

Tweeter-in-Chief: A Content Analysis of President Trump's Tweeting Habits

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements in
an undergraduate senior capstone course in communications

Abstract

Twitter has become one of the most prominent forms of modern communication, allowing users to curate information, update followers, and report news in real time, among other actions. Most recently, Twitter has provided an intimate look into the day-to-day thinking of the president of the United States. Donald Trump is among the most prolific users of the platform, expressing himself in front of a wide audience. Through a content analysis of Trump's tweets during his first seven months in the Oval Office, this study found that he has criticized more Republican lawmakers than Democrats, retweets Fox television shows at unprecedented levels, and employs tactics to delegitimize the press.

I. Introduction

Twitter is one of the most powerful tools in modern communication. The microblogging platform allows its 300 million monthly active users (Twitter, 2017) to compose 280-character messages to relay information to the general public. Politicians are one group that has benefitted from Twitter and relied upon it for networking (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013). Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign brought Twitter to the forefront of American politics, proving how it could be used effectively to communicate with likely voters (Tumasjan, Sprenger, Sandner & Welpe, 2010). Today, Twitter remains a forum for lively political debates and offers candidates an opportunity to discuss substantive issues. Perhaps the most prolific Twitter user in politics is Donald Trump, who has more than 43 million followers and more than 36,000 tweets. Trump has been an incredibly active Twitter user before his 2016 run for president, during his candidacy, and thus far into his presidency. Since September 28, 2016, he has tweeted an average of 7.5 times per day.

With Trump having just entered the Oval Office in January 2017, scholars have yet to systematically study his tweeting habits. Through a content analysis of Trump's tweets during his first seven months in office, this study will provide meaningful insight into a topic that has yet to be fully explored. It will specifically examine Trump's content message strategies, levels of tweet engagement and users most retweeted.

Keywords: President Trump, president, United States, Twitter, tweets
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II. Literature Review

Twitter's Role in Politics

For nearly a decade, lawmakers have relied on social media to mobilize support during campaigns. Twitter, a microblogging platform that allows users to compose messages in 280 characters or fewer, has helped politicians in their networking efforts (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013). Former U.S. President Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign legitimized Twitter in the political arena by showing how it could be used to generate enthusiasm (Tumasjan, Sprenger, Sandner & Welpe, 2010). Although Twitter is a relatively new method of communication in the political sphere, it is widely used today by federal lawmakers.

Twitter remains a forum for lively political debates and offers candidates an opportunity to discuss substantive issues. The 2016 presidential election featured 17 Republican candidates, prompting many of them to try to stand out from the pack. Then-candidate Donald Trump distinguished himself with surprising successes during the Republican party primaries, and his communication style appeared to overcome any shortcomings with his questionable political platforms (Ahmadian, Azarshahi & Paulhus, 2017). What Trump lacked in policy, he gained in authenticity with the voters. Twitter allows political parties and individual politicians to bypass the press to speak directly with voters (Kalsnes, 2016). For individual candidates to stand out in crowded spaces, such as Twitter, it is important they effectively engage with their audiences.

Social Media Engagement

At the broadest level, engagement is the quality of a user's experience with technology (O'Brien, 2011). Mersey, Malthouse and Calder (2010) view engagement as the collective experiences an audience has with any given media brand. Earlier definitions of engagement have emphasized the psychological aspect in which users become cognitively involved in processing content (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). Such interpretations focus on the impact Twitter has on human emotions and social media's relationship with anxiety, stress, and other feelings. The concepts of engagement and audience take on a wide range of meanings in a social media context. On Twitter, engagement can be measured quantitatively through likes, retweets, replies, and impressions (Twitter, 2017). The concept of engagement can also be used to describe users' thoughts, behaviors, and feelings (O'Brien & Toms, 2008). McCay-Peet and Quan-Hasse (2016) propose a model for measuring social media engagement in which the following six factors are taken into account: self-presentation, action and participation, uses and gratifications, positive experiences, usage and activity counts, and social context. When politicians discover which tweets receive a higher number of engagements, they can create a feedback loop by sharing similar messages (McCay-Peet & Quan-Hasse, 2016).

