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## Abstract

Drawing on interviews with staffers from the 2012 Obama and Romney presidential campaigns and qualitative content analysis of their Twitter feeds, this article provides the first inside look at how staffers used the platform to influence the agendas and frames of professional journalists, as well as appeal to strong supporters. These campaigns sought to influence journalists in direct and indirect ways, and planned their strategic communication efforts around political events such as debates well in advance. Despite these similarities, staffers cite that Obama's campaign had much greater ability to respond in real time to unfolding commentary around political events given an organizational structure that provided digital staffers with a high degree of autonomy. After analyzing the ways staffers discuss effective communication on the platform, this article argues that at extraordinary moments campaigns can exercise what Isaac Reed calls "performative power," influence over other actors' definitions of the situation and their consequent actions through well-timed, resonant, and rhetorically effective communicative action and interaction.

## Keywords

Electoral politics, political communication, social media, Twitter

On 30 August 2012, during the Republican National Convention, Hollywood star Clint Eastwood took the stage to lambast president Obama. What ensued was an odd, 11-minute monologue where Eastwood conversed with an empty chair upon which an

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**Figure 1.** @BarackObama tweet (2012).

imaginary Barack Obama sat. The evening of Eastwood's speech the official campaign Twitter account @MittRomney did not mention the actor, while the Obama campaign deftly tweeted out from @BarackObama a picture of the president sitting in his chair with the words "This Seat's Taken" (see Figure 1). The picture was retweeted 59,663 times, favorited 23,887 times, and, as importantly, was featured in news articles across the country.

While many scholars have studied political discourse on platforms such as Twitter, we have little understanding of how campaigns themselves view social media as strategic communications tools and craft goals for their uptake. We know little about how campaigns engage on these platforms as part of their larger communications strategies, such as efforts to shape the agendas and frames of political journalists and mobilize their supporters. We know even less about how campaigns and political elites seek to channel, steer, influence, respond to, or otherwise manage networked political communication on social media platforms. Even more, we know little about the organizational contexts that shape the uptake of social media by campaigns.

This article fills these gaps in the literature and develops a framework for understanding political discourse and influence on Twitter. Through in-depth interviews with

principals on both sides of the aisle and qualitative analysis of the Twitter feeds of the two campaigns, this article argues that the campaigns used Twitter primarily as a tool to set the press's agenda and shape journalists' understanding of the election (*see also* Parmelee, 2013a). Both campaigns sought to influence reporters directly by tweeting out strategic communication such as fact-checks of the opposing candidate, and staffers planned and scripted their communications on the platform well in advance of events such as debates. Staffers on both campaigns also cited that journalists used Twitter as a proxy for public opinion to assess such things as the candidates' debate performances. Both campaigns worked to create a "climate of opinion" favorable to their candidate to influence reporters' perceptions of political events as they read social media as a measure of public sentiment.

All that said, there were some differences in the ways the Obama and Romney campaigns used social media that this article argues were, in large part, a product of organizational structure. Staffers on both sides of the aisle argue that the Obama campaign's digital team, which was overseen by digital director Teddy Goff and had four social media staffers and one translator by the end of the campaign in addition to a host of state-level digital staffers (Democracy in Action, 2014), had significantly more autonomy. This autonomy enabled staffers to respond to political events in the moment and in a communicative style that accords with the norms and expectations of networked publics on Twitter. By contrast, these staffers argue that the communications of Romney's digital team, which had 16 staffers by the end of the election (Heisler, 2014, personal communication), had to go through multiple layers of vetting and approval that not only made it difficult to respond to events as they unfolded, it resulted in content on Twitter that was often repackaged press releases.

In other words, "backstage" organizational structures set the stage for campaign communications on Twitter and ultimately shape the power they could potentially have. I draw on a theory of "performative power" (Reed, 2013) to conceptualize moments when well-timed, resonant, and rhetorically effective communicative action and interaction on the platform enabled these campaigns to exercise influence over other actors' definitions of the situation and their consequent actions. I show how staffers working in digital media on both campaigns understood particularly successful communications on Twitter in performative terms and sought to, in the words of Romney social media and content director Rebecca Heisler (2014, personal communication), communicate at "the right moment" to exercise influence over the narratives of the professional press and decisions of supporters to donate and volunteer.

In the sections that follow, I first discuss the literature on Twitter and politics and performative power before detailing my methods for this study. I then present my interview and Twitter analysis findings, focusing on how these campaigns engaged in strategic communications around events on the platform. I conclude by analyzing strategic communications on Twitter.

