Spring 2016 Arts and Sciences Undergraduate Research Report in collaboration with Dr. Soo-Hye Han, Dr. Natalie Pennington, Kelsey Abele, and Madeline Frankel

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The 2016 presidential election has been cited by many journalists and scholars as one of the most hostile elections of its time. While much focus has been dedicated to the candidate's speeches and policy proposals, very little attention has been paid to the tone and context of their Twitter feed. Our team of researchers found this information to be invaluable in its contribution to the election and its outcomes, and thus, our research proposal was created.

In terms of relation to the Communication Studies Department, this study of social media communication breaks new ground for a department built on the discipline of communication using various methods. Tim Steffensmeier Department Head, writes, "In a world where employers rate effective communication as the most preferred skill, where the legal system is built on arguments, where families and relationships are held together by stories, and where politics needs critical yet civil discourse, the study of communication has never been more important."

Our research project centered on measuring the final four candidate's twitter feed at the time of the Spring 2016 semester; Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, Hillary Clinton, and Bernie Sanders. Utilizing Excel, we categorized each tweet based on the following categories: tweet author, format, inclusion of quotes, language, tone, focus, weight, function, mention of mobilization, appreciation, endorsement or campaign activities, inclusion of appeal, polls, personal experience, statistics, expert opinion or personal opinion. We compared our tweet scored with one another to obtain the most accurate data. This semester-long project measured every candidate tweet sent from February 1st to March 15th, a critical point in this election during which the primaries were taking place as voters selected their candidate to represent their respective parties.

Each week, Dr. Soo-Hye Han emailed each student researcher an Excel file of each candidate's tweets during that time, with instructions on how and what to code by a specific date. We met each week to go over our coding progress, measure our results, compare our results, and discuss what we had observed in coding each tweet. This presented an opportunity to learn new insights from our colleagues, and hear reports and observations that one could not have easily made working alone.

From these meetings and tweet codings, a pattern was beginning to form, and we saw each candidate's strategy play out through means of social media. Each had a unique message and persona that they were wishing to broadcast, and through twitter, were able to do so.

Social media, in particular, Twitter, has found its primary audience in Millennials. *AdWeek* reports an estimated 59 percent currently use the social media platform. The candidates would therefore, have a widely used method to communicate their message. Whether or not it's the best platform is up for debate. A 2016 Pew Research poll indicates that 59 percent of Twitter users get their news from the social media platform, but of those users, only 54 percent reported actively searching for news. The news market for 18-29 year old Twitter users is promising, but only 38 percent reported using Twitter for this purpose. In a word, the candidates would have some work to do to reach this audience.

Millennials have also consistently struggled turning up in large, consistent numbers to the polls, with their voting demographic numbers being among the lowest. Just 21.5 percent turned out in the 2014 primaries, and many election analysts, such as Phillip Bump, are expecting similar numbers for the 2016 presidential election.

Part of the problem stems from a cynicism young people have towards politics, and in particular, politicians. Millennials' attitude towards politicians leads them to assume their voice (and vote) doesn't matter. A 2011 study by the Harvard Institute of Politics found only 36

percent of 18-29 year olds view running for office as the "honorable thing to do." Additionally, 31 percent believe America's role in the world will be "worse" and only 23 percent say it will be better than it is today. Harvard also reported that "more Millennials believe the U.S.' diplomatic standing (17 percent, "will be better;" 24 percent, "will be worse") and economic standing (29 percent, "will be better;" 30 percent, "will be worse") will be worse than the proportion saying they will improve."

Voter apathy in young people is not necessarily a new problem. Across the country, youth are consistently the demographic with the lowest voter turnout. In Riley County, only 12.3 percent of young people actually voted in the 2014 midterms. The United States Census Bureau reported that the specified 18-23 age group additionally carries the title of lowest voter turnout numbers, more than any other eligible voter groups. This represents a staggering number of residents whose voices aren't heard in every election cycle.

In order for Millennials to turn out in record numbers for these candidates, the candidates themselves would need to carefully convey their message; painting an optimistic view of America's future and give a transparent account of what they would do, as well as attempt to remove the cynicism that comes with working as a politician in the eyes of Millennials.

Trump's tone in his tweets seems to follow a pattern. During media focus on a scandal or soundbite, there is a series of negative tweets from Trump that are unsigned. Following a primary win, he will usually tweet a series of positive responses directed at each state that are short in duration. What's especially interesting in Trump's Twitter usage is his lack of external links. The other candidates utilized Twitter's ability to send links with their tweets, usually directing users to their website or related platform. Trump rarely relies on this method. He also curiously ignore utilizing quotes in his tweets; they too, are few and far between. Many candidates use quotes during an endorsement as a show of support from a prominent figure. Trump does not.