Twitter users often try to send messages that align with what their audiences believe. Individuals present themselves differently based on whom they are communicating with to appeal to an imagined audience (Marwick & Boyd, 2010). When politicians try to appeal to an imagined audience, their followers might share messages simply because other people are sharing it. Those who have strong opinion leadership use Twitter more frequently than those with weak opinion leadership (Park, 2013). As some users seek to influence political conversations, others search for messages that align with their own beliefs (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973). Previous scholarship has focused on the influence of politics on voters (Tumasjan, Sprenger, Sandner & Welpe, 2010; Park, 2013), whereas this study seeks to examine which types of tweets receive the highest levels of engagement from President Donald Trump during his first seven months in office.

RQ1: Which types of tweets receive the most engagement?

It will be interesting to explore how patterns in Trump's tweeting habits reflect his beliefs and those of his followers. With Trump entering the Oval Office earlier this year, there has been little time for substantive research on his tweeting habits. Even so, reporters and researchers have sought to better understand how Trump uses Twitter. Existing research conducted during the 2016 presidential election found that tweets coming from Trump's Android device on his @realDonaldTrump account were angrier and more negative, thus revealing that Trump himself directly tweets from an Android device while his staff members use an iPhone (Robinson, 2016). This study will explore differences in messaging between Trump and his staffers by distinguishing between tweets that come from Android devices and an iPhone.

On the campaign trail, Trump called Twitter “a powerful thing,” a “modern method of communication,” and boasted about the millions of people who follow him on social media. In a family town hall interview with CNN, though, Trump said he either wouldn’t use Twitter at all as president or would use it very little (CNN, 2016). Thus far into his presidency, however, he has tweeted quite frequently, averaging about six tweets per day during his first seven months in office. Understanding what Trump tweets about and how he interacts with his followers will enhance readers’ understanding of his social media habits. In some cases, Trump tweets with specific goals in mind, but in other cases, his brash comments get him into trouble and carry unintended consequences. Even so, he enjoys tweeting and views the platform as an asset (CNN, 2016).

RQ2: What message strategies does Donald Trump most frequently employ when tweeting?

RQ3: How does Twitter messaging differ between Trump staffers and Trump himself?

An informal canvassing of Trump’s tweets prior to this study revealed a pattern of attacks on news organizations and individual reporters. Through Twitter, Trump has found a platform to circumvent the press to speak directly to his supporters while simultaneously aiming to discredit legitimate reporting. During his time as press secretary in the first several months under the Trump administration, Sean Spicer explained how the president views the role of Twitter as it relates to media criticism. In an interview with Ted Koppel on *CBS Sunday Morning*, Spicer said, “A lot of times, folks in the media feel threatened that he has a direct pipeline to the American people” (CBS Sunday Morning, 2017). Trump sees Twitter as a resource to disseminate positive information, while attacking coverage he considers inaccurate or unfair.

RQ4: How does Donald Trump use Twitter to delegitimize the press?

Through a content analysis of Trump’s tweets during his first seven months in office, this study will provide meaningful insight into a topic that has yet to be fully explored. It will specifically examine Trump’s content message strategies, levels of tweet engagement and top mentions.

III. Methods

Prior to the data analysis phase of this study, an informal canvassing of tweets was conducted to explore patterns in Trump’s tweeting habits and generate research questions. For example, after discovering Trump frequently used the term “fake news” to describe unfavorable media coverage, a research question was created to examine how Trump uses Twitter to delegitimize the press.