## Literature review

In the years since the 2008 election cycle, scholars have taken a keen interest in the rise of Twitter as a platform for political communication. The 2008 Obama campaign's tweet announcing victory was retweeted 157 times. In 2012, by contrast, the Obama

campaign's tweeted photograph on the eve of the re-election received more than 800,000 retweets in less than 3 days. In a comprehensive meta-analysis of 115 empirical studies of Twitter and politics, Jungherr (2014a) finds broad areas of scholarly interest around "politicians, publics, and events." Some scholars have detailed the content and interactional affordances of the medium for politics as well as the contexts within which it is taken up (Parmelee and Bichard, 2012), while others have explicitly considered its normative import (Freelon, 2013). Parmelee and Bichard (2012) argue that parties, representatives, and candidates use Twitter to route around the professional press, gain wider attention, or mobilize activists and resources.

Other scholars have asked whether Twitter can be used as a proxy for public opinion to predict outcomes at the ballot box (DiGrazia et al., 2013; McKelvey et al., 2014). Scholars have analyzed the increased number of tweets around political events such as conventions and debates and how Twitter use varies according to the stages of events and the presence of controversies (Jungherr, 2014a: 69–70; Kreiss et al., 2014). Other scholars point to dynamic interactions between differently situated media actors. Jungherr (2014b) shows how there are different media logics at play in traditional media coverage of and Twitter discourse around political actors. Chadwick (2013) has argued that Twitter sentiment serves as a proxy of public opinion for political elites.

Despite this impressive body of work on a platform that has only been widely used for less than a decade, we know little about how campaigns and other political and journalistic actors themselves view Twitter and seek to act strategically on the platform (Jungherr, 2014a: 73). Even more, much of the empirical work cited above relies on aggregate "trace" data of user actions on Twitter (i.e. metadata on things such as tweets and retweets as well as content and sentiment analysis). This approach infers campaign strategy from analysis of visible and easily accessible media content (for the limitations of this approach, see boyd and Crawford, 2012). There are comparatively fewer qualitative studies that examine how political actors and journalists arrive at their goals for and practices around the platform, how political organizations craft and implement strategic communications plans, and how these actors coordinate messaging across many different accounts and rely on backchannels to coordinate action with allies—which scholars have found on other platforms during previous cycles (Karpf, 2012; Kreiss, 2012a; for qualitative interviews about the platform with journalists, see Parmelee, 2013a, 2013b).

In addition, there have been few studies of Twitter that have considered how communication on the platform is contextual and contingent, unfolds sequentially, and is often premised upon interaction among strategic actors with disparate goals (see Jungherr, 2014b). One exception is Andrew Chadwick's *The Hybrid Media System*. Chadwick (2013) reveals how political communication in a hybrid media system is a dynamic, unfolding process that involves multiple actors interacting in response to each other across many different mediums and according to many different media logics. Chadwick's (2013) work suggests that we cannot predict in advance how actors will behave in a dynamic, unfolding sequence of events—what he calls "political information cycles"—simply by knowing their predispositions, goals, or aggregate patterns of media use (p. 6). Media practice should be viewed as contextual and subject to change as political events unfold and strategic actors try and shape dynamics in line with their goals. As Chadwick (2013: 18) argues, this requires analyzing how events unfold over

time, the capacities for timely action that social actors have, and strategic attempts to surprise and gain attention.

Reed's (2013) recent theoretical work on the concept of "performative power" appears highly relevant for understanding how campaigns navigate these unfolding sequences of communication around political events on Twitter. Reed argues that in addition to network and discursive power there is performative power. Network, or relational, power refers to locations in social structure, and the capacity to influence social life that results (or locations in socio-technical structure following the insights of actor-network theory). Applied narrowly to Twitter, network power would entail the starting positions of actors on the platform, such as the number of followers they have and whom they are followed by (in addition to all the ways that relationality on Twitter is shaped by broader positioning in social structures). What Reed (2013: 23) calls discursive power refers to the "degree to which the categories of thought, symbolizations and linguistic conventions, and meaningful models of and for the world determine the ability of some actors to control the actions of others, or to obtain new capacities." It is this discursive dimension of power that has often been the object of analysis of media and communication scholars concerned with signification, representation, ideology, and the power to define the categories of political life more broadly (as represented in the framing and agenda-setting traditions of research; see, for instance, work on framing and Twitter by Ampofo et al., 2011).

By contrast, Reed's idea of "performative power" refers to how the dynamics of situated action and interaction can enable some actors to exert control over others independent of network and discursive power. In essence, Reed (2013: 30) argues that relations and discourse need to be acted out by agents in time and space—and performance is powerful to the extent that it impacts or changes the relations, conventions, and significations that are the properties of network and discursive power. Reed (2013) argues,

In performative power, well-timed acts, "in tune" with the situation, provide actors with another route to a "quantum of social force," and to "making B do something he would not otherwise do." Power is performative to the degree that it rests in the particular "eventness" of a specific set of concrete actions. It often works by transforming actors' expectations and emotions, and thereby (contributing to the) control or coordination of their future actions. (p. 31)

For Reed, while all action is performative, the question is when might a performance have influence in a causal sense that stands separate and apart from relations and discursive categories. While Reed calls for future research to consider how, why, and when performative power is likely to occur, Michael Schudson (1989) provides a compelling discussion of when we might expect culture to "work." In Schudson's (1989) analysis, it is the "conditions—both of the cultural object and its environment—that are likely to make the culture or cultural object work more or less" (p. 160). These conditions entail whether a cultural object is retrievable (psychologically, socially, economically, and physically), has rhetorical force (the interplay of a message, its audiences, and the symbolic field) and resonance (the relationship between object, audience, and context), is retained institutionally, and has resolution (in terms of its presence at particular moments of action or the directives it encodes). This idea of culture "working" can potentially help to explain moments of performative power.

