develop categories from the data collected, and then comparing and integrating categories to reveal themes of the ways in which tweets influence journalists and why such influence is possible. During the coding phase, memo writing aided in understanding what aspects of agenda building were emerging from the data. The researcher also did negative case analysis, a process that is meant to ensure that the themes being reported in the results section were in no way contradicted by anything said by participants. The quotes in the results section are attributed to the pseudonyms that were selected by the participants.

Results

The participants regularly use political tweets as part of their reporting process. All see Twitter as more important to them than Facebook and other social networks when doing their jobs as political reporters or editors. Interestingly, participants compared political tweets to press releases and said neither influences their coverage much or at all. Yet, when they talked about how they use Twitter, all of the participants gave examples that indicate that political leaders' tweets shape their coverage in at least one of six ways. For participants, political leaders' tweets are:

- generators of story ideas;
- tip sheets for events that they might have otherwise missed;
- places to go to find quotes and polling data;
- ways to expand access to a wide range of sources to get alternative viewpoints;
- forms of background information that help them better understand issues;
- ways to double-check information in existing stories.

Not all political leaders' tweets are considered equally useful by participants. Tweets from political bloggers, think tanks, and interest groups tended to rank higher with most participants than tweets from candidates or elected officials. When asked to describe what makes a political tweet worthy of being used in their coverage, participants pointed to several qualities:

- the breaking nature of the information;
- information that adds value to an existing story being worked on;
- an insider's perspective on what is really going on politically;
- information that quickly gets to the point.

The pages that follow provide a more detailed description of participants' comments regarding how and why political tweets shape coverage.

Participants' perceptions of Twitter's influence

Participants rely heavily on Twitter to do their jobs. Tracie said: 'Twitter has become such an integral part of my reporting that I don't really think of it as a separate thing anymore'. She, like all of the other participants, said Twitter is a better fit than Facebook for political journalists. One reason for Twitter's advantage is the nomenclature used by the two types of social media. She said, 'I'm comfortable "following" a source [on Twitter] but not comfortable "friending" one [on Facebook] because of perceptions that go along with being "friends" with someone I cover'. Andrae said Twitter is used more by political reporters because 'Facebook is used to a much lesser extent by politicos and their allies'.

Despite Twitter's standing as the top social media for political reporters, participants said political tweets are no more persuasive on their coverage than press releases, which they said are not influential. Lawrence said, 'I don't see it as any different than press releases, personal contact, and advertisements'. Eddy said: 'Tweets from political leaders are little more than abbreviated news releases of the type that typically are ignored by most reporters'. Butter said, 'Every one reads like a press release, so they don't add much'.

Occasionally, political leaders attempt to directly influence journalists, but with limited success. Anniezebra said those working for Florida's governor have tried several tactics: 'Gov. Scott's staff definitely uses Twitter to try to influence coverage by pushing back on stories or getting into actual arguments with reporters'. However, the consensus among participants is that leaders' tweets do not alter the overall tone of stories but rather contribute information to stories being worked on. 'Generally, I don't think Twitter influences our coverage all that much. Instead, it augments it', said Sydney. Despite some participants' perceptions that political tweets fail to substantially influence their coverage, all participants gave examples that indicate that their coverage is often shaped by tweets.

Ways in which political leaders' Tweets shape coverage

In addition to contributing information to existing stories, many participants said tweets from political leaders can act as a tip sheet that sparks new story ideas. Andrae said he has received leaders' tweets that led him to story ideas. 'There are instances where an official or an agency actually tweeted something newsworthy, tipping us to something happening in the legislature', he said. 'I've found they often tweet information about news events or make comments that are worth pursuing'.

Marc said following a wide range of political sources can help in finding story ideas. After seeing tweets from a Tea Party member discussing the issue of surveillance drones, he thought 'that would probably make a good story. So, you hear people talking about things that you might not otherwise hear. It adds to the mix of things to eventually write about'.

Some participants actively seek out political tweets to find story ideas. Lawrence said he will regularly 'troll through' tweets he sees from 'officials, spokespeople, policy wonks' and others because sometimes such tweets will 'spark within me an idea that I

might want to present'. Similarly, Anniezebra said: 'I follow Twitter all day and use it to follow on leads. … I often see things about endorsements, candidates getting into races, candidates coming to Florida, etc. It helps me very much as a news "source"'. The previous comments from Andrae, Marc, Lawrence, and Anniezebra indicate first-level agenda building, with salience being directed to objects, such as issues, events, and candidates.