Twitonomy, a subscription-based service offering downloadable datasets for publicly available tweets, was used during the data collection phase of this study. Tweets from Trump’s first seven months in office (January 20, 2017-August 19, 2017) were placed into a

Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for further analysis. A span of seven months was used to ensure a large sample size of tweets was collected during important newsworthy events, such as the resignations of prominent members in Trump’s administration. A total of 1,272 tweets were entered into the spreadsheet, and the text of each tweet was immediately cleaned. For instance, when tweets included “&” they were replaced with the word “and.” Additionally, Twitter handles, such as “@seanhannity,” were replaced with the actual names of users, such as “Sean Hannity.” After the text of all tweets was cleaned, a word cloud was created using TagCrowd, a free data visualization site created by Daniel Steinbock that allows users to customize word clouds and visualize word frequencies. Words or phrases that appeared frequently signaled potential areas of study. The word cloud played a role in determining which variables should be considered for analysis and which content message strategies Trump most often employs. See *Figure 1*.

H2: Trump will most frequently attack the media and praise himself in his tweets. He will least often praise others and articulate policy positions.

To understand which tweets come from Trump and which tweets come from his staffers, this study will compare the use of iPhone (Trump staffers) with the use of Android (Trump himself). Twitonomy automatically sorts tweets by platform, which will be used to examine whether tweets coming from Android devices are more hyperbolic, as previously proven in existing research (Robinson, 2016).

H3: Tweets that come from an Android will be more hyperbolic and inflammatory than those coming from an iPhone. Additionally, tweets sent through an Android phone will be more likely to involve media criticism and personal attacks.

One pattern that emerged in an informal canvassing of tweets was Trump's frequency of media criticism. Phrases like "failing," "bad," and "story" were among the 50 most frequently mentioned words in Trump's tweets, as shown in the word cloud in *Figure 1*. Additionally, the term "fake news" was often used to describe unfavorable media coverage.

H4: Trump will try to delegitimize the media by retweeting from accounts that offer him favorable coverage. He will use negative phrases like "fake news" to describe credible reporting that is highly critical of his administration. When confronted with damaging information, Trump will seek to deflect blame onto other people through a technique known as whataboutism.

The aforementioned hypotheses do not address other variables analyzed in this study. One important subject for analysis will be retweets. To understand Trump's tweeting habits, it is important to examine which accounts he most frequently retweets from. Such an analysis provides insight into news sources and people Trump pays closest attention to. Additionally, this study analyzes personal attacks along party lines. Examining whether Trump criticizes Democrats or Republicans more frequently will provide meaningful insight into Trump's online behavior.

For the purposes of this study, tweets were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. A coding scheme using 0's and 1's was used to measure Trump's content message strategies. For example, if Trump offered media criticism in one of his tweets, that category would receive a "1" to represent that the tweet involved media criticism. At the same time, all other content message strategy categories would receive a "0" to represent that the tweet did not focus on policy points, personal attacks, self-praise, or praising of other people. No tweets received a "1" in multiple categories because this study aimed to analyze the predominant message of a tweet. No inter-coder reliability was conducted and no statistical programming software was used to determine levels of significance or correlations between engagement and other variables.

IV. Findings/Results

Several interesting findings emerged after analyzing all of Trump's 1,272 tweets.

H1: Tweets involving media criticism and personal attacks will receive the highest level of engagement as measured by likes and retweets.

Tweets that received the highest levels of engagement, as measured by the sum of retweets and likes, tended to articulate policy points. Of the 100 tweets with the highest levels of engagement, 39 focused on policy. Personal attacks ranked second, accounting for 20 of the top 100 tweets. Of the remaining tweets with the top 100 levels of engagement, 13 involved self-praise, 13 involved media criticism, nine involved praising others and six involved other topics. See *Figure 2*. An overwhelming majority of Trump's top tweets were original content. Only one of the top 100 tweets was a retweet. Trump's most popular tweet received nearly twice as many engagements as the next highest. The tweet, which received nearly a million overall engagements, was an old video of Trump fighting at a wrestling event. The face of a person Trump punched was replaced with a CNN logo. See *Figure 3*.