The broader claim here is that scholars must look across all three dimensions of power to understand Twitter and politics. While scholars normally have network and discursive power as their objects of analysis in their research on Twitter and politics (even if they do not use those terms), we can also think of moments when discrete events, such as presidential debates, produce extraordinary opportunities for campaigns to act in ways that affect other actors' definitions of the situation and their consequent actions. If these ideas about power can be applied to Twitter in the context of electoral politics, we should expect to see among campaign staffers (a) an appreciation for and understanding of the relational structure of Twitter; (b) attention to the discursive elements of framing and campaign messaging on the platform; (c) a desire (if not an ability) to navigate between "habit and creativity" (Reed, 2013) in response to dynamic, unfolding events; and (d) descriptions of power on Twitter in terms of well-timed and resonant communication that had clear outcomes in terms of the resources campaigns seek.

## Methods

A United States presidential campaign offers an opportunity to explore strategic campaign communications on Twitter. That said, we should not expect what occurs in the context of a presidential campaign to automatically transfer to other races given much smaller campaign staff sizes and less attention among the electorate and journalists to down-ballot races, which render "pull" media strategies (premised on voters opting in to following candidates) less effective than "push" strategies (delivering content) (Nielsen and Vaccari, 2013). For example, the @BarackObama Twitter account had approximately 22,112,160 followers on election day in 2012, while the @MittRomney Twitter account had 1,761,442—not only revealing vast differences in scale between the two campaigns, but also significant differences compared with the average congressional member who has 4,000 followers (see Gainous and Wagner, 2014).

Even still, there is much to suggest that analysis of the presidential campaigns' organizational structures, strategic communications goals, and moments of effective communicative action would provide a lens onto understanding the uptake of the platform by political actors more broadly. Parmelee (2013a, 2013b) found strikingly consistent patterns of journalist expectations and use of Twitter across many different US outlets. A number of scholars have pointed to the fact that Twitter is now widely, although differentially, adopted by members of congress (Williams and Gulati, 2011), and scholars have documented how strategic tools such as "microsites" are prevalent across federal congressional campaigns (Baldwin-Philippi, 2012). Other scholars have shown how comparatively well-funded presidential campaigns are often labs for technological experimentation and the development of new tools and practices that diffuse broadly to campaigns at all levels of office (and often internationally) through the subsequent work of staffers and consultancies (Kreiss, 2012b; Plasser and Plasser, 2002).

All of this suggests the degree to which particular strategic communications practices on Twitter may be adopted far outside the context of an American presidential campaign. This article grows out of a larger book-length project focused on the evolution of, and differences between, the two US parties' capacity to contest elections using digital and

social media over the last decade. The evidence for this article is gathered primarily from open-ended, semi-structured interviews conducted with senior members of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney's 2012 presidential campaigns. I selected interviewees on the basis of both their organizational roles, as gleaned through public records and journalistic coverage, as well as snowball sampling. Through these means, the relevant interviews from the larger book project for this study are as follows: Abe Adams, deputy digital director, Romney 2012; Caitlin Checkett, digital integration director, Romney 2012; Teddy Goff, digital director of Obama 2012 and director of new media—battleground states, Obama 2008; Rebecca Heisler, social media and content director Romney 2012; Zac Moffatt, digital director Romney 2012; and Michael Slaby, chief integration and innovation officer, Obama 2012, and chief technology officer, Obama 2008.

This comparatively small, purposive sample is justified by the fact that there are very few people relevant to this study. While I rely on a number of interviews from staffers on the Romney campaign, in my account of the Obama campaign, I focus largely on interview data from digital director Teddy Goff in addition to archival materials. I focus on Goff's account here given his senior role, the small size of the Obama social media team (which fundamentally limits the number of potential data points), and his candor in discussing the campaign's strategic communications efforts across social media platforms. When I could not confirm Goff's statements directly through archival materials, I corroborated them with accounts from other senior staffers on the campaign whom I interviewed for the larger book project as well as analysis of the campaign's Twitter feed.