In addition to sparking story ideas, political tweets are a source for quotes, polling data, and other statistics that end up in stories. Robbie said: 'If a candidate is making comments about, let's say, an issue, a hot button issue, sometimes we'll use that tweet as a quote for our story'. Marc gave a more specific example of how quotes in tweets make it into stories:

> When Ann Romney [wife of the 2012 GOP presidential nominee], for instance, got on Twitter after Hilary Rosen [a Democratic Party pundit] had made a comment about how Ann Romney was just a stay-at-home mom and didn't really have a job in her life, there's an example of here's Ann Romney, we believe, speaking on her own. Here's what she said. There have been times in stories when I'll troll through Twitter, and I'll actually pick up quotes through Twitter and throw it in there, saying 'such and such tweeted this'.

Including tweeted quotes in coverage suggests second-level agenda building because such quotes likely stress the salience of attributes that are favorable to the leader who is tweeting. Marc also said he follows 'as many pollsters as possible' because 'Twitter is exceptionally well-suited for getting out polling information', which he feels his readers appreciate.

Many participants also said Twitter gives them access to a wide range of sources that lets them share diverse opinions with their readers. Marc said, 'I follow about 860 people: left, right, and center. So it helps me get different perspectives from people'.

Maria said she sometimes sees 'an angle or a viewpoint that you may not have thought about when you were reporting it. You know, it's that alternative view that I always like to include in as many stories as I can'. She also said the public nature of Twitter, where everyone can see who is following who, encourages her to find diverse sources so her readers don't suspect bias. 'I sometimes think they're going to think I'm too conservative or too liberal based on who I'm following, so I really do make a conscious effort to get a lot of Democrats, Republicans, and all sorts of groups', she said.

Sydney said links in political leaders' tweets can direct him to perspectives on issues that he might not have been exposed to otherwise:

> I recall that after one closely watched jobs report recently, I saw a tweet with a link to an economist's report showing that most of the job losses came from the government sector. It caught my attention because it was not necessarily an intuitive thought. State and local governments were cutting their budgets to account for lower tax revenue, all over the country, and the aggregate effect was offsetting gains in the private sector. That's a report I might have missed before. … Now, of course, a lot of these reports are written to advance a certain political goal, so we have to be careful to check for veracity and methodology.

If a tweet is particularly informative, participants sometimes seek out the source and interview them. Alan said: 'I have seen tweets that led to phone conversations'.

Several participants also said political tweets are a useful resource to better understand the issues they cover. Sydney said some tweets give him 'a directional sense' of where certain issues are heading. Alan said viewing hashtags that focus on current events can add to his knowledge about issues. One hashtag he cited, #SSM, was 'very, very important' as he covered same-sex marriage legislation that was pending. 'It enabled me to filter out a lot of noise and hunt for the information or feedback that was important to me at that time for that issue', he said.

The final way political tweets shape coverage deals with fact-checking. Journalists can compare information in their story against information in tweets. Also, Eddy said political leaders' tweets can sometimes reveal a story error. 'Their Twitter responses have caused me, and other reporters, to correct an error or make some other, generally minor, tweak to a story', he said.

The most influential political leaders on Twitter

Participants cited the tweets of political bloggers, think tanks, and interest groups as being the most useful in terms of generating story ideas and providing information for existing stories. The tweets of elected officials and candidates rated lower. According to Maria, the tweets of think tanks and interest groups are the most valuable because such groups are 'more about analyzing issues as opposed to telling me what the news of the day is'. Similarly, Eddy said: 'Political think tanks tweet links to their analyses, which are sometimes useful'. The in-depth analyses linked to in the tweets better fit the needs of newspaper reporters. Maria said: 'I think newspapers emphasize analyzing today's news rather than just reporting today's news tomorrow'. Andrae said the tweets of interest groups and think tanks help with ideas and alternative perspectives:

> Interest groups and think thanks, more than most, seem to tweet information that I find useful, be it about a press conference or upcoming event, or commentary on a current event or topic. Sometimes they actually break news this way.