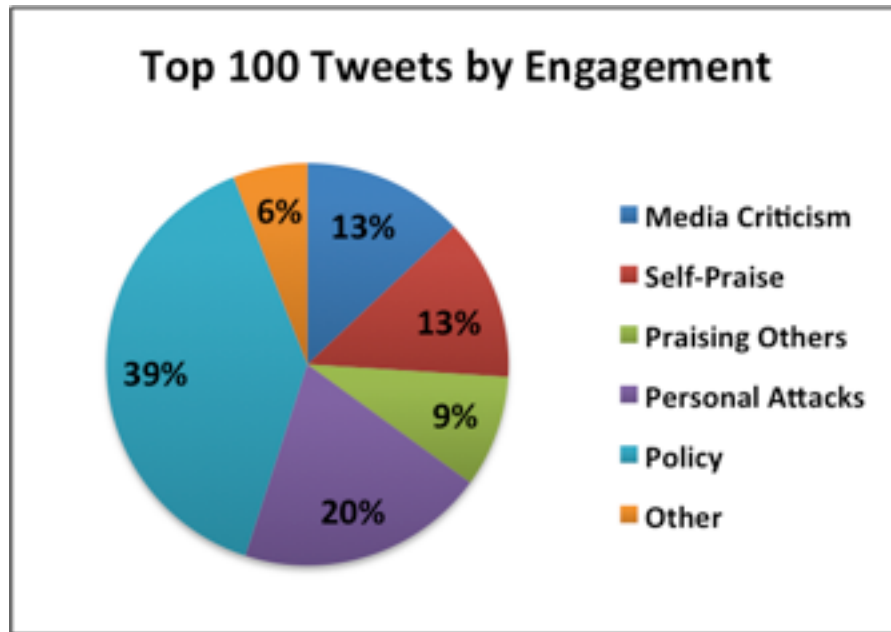


Figure 2. Trump's most engaged with tweets, as measured by the sum of retweets and likes; Tweets involving policy and personal attacks were among Trump's most popular, while those involving media criticism, self-praise, and praising others were the least popular.



Figure 3. Trump's most engaged with tweet features him punching a CNN logo

Trump’s next most popular tweet was quite different. It received about half a million engagements and offered a more optimistic message stressing the importance of peace and unity. The tweet says, “Peaceful protests are a hallmark of our democracy. Even if I don’t always agree, I recognize the rights of people to express their views.” Though Trump’s most engaged with tweet involved media criticism, 39 of the top 100 tweets focused on policy positions. While Trump’s most popular tweets seldom involved media criticism, *H1* is partially supported given that Trump’s most popular tweet showcased himself emphatically punching a news outlet’s logo.

H2: Trump will most frequently attack the media and praise himself in his tweets. He will least often praise others and articulate policy positions.

In 30.7 percent of his tweets, Trump articulated policy positions. The remaining four content message strategies were more evenly split. He praised others in 17.4 percent of his tweets, made personal attacks in 16.7 percent of tweets, provided self-praise 15.1 percent of the time, and criticized the media in 13.8 percent of his tweets. Other tweets that didn’t fall into any of the aforementioned categories accounted for 6.3 percent of the overall tweets. Trump’s tweets were more likely to involve policy and praising others than media criticism and self-praise. *H2* was proven incorrect. See *Figure 4*.