I conducted these interviews both in-person and through media, and they varied widely in terms of time. All of these interviews lasted more than 1 hour, and some encompassed more than 6 hours conducted over multiple sessions. As the larger book project is a historical work, participants were personally identified. Participants could, however, declare any statement in their interviews "not for attribution" (i.e. directly quoted but anonymous), "on background" (i.e. not directly quoted), or "off the record" (i.e. not to be reported) at their discretion. The Institutional Review Board of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill approved the study along with a consent form that clearly stated the terms of participation.

My interview questions were structured to elicit biographical details regarding individuals' work since the start of their careers (see Padgett and Powell, 2012). In the context of their work on these particular campaigns, questions included how and when they joined these campaigns, the work they performed, whom they reported to, the technologies they used and developed, how the goals and the strategies of the campaigns took shape, and how all these things changed (or failed to) over time. I was guided by Weiss's (1995) guidelines for qualitative in-depth interviewing that is tailored to individuals based on their unique experiences and dialogic yet guided by the researcher. To analyze the data, I created chronological narratives that interweaved accounts of organizational processes on the two campaigns drawn from the interviews and journalistic reports and organizational records (for details on this strategy of analytical "sense-making," see Langley, 1999: 695). I then moved back and forth between my inductive analysis of these accounts and the theoretical tools in the literature to develop the account provided here (see Luker, 2008).



In addition to these interviews, I performed a qualitative content analysis on archived versions of the two campaign's various Twitter feeds and other media properties from the 2012 cycle. In keeping with the emphasis of this study on events, I archived all the tweets from the two presidential campaigns around the two parties' conventions, the three presidential debates, and vice-presidential debate. I then analyzed these feeds in light of the interview data, looking for fit and disjuncture between what the campaigns said they were doing and what they actually did, comparing the language, style, and timing of campaign tweets, and assessing the degree to which users were interacting with content (through things such as retweets and favorites).

## Findings

### *Organizing social media*

Veterans of Obama's 2008 effort saw a changed technological landscape in 2012. The 2012 Obama campaign's digital director, Teddy Goff (2013, personal communication), could not remember the word Twitter being mentioned in new media department meetings in April through November 2008 and says the campaign "probably had some intern paste whatever we were putting on Facebook" on the platform. Looking back, Goff and his colleagues on the 2012 campaign cite Twitter beginning to emerge as a force in politics in 2009 and 2010, as Republican members of the US House of Representatives and candidates during the midterm elections began to adopt the platform to oppose the Democratic Party's agenda.

Former staffers cite that Obama's re-election campaign in early 2011 was organizationally complicated. Staffers were trying to carve out their roles and positions in the campaign's hierarchy. Even so, former staffers describe a distinctive approach at the top of the campaign toward digital that was always present and similar to the 2008 campaign (Kreiss, 2012b). As Goff (2013, personal communication) describes, campaign manager Jim Messina

believed that you've got to go let the digital guys do what the digital guys want to do and not have the digital guys servicing a communications team who don't get digital and aren't going to get what is going to work.

To this end, similar to 2008, the digital director position was considered senior staff in the organization's hierarchy, on a par with other division heads on the campaign such as communications and field.

Even more, as Goff suggests, Obama's digital team had the autonomy to pursue digital communications in ways staffers believed were native to the Internet. One example of this autonomy is the digital department's response to Clint Eastwood's infamous speech. Goff (2013, personal communication) says that digital staffers were paying attention in real time to the millions watching and commenting on the convention on Facebook and Twitter, and sought to engage the campaign's supporters, assuage them, and rally them to the president's side through an in-the-moment response to Eastwood:

The 30 million Obama supporters who watched that and saw the president get smacked around, and if nobody did anything about it, and nobody had his back, they would have known that nobody had their back either.

Even with autonomy, Goff and his staffers still worked within the contours of the campaign's messaging. Staffers cite that they were aware of the communications strategy of the campaign, and had an implicit sense of what was "on" and "off" message. Goff and his staffers knew that they could not make policy pronouncements, but they did develop creative content quickly in response to events in the broad context of the campaign's messaging, and they also kept the other departments fully briefed about the content coming out of the digital department. While this trust was in part the result of the fact that Goff was a veteran of the 2008 campaign and served as the *Whitehouse.gov* lead of the Obama–Biden transition, the new media department of the 2008 campaign enjoyed a similar autonomy (see Kreiss, 2012b).

The Romney campaign, by contrast, was organized very differently.<sup>1</sup> The digital department had a seat at the senior staff table, at the same level as political, policy, operations, and finance. However, in contrast to the Obama campaign, Romney's digital team had to go through an extensive vetting process for all of its public communications, meaning that the temporal workflow of the campaign did not match the speed of social media. As Caitlin Checkett (2014, personal communication), the campaign's digital integration director, describes,

So whether it was a tweet, Facebook post, blog post, photo—anything you could imagine—it had to be sent around to everyone for approval. Towards the end of the campaign that was 22 individuals who had to approve it. ... The digital team unfortunately did not have the opportunity to think of things on their own and post them. ... The downfall of that of course is as fast as we are moving it can take a little bit of time to get that approval to happen.