Also interesting is how he refers to his media appearances. Again, most candidates will include a specified time, channel, and link. Trump's usual course of action is mentioning something along the lines of him appearing on "all the major news show" usually accompanied by "Enjoy!" Trump also employs a method personal attacks coupled with his opinion in regards to competing candidates or nay-sayers. His use of adjectives to describe these candidates is particularly strong, and appears to resonate well with his supporters. One tweet, sent out on March 2nd, reads, "Looks like two-time failed candidate Mitt Romney is going to be telling Republicans how to get elected. Not a good messenger!" and was retweeted over 8,000 times. Trump's objective could be a different take on the presidential campaign. It's very obvious he is relying on himself to spread his message, as so little of his Twitter is dedicated to endorsements from prominent leaders. He seems to be attempting to appeal to his followers as an outsider of sorts, with business acumen that make him suited for the White House. He also perpetuates that those in the media are conspiring against him, usually resulting in thousands of retweets. In essence, Trump is the "different" candidate for a voter exhausted by Washington's current state of affairs.

Especially towards the end of his campaign, Ted Cruz and his campaign were working to portray the candidate as likeable and affable. In March, the AP-GfK Poll showed only 26 percent of Americans had a favorable opinion of Cruz, while 59 percent were unfavorable. It's safe to assume that voters would want to vote for someone whose policy they agreed with, but also someone who they liked. It's evident in Cruz's Twitter feed that there was a massive effort to portray him as a likeable man. Over half of his Twitter content consists of retweets, with the tone

of these retweets being a positive show of support for the candidate. The retweets in question come from both the everyday voter, and the prominent politician or conservative leader, as Cruz was noticeably using the endorsements from Texas Governor Greg Abbott and conservative media mogul Glenn Beck in his Twitter feed. At one point, the Cruz campaign even posted survey results showing many found him to be a likeable candidate after all. His attacks against his opponents, mainly Trump, are also done primarily in the form of retweets, which again range from political leaders to the average citizen.

In this context, Cruz could very well have been trying to flood his feed with supporters, in the hopes of diminishing his status as "unlikeable." His tone, for the most part, is also very positive, furthering his attempt at distinguishing himself as someone pleasant to be around. Perhaps where Cruz failed is in the execution timeline. When he began his race, he was already disliked by many of his own public servants due to his role in the government shutdown. For Cruz, the contempt he was trying to dispel may have already been set in stone, and it would have been wiser to tackle this issue sooner.

Perhaps what is most surprising about Bernie Sanders twitter content is the amount of negativity in his tweets, given that he had centered his campaign with the slogan, "A future to believe in." Perhaps his strategy in this was to convince his supporters that the current state of the country was so despondent, that there was an immediate for his policies to create a positive future. Sanders is also very specific in his critiques of what he believes is unjust, corrupt, or in need of change. On February 26th, for example, he tweeted, "I have a radical idea: instead of having unfettered free trade, we should have fair trade protecting workers in the U.S. and abroad." It was certainly popular with his supporters, with over 2,000 retweeting it.

Sanders also frequently used "I" when proposing policies or actions he would perform as president, which seemed to give ownership to his supporters. A popular way of fostering unity among his supporters was the use of "us" and "we" when referring to his campaign. Also posted on February 26th, the tweet, "When the people stand together, there is nothing we cannot accomplish," gave followers an almost familial sense of community that personalized the presidential race for them. Analyst Phillip Bump, however, accurately predicted that, for a variety of reasons, Sanders reliance on Millennials would ultimately be his downfall; they simply don't vote in the numbers that he needed.

Finally, Clinton's approach to her Twitter content seems to be two-fold; portraying herself as qualified, and as a caring candidate. She posts several photos with her everyday supporters, with a special focus on the very youngest. One photo showed a young girl wearing a t-shirt that said, "Meet Hillary, Hug Hillary" which received a very positive response. She also posts about her granddaughter, and frequently refers to the future using "kids" and "children" in her tweets. On February 10th, for example, she tweeted, "Fighting to improve the lives of kids and families—and never giving up," which received over 1,200 retweets. She is also the only candidate to sign her tweets using "-H" in an effort to perhaps give a personal touch to her account.

When tweeting about her endorsements, the words most commonly used are "qualified" and "prepared." For example, a February 11th endorsement from Representative John Lewis read "The most qualified candidate, and someone who is, by all reality-based measures, progressive," which went on to garner over 1,500 retweets.

This research promises an exciting new field for social media analysis. Certainly, there is a way to engage Millennials in this election through the use of social media, but both Trump and Clinton appear to be struggling to capture this audience. Reportedly, only 41 percent of

Millennials even plan on voting in this election, citing a dislike of both candidates. Currently, Millennials occupy the largest voting bloc, making them more important than ever. How the candidates choose to respond through social media could make or break their White House chances.

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