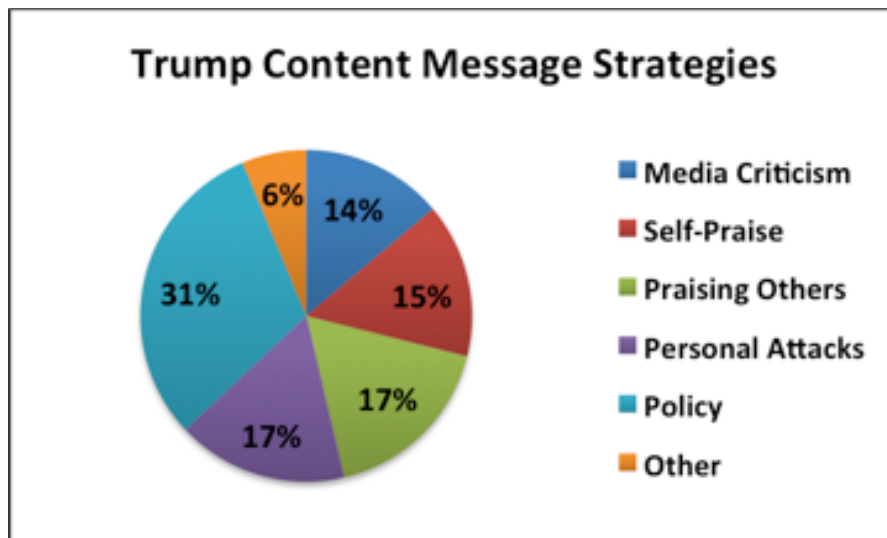


Figure 4. Distribution of tweets by content message strategy; Trump most frequently outlined policy positions, while least often criticizing the media.

H3: Tweets that come from an Android will be more hyperbolic and inflammatory than those coming from an iPhone. Additionally, tweets sent through an Android phone will be more likely to involve media criticism and personal attacks.

Correlation between tweet platform and messaging could not be determined due to a shift in Trump’s tweeting behaviors. Early on in his presidency, he used Android devices. Over time, however, tweets were almost entirely sent through an iPhone, making it impossible to examine whether Trump himself tweeted or his staffers tweeted. *H3* could neither be supported nor refuted.

H4: Trump will try to delegitimize the media by retweeting from accounts that offer him favorable coverage. He will use negative phrases like “fake news” to describe credible reporting that is highly critical of his administration. When confronted with damaging information, Trump will seek to deflect blame onto other people through a technique known as whataboutism.

Trump delegitimized individual reporters and news organizations through a variety of techniques. Of his 1,272 tweets, 176 involved media criticism. Many of those tweets involved the words “fake news.” The majority of tweets criticizing the media (51.1 percent) included the term “fake news.” Trump most often criticized *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*. He also criticized ABC, NBC, CNN, and MSNBC. When

explaining his dissatisfaction with those news sources, Trump would associate negative information with fake news. For example, when news organizations released polls showing his approval rating was below 40 percent, Trump tweeted, “Any negative polls are fake news, just like the CNN, ABC, NBC polls in the election.” If a news organization provided information Trump did not like, it was decried as fake news. Meanwhile, Trump engaged in personal attacks against specific reporters and engaged in “whataboutism,” the practice of deflecting attention away from oneself onto a similar, yet unrelated topic. Trump uses it to broaden context, offer a counterpoint, divert blame, muddy the waters and confuse people (Zak, 2017). “When will Sleepy Eyes Chuck Todd and NBC News start talking about the Obama SURVEILLANCE SCANDAL and stop with the Fake Trump/Russia story?” Trump tweeted. In another tweet, he got more personal by attacking a female anchor’s appearance. “I heard poorly rated Morning Joe speaks badly of me (don’t watch anymore). Then how come low I.Q. Crazy Mika, along with Psycho Joe, came to Mar-a-Lago 3 nights in a row around New Year’s Eve, and insisted on joining me. She was bleeding badly from a face-lift. I said no!”

In contrast, Trump praised news outlets that offered more favorable coverage of his administration. This phenomenon is perhaps most evident when looking at accounts he retweets. Trump retweeted 135 times during his first seven months. He retweeted *Fox and Friends*, a conservative morning talk show, 45 times. This was five times higher than any other user. Trump retweeted Fox News nine times, the Drudge Report seven times, and The White House five times. He retweeted family members and Fox News programs/anchors more than all other users combined. Of the 135 total retweets, 66 came from Fox-related accounts, eight came from Trump family members, and 61 came from all other accounts. *H4* was proven correct.