Zac Moffatt (2014, personal communication), Romney's digital director, went so far as to describe the campaign as having "the best tweets ever written by 17 people ... It was the best they all could agree on every single time." A number of staffers on the Romney campaign cite that while the initial challenge of the campaign was resources given an extended primary, in the long run it was the lack of organizational autonomy that undermined digital efforts on behalf of the candidate. Without a large staff during the primaries, the challenge was producing the various types of rich digital content the Obama campaign was producing (such as interviews with field volunteers and staffers). But the broader issue of the approval process meant that by the end of the campaign, even when it had staffed up considerably, staffers were often repackaging press releases across platforms because everyone knew they were approved. As Checkett (2014, personal communication) describes,

So you get into the cycle where a press release is sent to us, it is something that we can add to the site, you can pull a Facebook message from that, some Twitter copy, and you don't have to go through the approval process because it was already approved. So I felt like that was a huge problem because of course people don't want to go to your website and read press releases and we knew that.

### *Scripting social media and influencing the press*

The presidential debates reveal how much of campaign staffers' attention was oriented toward the professional press, along with the changing nature of campaign communication strategies and the different temporal rhythms of contemporary media flow more generally. In the mass media era, campaigns sent surrogates to opinion programs on cable news networks and the "spin room" immediately after a debate to shape mass public perception and journalistic narratives about the winner and loser of the event. These things still happen today, but the practices around contests over frames look very different and there are more actors involved.

Campaigns, for instance, now pay close attention to shaping commentary on social media platforms such as Twitter during the debates themselves, in large part to influence journalistic perceptions of public opinion about the event. While, as noted above in the context of the Eastwood incident, the Obama campaign used Twitter to communicate with highly active (and often influential) supporters, more importantly the platform was a vehicle for influencing the professional media. As Goff (2013, personal communication) details,

Most likely not one thing we did on Twitter persuaded any voter or even necessarily reached any undecided voter, but what it did do was, you know, reached the somewhat elite core of supporters and then very importantly reached reporters as well. So for Twitter we spent a lot of time thinking about how we could sort of manipulate the sort of national dialogue, the dialogue around politics. We had to have a really multifaceted strategy for that reason ... I mean we would really think down to that hour or half hour about what could we do that is going to dominate Twitter for an hour or two, because you get down to 30 days left if you could dominate Twitter for 2 hours, that is, you know, we will take it.

Goff goes on to argue that discourse on Twitter among political elites shaped journalistic perceptions of the race and ultimately how they covered it, much in the same way that informal talk at the bar and campaign bus did during previous cycles. That said, what is clear is that the temporal nature of politics has changed, and so have the channels for campaign influence. Campaigns have gone from attempting to win the entire professional journalism news cycle, defined in terms of a 24-hour increment, to focusing on 2 hours on a single social media platform. Meanwhile, campaigns perceive Twitter to have "spillover" effects onto other platforms and mediums, as journalists increasingly write multiple versions of stories for different and larger audiences across multiple platforms.

For example, the Romney campaign extensively scripted its social media communications around political events such as debates in the attempt to shape the flow of discourse about the election. In preparing for the first debate, about a month in advance Romney's digital team started to work very close with the rapid response communications team. Together, these staffers began doing dry runs on Saturdays of everything they would do on digital platforms during the debate itself. They even created a 90-page document that had all of the research they were ready to make public and premade over 200 info-graphics. As Moffatt (2014, personal communication) describes,