The tweets of political bloggers are also quite useful, especially for story ideas. According to Eddy, 'Political bloggers sometimes get, and tweet, bits of information that are essentially mini-scoops that we have to follow up'. Sydney cited 'specialized journalists or bloggers at news outlets like Politico or RealClearPolitics or TNR or ScotusBlog' as being shapers of news. 'These writers go deeper than we do on many subjects, and so they are great sources of ideas', he said.

Elements of an influential political tweet

Several factors make a political tweet able to shape coverage. Tweets with news values, such as timeliness, stand out to journalists. Marc called Twitter 'possibly the ultimate breaking news tool'. Andrae said: 'We often pick up ideas, breaking news tips, even press statements from Twitter. It is a source of daily information'. Speed is one of Twitter's big advantages. Sydney said he seeks out tweets that meet his deadline needs:

They are useful, on deadline, if I'm looking for immediate reactions to the news. So when the Supreme Court issues its decision on President Obama's health care law, our first cut might include instant reactions from political players, as expressed on Twitter. Twitter has become the first draft of the '…said in a statement' comment.

Useful political tweets are often those that contain information that supplements an existing story being worked on. When it comes to a political tweet's ability to shape a story, Maria said, 'A lot of it is topical'. One example Robbie gave of a topical political tweet dealt with how local candidates will sometimes tweet about 'how they've knocked on seven thousand doors or they've raised just so much money'. She said candidate outreach and fundraising are common themes she covers:

That's something that I definitely care about, because we do stories about how much each candidate has raised in their campaign. So looking at that kind of thing, those kinds of tweets and those kinds of nuggets of news are helpful for me.

Certain types of quotes also stand out to journalists. Butter said journalists appreciate having instant access to quotes from political leaders who are not always available to be interviewed:

One example was when I was covering Newt Gingrich, and he was asked about whether he supported women joining Augusta National Country Club. It was Masters week. He told the traveling press corps that Callista [Gingrich's wife] would make a great member. Then he tweeted the same answer to the wider public a few minutes later. That way other reporters did not have to write 'NBC reported'. They could say, 'Newt tweeted'.

Tweets that include an insider's perspective on the major issues being debated are sought after by participants. Lawrence said: 'I think that's valuable, where you're getting a very unvarnished view'. Alan also desires political leaders who are plainspoken and revealing when they tweet. He wants to see:

… a politician who would tweet a committee meeting, you know, almost the same way that a reporter would. That politician's perspective as to why a bill is being bottled up in committee, that kind of thing. If we could ever get to the point where politicians were doing that, sort of live in-the-moment, that would be very exciting.

Finally, tweets must be easy to read to appeal to journalists. Robbie said: 'I tend to focus on the ones that are short and punchy … with a quick sentence or a quick description, and then I can click on the link and go on from there'. Tracie said to-the-point tweets stand out because they are 'helpful to reporters who are, more and more, being stretched in every direction'.

Discussion

The findings presented in this exploratory study indicate that tweets from political leaders lead to agenda building. To get a detailed understanding of how agenda building

occurs on Twitter, the first research question sought to find out the ways in which political leaders' tweets influence political journalists' news coverage. Participants noted six uses for political tweets in their coverage or reporting process. Leaders' tweets are: story idea generators, tip sheets, sources of quotes and data, places to find diverse sources, resources for background information, and fact-checking tools. The findings clearly show the presence of first-level agenda building. In other words, a political tweet that acts as a tip sheet to spark a story idea is influencing object salience in coverage regarding issues and candidates, which is the basis of first-level agenda building.

Second-level agenda building also seems to occur as a result of political leaders' tweets. For example, quotes and poll data from leaders' tweets that are used by journalists have the potential to influence the attributes in journalists' stories that portray issues, candidates, and other objects. Using information subsidies to shape the affective tone or substantive dimension of attributes in stories is at the heart of second-level agenda building. Precisely how much or how often political tweets serve to influence attribute salience is the subject of another study. A content analysis of political leaders' tweets and subsequent press coverage would help clarify the degree to which second-level agenda building is occurring.

Political tweets can now be seen as information subsidies, which Gandy defined as information that is 'made available at something less than the cost a user would face in the absence of the subsidy' (1982: 61). Tweets are free, easily available, and contain information participants described as valuable. While participants sometimes compared tweets to press releases, tweets are actually more akin to other types of information subsidies. Press releases are generally targeted to journalists only, whereas tweets are distributed to journalists and the general public. Tweets, therefore, have the opportunity to influence the public directly as well as through media coverage. The increased public exposure makes tweets similar to YouTube videos, Facebook posts, and blog posts, which are used as information subsidies by journalists and are also seen by millions of others (Ragas and Kiousis, 2010; Wigley and Fontenot, 2009).