During the data analysis phase of this study, another major finding emerged. Trump tweeted a total of 212 personal attacks. 54 percent of those attacks were against Democrats, 21 percent were against Republicans and 25 percent were against other individuals, countries or groups of people. While a strong majority of criticisms were against Democrats, Trump tended to refer to Democrats more broadly. He often called the party obstructionist, but he seldom criticized individual Democrats. When he did criticize specific people, they were often related to the 2016 presidential election, such as President Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, John Podesta, and Loretta Lynch. In contrast, Trump called out more current Republican lawmakers than Democratic ones. See *Figure 5*. Trump often attacked Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, Arizona Sens. John McCain and Jeff Flake, South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham and North Carolina Rep. Mark Meadows. Trump also attacked members of his own administration, most notably Attorney General Jeff Sessions. “Attorney General Jeff Session has taken a VERY weak position on Hillary Clinton crimes (where are E-mails and DNC server) and Intel leakers!” Trump tweeted.

Personal Attacks on Lawmakers	
Democrats	Republicans
Richard Blumenthal	Jeff Flake
Adam Schiff	Lindsey Graham
Bill de Blasio	Mitch McConnell
Chuck Schumer	Jeff Sessions
Nancy Pelosi	Lisa Murkowski
	John McCain
	Mark Meadows
	Jim Jordan
	Raul Labrador
	Rand Paul
	Susan Collins

Figure 5. List of current lawmakers Trump has attacked on Twitter. (Note: Jeff Sessions previously served as an Alabama senator early on in Trump’s presidency before being confirmed as attorney general.) Trump criticized about twice as many current Republican lawmakers as Democratic ones. In some tweets, he referenced people without using their names, but in other cases, he explicitly called out members of both major political parties.

V. Discussion

Findings from this study offer surprising revelations about Trump's tweeting habits. For example, when launching personal attacks, he criticized current Republican lawmakers more than Democratic opponents. While it is no surprise that Trump attacked a wide range of people on social media, it is unusual for a sitting president to be so openly critical of his own party and administration. When three Republican senators decided not to vote in favor of opening debate on a bill replacing the Affordable Care Act, Trump went on the offensive. While he suggested Democrats were obstructionists who were unanimously against his presidency, he focused more on political opposition within his own party. "3 Republicans and 48 Democrats let the American people down. As I said from the beginning, let ObamaCare implode, then deal. Watch!" The three Republican defectors were Maine Sen. Susan Collins, Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski, and Arizona Sen. John McCain. While he didn't identify those members by name, he did imply that they had halted his agenda.

In other tweets, Trump was more critical and willing to identify individual lawmakers. For example, he tweeted, "Senator Lisa Murkowski of the Great State of Alaska really let the Republicans, and our country, down yesterday. Too bad!" When McCain and Graham spoke out against Trump's proposed travel ban on Muslim-majority nations, Trump tweeted that "they are sadly weak on immigration" and "should focus their energies on ISIS, illegal immigration and border security instead of always looking to start World War III." While Trump had his fair share of criticisms about the Democratic Party, his attacks on current Republican lawmakers were brasher and more frequent. Trump also launched personal attacks on national security leaders and federal judges. After a court ruling halted Trump's proposed travel ban, he tweeted, "The opinion of this so-called judge, which essentially takes law-enforcement away from our country, is ridiculous and will be overturned!" At the time of Trump's decision to fire FBI Director James Comey, he issued a threat before Comey was schedule to publicly testify before the Senate Judiciary Committee. In one tweet, Trump said "James Comey better hope that there are no 'tapes' of our conversations before he starts leaking to the press!" Trump later insisted he did not secretly record his private conversations with Comey. Through Twitter, though, Trump cast doubt into the minds of his followers about Comey's credibility. Attacking court judges, an FBI director, and members of one's own party is unprecedented.

One unexpected result from this study was the frequency in which Trump discusses policy matters. In many cases, Trump informs the public about meetings he has with foreign leaders, such as Chinese President Xi Jinping and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. While many of his policy-related tweets focused on telling his followers whom he was meeting with, Trump occasionally announced or teased out future policy decisions. For example, in one tweet, Trump kept military leaders and followers in suspense after the ominous tweet shown below:



Nine minutes later, Trump announced his intent to ban transgender individuals from serving in the military because of the medical costs associated with sex reassignment surgery.