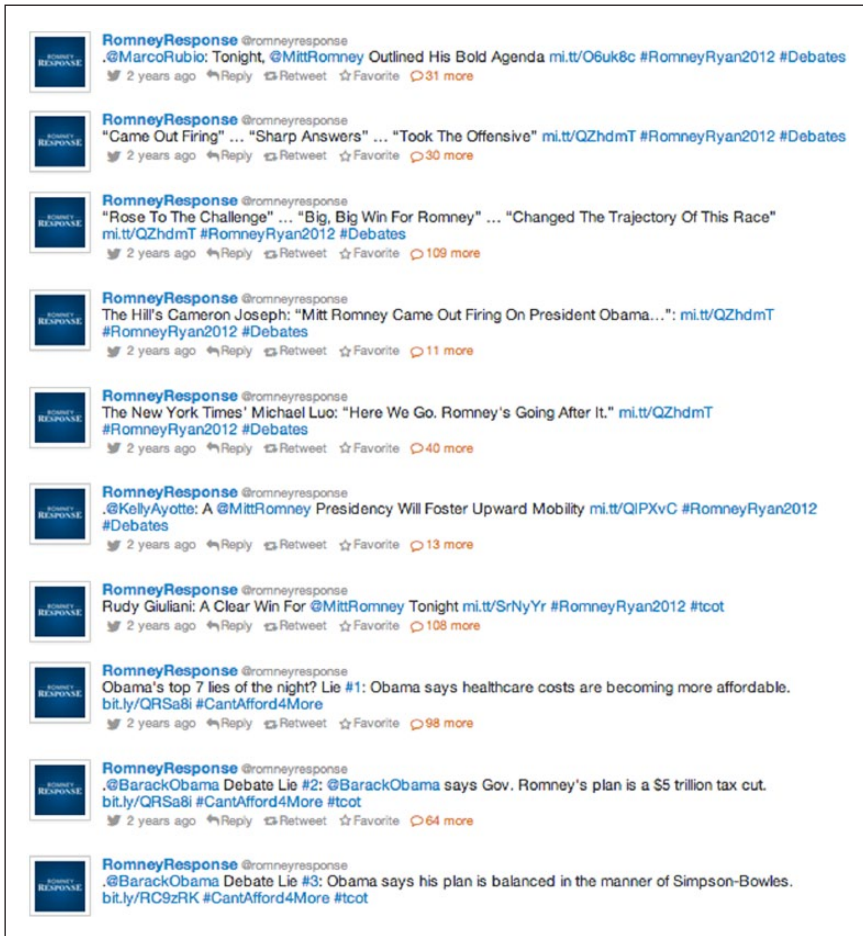


Figure 2. @MittRomney Twitter feed, 11 October 2012.

We knew what he [Obama] was going to say and so literally it was almost like battleships. ... You create a war room where just the comm guys and then the 3 people on digital ... We could just fit it all out to what was supposed to go to Facebook, what was to go to Twitter, anything on the site.

On Twitter, staffers coordinated this messaging during the debate through numerous accounts, which they urged supporters to follow on “Follow Fridays” or general exhortations to “follow before the debates.” Staffers also created a microsite that they say over 150,000 people used during big events. The microsite was an expansive effort that featured a rotating set of 100 different info-graphics the campaign had created in advance based on the topics staffers anticipated being raised during the debate. The following snapshot of the @MittRomney Twitter feed on 11 October 2012, the day of the vice-presidential debate, reveals this strategy for disseminating content (see Figure 2).

During the debate, whenever a particular topic came up, digital staffers conferred with select communications and policy staffers, all of whom were in the same room. Together, these staffers chose which content was going to go up on the site or be tweeted out by Romney or staff accounts. Rapid response to the debate consisted of this content that was already largely developed and approved, mixed with the dissemination of real-time reactions from journalists and friendly pundits and elected officials during the post-debate wrap up (Figure 3).<sup>2</sup> Even still, the communications team was the final arbiter of



**Figure 3.** Archive of the @RomneyResponse Twitter account (2012).

all content. Rebecca Heisler (2014, personal communication), the social media and content director, cites that the digital team's role was limited to determining what would be appropriate content for which accounts, as well as actually sending it out.

Romney staffers cite that this coordinated, scripted communications strategy on Twitter during the first debate helped establish a particular narrative on social media of the candidates' respective performances that the Obama campaign was forced to address. As Moffatt (2014, personal communication) argues,

We practiced it and, first of all, we were also very fortunate—that you look up on social media during the debate, how we are crushing this guy. But if social media hadn't existed I believe that Obama folks would have come out afterwards and they would have been like “that is not true.” But the social got so overwhelming they didn't even turn up for 30 minutes to the room afterwards to figure out how to talk about it. ...

Even more, Goff argues that while the president had an (admittedly) poor performance during the first debate, the reaction to it was compounded by reporters using Twitter as an unproblematic measure of public opinion. Goff cites journalists using the platform to gauge the performance of the candidates and ultimately proclaim victors, such as Ben Smith of BuzzFeed interpreting public sentiment on Twitter to declare Romney the winner 40 minutes into the first debate.

Learning from the first debate, where Obama's digital team did not do extensive planning in advance, staffers entered the second debate with a more defined plan and scripted approach to tweets. Staffers cite that it was obviously important for the president's own performance to be better, but the digital team's role was to, as Goff (2014, personal communication) puts it,

make sure that no matter what was going on, frankly whether or not the president did his job, you know, there would be very loud voices talking about how we were doing well so that if we were doing well that would be perfectly clear to reporters and if we weren't doing that well they would look at Twitter and see that it was a lot more mixed than they expected and sort of second guess their own perception that maybe the president wasn't doing that well.