The public consumption of tweets may make tweets more influential on media coverage than traditional press releases. Political tweets inject issues and views into the public domain that journalists may feel the need to cover, either to appear current with their readership or for fear that competing news organizations will scoop them. In addition, the public environment of Twitter differs in influence from many other venues for agenda building by subtly forcing journalists to receive information from a wider range of sources than might have happened previously. Maria alluded to this phenomenon when she said that she makes 'a conscious effort' to expand the ideological diversity of the leaders she follows because 'I sometimes think [my readers are] going to think I'm too conservative or too liberal based on who I'm following'. As a result, Maria said she sometimes sees 'a viewpoint that you may not have thought about'.

The second research question asked about the elements that make some political tweets successful in shaping coverage. Participants said political tweets that stand out and are worth using tend to include breaking news, information that augments an existing story, inside information, and information that is clearly and quickly delivered. The findings match what British and Dutch journalists said are the qualities that lead to a political tweet contributing to coverage. Qualities cited in the study include

newsworthiness, such as timeliness, and information that adds to a broader news story (Broersma and Graham, 2012). So, British, Dutch, and US journalists share some similarities in what makes a political tweet worth using in coverage.

While participants said the tweets of many types of political leaders are valuable in their coverage, the tweets of political bloggers, think tanks, and interest groups were cited as particularly useful. Candidates and elected officials were mentioned, but less so, which underscores how much political persuasion happens by those who are not politicians. Also significant is Twitter's lead over Facebook as the most beneficial social media platform for political journalists. This finding matches what was found during in-depth interviews with political consultants and other politically interested individuals, who said they use Facebook for their personal life but Twitter for politics (Parmelee and Bichard, 2012).

The influence that political leaders' tweets have on participants is especially noteworthy given where they work. Most participants do their jobs in state capitol bureaus and Washington, D.C., yet some past research has found that journalists tend to be the least influenced by political information subsidies when they work in centers of power, such as state capitals (Dunn, 2009).

Using a qualitative approach aided in more fully exploring the many ways in which agenda building occurs with political leaders' tweets. For example, many participants said leaders' tweets served as background information to help them understand issues, as opposed to showing up word-for-word in stories. This is the kind of influence that Vermeer (1982) noted can be missed when doing a content analysis that simply compares information subsidy content with news story content. Also, by letting participants talk at length about what they do with political tweets, it was possible to explore Curtin's (1999) warning that information subsidies may spark story ideas, but not lead to agenda building because the resulting coverage ends up being unfavorable. In the present study, no participants mentioned using political leaders' tweets in ways that clearly went against the leaders' agendas.

Several limitations to address include the sample and the method selected. The participants were not randomly selected, limiting the ability to generalize the findings. Also, a sample size of 11 participants might seem low, but it is in line with other qualitative studies (McCracken, 1988: 17; Marshall, 1996: 523; Starks and Trinidad, 2007: 1375). As is true with all methods that rely on self-reports, the in-depth interview findings are based on what the participants said they do with political tweets and may not reflect what they actually do.

One area for future research deals with inter-media agenda setting, which occurs when stories from one news media outlet, such as the *New York Times*, set the agenda of other news outlets, such as smaller newspapers or TV news (Golan, 2006; Reese and Danielian, 1989). Inter-media agenda setting on Twitter is suggested by one participant, who said that tweets from political news websites, such as Politico and Real Clear Politics, are 'great sources of ideas' to his newspaper. The degree to which journalists are influenced by the tweets of other journalists is unclear and deserves further study.

Additional research also needs to be done on how tweets influence political journalists who work in television, as well as how tweets are used as information subsidies by journalists whose beats include health, science, and local news. Also, while the present

study focused on how political leaders use tweets to influence journalists, it is also likely that journalists' tweets affect leaders' agenda. This bidirectional process has been found in other contexts (Wanta and Foote, 1994) and is worth pursuing regarding Twitter. Finally, quantitative methods should be employed to compare political tweets to other information subsidy types, such as press releases and candidate ads, in terms of relative effectiveness at the first and second level of agenda building.

Funding

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