Throughout Trump's presidency, he has criticized news organizations that provide unfavorable coverage of his administration. While it's not unusual for politicians to express their displeasure with members of the media, it is unusual to see where Trump turns to receive his news. Trump often turns to Fox News for favorable coverage. He retweets content from *Fox and Friends* five times more often than any other Twitter user. Trump retweets more from his family and Fox-related shows and reporters than all other users, combined. While it's no secret Trump is a fan of Fox News, it is surprising how often he disseminates the network's content. By dismissing actual reporting from credible news outlets and sharing questionable, opinionated content from Fox News, Trump seeks to delegitimize the media. Trump considers *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, NBC, ABC, CBS and CNN to be fake news. When tweeting about those news organizations, he often portrays himself as the victim of a media misinformation campaign. He also tells his followers that the media is *their* enemy. One noteworthy Trump tweet says the following: "The FAKE NEWS media (failing New York Times, NBC News, ABC, CBS, CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American people!"

Trump's words go beyond brash remarks and open hostility toward the media. He actively shares conspiracy theories from Fox News hosts. Trump once retweeted a message from Sean Hannity promoting an appearance from Newt Gingrich, a Trump ally and former Speaker of the House. In the tweet, Hannity said he and Gingrich would discuss "the Deep State's allies in the media." The term "Deep State" suggests people within the federal government are undermining Trump's authority and are actively exploiting the media to undermine his agenda. While Trump staffers have offered anonymous comments to journalists and government officials have handed over classified documents to news organizations, Trump retweeting Sean Hannity signals that he believes there is an underground government effort to remove him from office. The people who have Trump's eyes and ears, such as Sean Hannity, wield tremendous power in shaping what Trump talks about on Twitter.

This study is neither a criticism nor affirmation of Trump's behaviors on social media. It is merely an examination of his use of Twitter during the first seven months of his presidency. This study aims to provide greater insight into an area of research that has received little attention.

VI. Limitations

This study did not measure replies as a factor of engagement due to logistical concerns. Understanding how users respond to Trump's tweets and which replies receive the most retweets and likes is important to understanding the impact of Trump's behaviors on Twitter. Because this study focused on the messaging of Trump's tweets, it did not examine the reactions to his messaging. Future research into this topic could adopt qualitative and quantitative methods to examine which groups of people reply to Trump's tweets, how often they reply, and what they say when they reply.

Since joining Twitter in March 2009, Trump has published more than 36,000 tweets. This study focused exclusively on 1,272 tweets from his first seven months in the White House, thus excluding a large sample size before, during, and after his presidency. It would be worthwhile to examine how Trump's messaging on Twitter evolved during the course of his 2016 presidential election. It'd also be interesting to find out whether the tactics he employed on the campaign trail are consistent with how he tweeted before

he ran for public office and how he tweets today as president. Though this study has some limitations, the findings offer critical insight into Trump's tweeting habits.

VII. Conclusion

Through a content analysis of 1,272 tweets during Trump's first seven months as president, this study explored what Trump tweets about, which tweets receive the highest levels of engagement, and how Trump works to delegitimize the press. Findings reveal that Trump criticizes more Republican lawmakers than Democrats. Additionally, he disseminates a significant amount of information from conservative talk shows, such as Fox and Friends. Trump tweets about a number of subjects, and tweets that are most frequently engaged with appear in a number of categories, ranging from policy, self-praise, praising others, personal attacks and media criticism. Results from this study are unique since there has been little existing research about Trump's use of Twitter as president. Even so, they are consistent with prior findings about the influence of social media in shaping political conversations (Tumasjan, Sprenger, Sandner & Welpe, 2010; Park, 2013). Though Twitter has only been used by one president before Trump, existing research supports this study's finding that the social networking platform plays a prominent role in shaping peoples' political attitudes (Tumasjan, Sprenger, Sandner & Welpe, 2010).

Acknowledgments

This author is thankful to Harlen Makemson, professor at Elon University, for his supervision, advice, and accessibility. The author also appreciates the feedback from numerous reviewers.

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