For example, in many ways similar to the Romney campaign, Obama's digital team did much planning in advance of the second debate in the attempt to create favorable sentiment for the candidate on Twitter. Goff (2014, personal communication) cites that the campaign tried to "manipulate" Twitter attention down to the minute. To do so, the digital team sketched out in advance broad lines of what Romney was going to say and drafted hundreds of Tweets for use either by the Barack Obama, Jim Messina, or David Axelrod accounts. Some of these tweets were even distributed to external supporters of the candidate on Twitter. According to a comprehensive analysis of the Obama campaign by a Republican political operative, the campaign "scored 50,000 Twitter accounts by political affiliation" and "used Twitter influence (looking at the number of tweets and followers) to target direct messages asking people to get involved" (Ruffini, 2013: 28). The team also produced a number of info-graphics, many of which were never made public, but were designed to be published if Romney made particular claims. The campaign flagged tweeted info-graphics for reporters on the platform through mentions of their Twitter handles. If the campaign knew that a certain attack was coming, it was prepared with a rebuttal or worked to strategically resurface a video that showed that an argument was originally made 3 months earlier.

### *Performative power*

The findings above suggest that staffers on both sides of the aisle saw competitive advantage in well-timed, emotionally resonant, and rhetorically effective communication that shaped the responses of other actors to events on the campaign trail. Goff cites "This Seat's Taken" as a tweet that reassured and rallied supporters at a moment of political assault. Checkett cites how the autonomy of Obama's digital team enabled staffers to better connect with audiences through content that was timely and appropriate to the electoral context and platform, not simply press releases. Moffatt suggests that his campaign's in-the-moment response to the first debate—even if largely pre-planned and

extending the critiques of other actors—constrained the Obama campaign's ability to spin its candidate's lackluster debate performance. All of these episodes suggest, at a very minimum, how timing, resonance, and rhetorical effectiveness won these campaigns some "increased capacity to move in the world" (Reed, 2013: 207).

Perhaps, the most telling way to see performative power at work comes in relation to the two things that campaigns value most (outside of votes): money and (favorable) press coverage. In terms of the former, fundraising may be predicted in advance in approximate terms, but outside of regular moments of expected small dollar fundraising (such as around conventions and debates that have heightened attention from the electorate) patterns of online fundraising are often tied to successful action at particular moments (see Karpf, 2012; Kreiss, 2012a). Even more, while much campaign reporting entails accounts of speeches from the campaign trail and opposition research provided by campaigns, there are extraordinary moments when, through the sheer force of timing and rhetoric, elected officials and campaigns can reshape the narratives of the professional press (Kreiss, 2012a).

Staffers of both campaigns pointed to moments when their tweets resonated with audiences and conceptualized their influence over others' actions on Twitter in terms of performative power. For example, in a passage worth quoting at length, Heisler (2014, personal communication; emphasis added) recounts how the Romney campaign solicited donations with a link on Twitter immediately after the first debate, when Romney was widely seen to have had a great performance:

With Twitter we always just kind of would look at it as we were doing it and just see what was *taking off* and what was *falling flat*. The thing for us was just going back to debate night. So we never tweeted from the Romney account during debates until the general election debates but we just realized that this is a huge missed opportunity.<sup>3</sup> We have all these people that are following this account and we kind of sacrificed again like the voice of Mitt because we were, like *this is Twitter's moment right now*. It was one of the biggest days that we would have. So I mean from just thinking about the most successful fundraising tweet we ever had was like right after the first debate. We literally tweeted, I mean, he obviously had done very, very well. I think we tweeted like some like 40 character thing I don't know and then it was like "chip in \$15" and I mean it just *blew up*. It *blew up* as far as retweets and how we were doing but also like our actual fundraising. And that was kind of like our "oh shit if we really *time this right* and he really has a *good moment* like this is actually a big fundraising platform for us." With that being said, we obviously, that wasn't our primary focus of Twitter, but *when we hit it at the right moment*, but it was more kind of watching it in real time and then kind of adjusting as we went ... It is just kind of *fickle as far as like what takes off and what doesn't*.

As for why this worked, in Schudson's (1989) terms, it is likely that the fundraising tweet was close-to-hand and available precisely during the time and under the conditions when supporters were most likely to act upon it. Even more, as a fundraising tweet with an embedded link to a donation page, it was highly resolved to a very specific action.

Meanwhile, the Obama campaign's staffers cite similar moments when their routine communicative action on the platform gave way to times when they wielded an extraordinary influence over journalists. Indeed, it is striking that success on Twitter on Obama's famously (quantitative) data-driven campaign eluded both prediction and clear measurement. As Schudson (1989) argues, rhetorical effectiveness emerges from

the fit between the engaging qualities of the object (i.e. tweets), the composition of particular audiences (supporters and journalists with expectations as to the genres of social media), and relations within a field of political symbols. Staffers sought to achieve both a broad set of followers among Twitter users (an appreciation of relational power) and navigate the discursive environment by framing the election in terms advantageous for the candidate. But it was influence on the platform that the campaign ultimately sought, defined in terms of supporters circulating the campaign's messaging through retweets and shaping press narratives of the election. And, to achieve these things, staffers sought well-timed and deeply contextual tweets that could shape the flow of political communication on the platform. As Goff (2013, personal communication; emphasis added) explains in response to a question about how the campaign evaluated its success on the platform,

You know we typically, our orientation was always to care more about *engagement* than about the top line number. So I would *much rather get a lot of retweets* then, you know, then for us to gain a huge following with people who don't retweet our stuff. You know so we try to focus on that. We didn't have goals for our growth, list growth, whatever. We had goals for underlying conversions. But that is something hard to really know the correct answer too and certainly when it comes to measuring something like "*have we won the afternoon on Twitter?*" I mean the only thing that we can really go by is your own perception of "is this what *reporters are talking about or not*" and that is how we did measure it.

## Discussion

As Parmelee (2013b) shows through qualitative interviews, Twitter is important to the agenda-building process, and successful tweets from journalists' perspectives have a number of common elements including timely, valuable, insider, and concise information. Successful tweets are also likely to be content that steps outside of the genres of press releases and advertisements, in being "plainspoken and revealing" and "short and punchy" (Parmelee, 2013b: 12).

This article shows how campaigns labor to produce the information that journalists find valuable, creating things such as info-graphics and fact-checks well in advance of debates, and content that fits with the genre expectations of social media users, in the attempt to shape journalistic coverage. Even more, it shows how organizational structures shaped the ability of these campaigns to produce strategic content.

At the same time, in addition to the general qualities of tweets that staffers and journalists view as effective, the findings detailed above suggest that scholars need to consider the interactional and contextual aspects of Twitter. Campaign staffers argue, for instance, that journalists did not just look to the platform for story ideas, but used it as an index of public opinion, which in turn shaped their perceptions of things such as the debate performances of the two candidates. Campaign staffers cite their attempts to gain indirect influence over reporting, including working through multiple Twitter accounts and cultivating networks of supporters to shape a climate of opinion on the platform that was favorable to their candidate. Even more, the "This Seat's Taken" tweet's appeal (as a clever inside joke that required both knowledge of Eastwood's speech and appropriate timing) to supporters and its power to set the press agenda



suggests broadly the deeply contextual nature of the platform. Indeed, we can read this in terms of Schudson's (1989) discussion of the resonance of cultural messages, which he details as a "public and cultural relation among object, tradition, and audience" (p. 170). "This Seat's Taken" was powerful because the image of the president's chair was not only visibly striking, it was made present in a context when supporters were looking to be reassured that the campaign was going to fight. It was resonant with journalists but likely for different reasons, namely, that it was a clever and novel response to a disjointed performance of the president's political opponents.

The findings above suggest that campaign staffers understand moments of virality such as these in performative terms. To use Heisler's phrase, the goal was to be "hitting things at the right moment" in ways that have influence over peoples' actions, whether it is motivating supporters to donate to the campaign or shaping what and how journalists write about the election. In terms of the latter, in Reed's terms, Obama's digital staffers achieved performative power in influencing the media's representation of the Republican National Convention. Staffers cited how performative influence came through well-timed, contextually appropriate, and subsequently highly resonant tweets that affected how journalists saw and understood the political context and the frames they used in their coverage. That said, while well-timed and contextually appropriate tweets can be effective at moving the public and shaping journalistic perceptions at particular and extraordinary moments, more routine strategic communications on the platform do not often meet with contexts where they "take off."

In essence, this article argued that the organizational power of a campaign's digital department leads to the potential to realize performative power on Twitter, which in turn influences the representational power (through agenda-setting and framing) of the professional press during a campaign. There are a number of avenues for future research. As the empirical findings of this article revealed, the two presidential campaigns seemingly made different calculations as to the risks and benefits of engaging on social media in relatively un-predetermined ways. More research is needed to uncover the internal arguments, sources of authority, and sets of skills that are valued within organizations and that shape the perceptions of risk and benefit to engaging on social media. As numerous scholars have detailed, contemporary campaigning generally features tightly scripted message control given shrinking sound bites, journalistic emphasis on process, horseshoe and episodic coverage, and an at-times oppositional, scandal-driven, and even cynical press. Even more, high profile social media gaffes have drawn critical attention in what Hamby (2012) has called a "filter-free new ecosystem" that even journalists, reflecting on their own practices, decry as thriving on "instrumentalism, self-involvement and snark". In such an environment, allowing 20- and 30-year-old staffers to tweet with autonomy is a real risk. That said, it can also potentially have real rewards.

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## Notes

1. Kreiss (2014) argues that the different histories of the two parties' extended networks over the last decade shaped the organizational structures of the two campaigns and the sorts of knowledge, skills, and practices that were valued.
2. Twitter feed of @RomneyResponse immediately following the first debate, 4 October 2012. Topsy search.
3. Staffers cite that the digital team did not tweet from @MittRomney itself during the primaries because it would not make sense given that the candidate was on stage.

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