

Twitter and Political Communication

Twitter entered the world of modern communication in 2006 and grew rapidly in popularity. Twitter has over 200 million registered users and makes up 15% of total online usage by Americans, making it one of the most popular social media (Humphreys, Gill, Krishnamurthy & Newbury, 2013). By 2008, “politicians, candidates, and political campaigns widely used the site to connect with citizens and potential voters” ((Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011) as cited in Bekafigo & McBride, 2013). Twitter especially, but along with many other social networking sites, has incredible potential to improve democracy and the nature of political dissemination and discussion.

Twitter and other similar social networking sites (SNS) have created a more egalitarian and decentralized communication model for modern society. On Twitter, communication is possible between any individual users, regardless of social status. “Twitter users are more likely to interact with people who are friends of friends, celebrities, politicians, and strangers” (Bekafigo & McBride, 2013). This significantly increases potential between important public figures and average citizens. This equalizing impact also lends more perceived authenticity to messages. Twitter messages are not transmitted by a third party (Lee & Shin, 2014) and this provides people with at least the impression of a more traditional, one-on-one communication model. Many SNS are also very inexpensive, and Twitter can therefore be a socially equalizing medium for individuals as well as businesses and organizations. Non-profits can theoretically have an

equal social media presence to that of Fortune 500 companies. This idea extends, potentially, to political candidates.

Despite the more egalitarian nature of the communication, however, some argue that the value of the messages has decreased. Twitter messages and updates are limited to 140 characters. This severely decreases the amount of content that can be shared and therefore limits the depth of the content that is provided. Alternatively, there is the claim that, “technological limitations are not new and can be a welcomed restriction for many chroniclers of life events” (Humphreys et. al., 2013). If we consider Twitter as a method to chronicle events and link to other sources, than it does indeed seem to be an effective tool. For politicians and campaigns, however, this required brevity could be detrimental to the spread of information and creating an informed public.

Stromer-Galley explains that, “interactivity, at it’s definitional core, is about feedback” (2014, p. 8). Unlike traditional mass media models, SNS allow two-way or even multi-way communication, and blur the lines traditionally drawn between sender and receiver. However in general, there has been a failure to fully utilize the dialogic potential of new media (Kim, Chun, Kwak, & Nam, 2014). “Despite the capacity of a new medium that allows for more personal and reciprocal contact with the electorate, however, candidates do not appear to have fully utilized its interactive features” (Lee & Shin, 2014). This idea is reinforced throughout Stromer-Galley’s analysis of campaigning in the Internet age. She claims that even in more recent elections, there are few candidates who have used new media in innovative ways (2014). Despite the lack of meaningful use, many recognize the potential that new media presents. “Social media can offer a direct, integrated, and inexpensive two-way communication channel facilitating

dialogic communication with the public. Dialogic communication, the ethical and relational aspects of PR, refers to a process of two-way, open, and negotiated discussion, where participants are able to exchange ideas and opinions freely, acknowledging the value of each other” ((Kent & Taylor, 1998) as cited in Kim et. al., 2014). These dialogic principles that Kent and Taylor claim digital communication can produce are fundamental to democracy. Discussion and discourse, equality, and feedback could all be created and maintained through social media outlets interactivity features.

One study found that citizens that are already partisan and politically involved “are extending their offline political reach to Twitter” (Bekafigo & McBride, 2013). The same study also found that minorities and people on the margins are also tweeting about politics, too. This research would suggest that participatory democracy is being increased and expanding due to the integrations of social media such as Twitter. Bekafigo and McBride also believe, “Twitter may be a good place to reach a highly engaged voting base who may, in turn, reach out to others” (2013). One of the largest benefits to the Twitter formula in regards to political action is the ability to retweet, share messages, and involve others in the political process. Researchers Lee and Shin take this one step further, claiming that SNS messages also “often serve as raw materials for the mainstream media” (2012). This significantly expands the audience of even private social networking accounts. This was certainly true in the case of the Iranian election in 2009. Following a questionable re-election of an incumbent leader, citizens used Twitter to mobilize and took to the streets in protest. These protestors were beaten and brutalized by police. The people captured this conflict on their phones and cameras, and disseminated this footage via social media to the western mainstream media (Ems, 2014). The people

were able to share the injustices with the world, due to the relationship between SNS and mass media, as well as the lack of centralized control over social media outlets.

Another example of Twitter being used to mobilize political action is the non-partisan, non-profit organization, Rock the Vote. They have always promoted increasingly innovative voter registration methods and utilized new media. In fact, they were the first organization to create a tool allowing voters to register online (Rock the Vote, 2014). “By consistently seeking out novel ways to reach new voters, we have run the largest voter registration drives for young people on record during the past six Presidential elections” (Rock the Vote, 2014). Through their efforts and extremely active social media campaigns, over six million young voters have been registered, despite the challenges to getting the millennial generation involved in politics. Their campaign is focused primarily on new media and the integration of this type of communication into the political landscape.

Social media has also had an influence on political events beyond mobilization and dissemination. “One of the most consistent findings is that the Internet has spurred more people to give politically affiliated donations including bringing in new donors, small donors, and younger donors” ((Bimber, 2001) as cited in Bedafigo & McBride, 2013). This has significant implications on democracy and political effects, because the encouragement of average citizen participation gives individuals a larger role in the political process. Increased involvement in politics via social media accounts can therefore also influence the amount of representation individuals receive from politicians by encouraging a larger volume of small donations by independent citizens and allowing less reliance on big business. Based on the limited amount of information available to

researchers, it seems that it is also harder for businesses to track individual Twitter users. This makes it more difficult to accomplish specifically targeted advertising over this medium, as individual users determine whom they follow and what content they see.

Social media has changed campaigning from all sides, and has the potential to make much greater change. In the 2012 presidential election “the campaigns intently followed Twitter looking for signs that their candidate was doing well or poorly. In some ways, Twitter served as a focus group of sorts, letting campaigns float messages to see what resonated” (Stromer-Galley, 2014, p. 161). Politicians and citizens could get a mutually better understanding of each other by interacting and sharing messages on SNS like Twitter.

Despite increased political engagement and voter empathy that results from Twitter interactivity with politicians and candidates, however, SNS cannot ensure that the population is more informed, or less susceptible to manipulation. Researchers conducted a study in which they gave participants identical messages from a politician, one given over Twitter, and the other in the form of a newspaper interview. They found that “exposure to a politician’s Twitter page heightened a sense of direct, face-to-face conversation with him... leading them [participants] to express more favorable impressions of and a stronger intention to vote for him.” On the other hand, “Those exposed to the candidate’s interview article better recognized the political issues he mentioned and showed less source-centered message processing than those who viewed his Twitter page” (Lee & Shin, 2014). This reinforces Lee and Shin’s earlier findings, that, “although they [participants] had more positive thoughts while viewing the high-interactivity Twitter page, they listed fewer issue-related thoughts and displayed poorer

recognition of the candidate's policy agendas" (2012). Increased political involvement is a great thing, but if the population is not also informed and knowledgeable about the issues, it does not further democracy. Instead, candidates could utilize SNS to manipulate voters and encourage undeserved sympathy.

There is also not a lack of attempts by government to utilize or block this new media for the purpose of control. For instance, in the case of the Iranian protests, the Iran government attempted to shut down Twitter all together, in order to block communication with each other as well as outside sources. Jared Cohen of the US State Department contacted Twitter during this time to ask that they hold off scheduled maintenance so that the people could get messages out. The US government claimed to do this as "proponents of freedom of expression" (Ems, 2014). This is in stark contrast, however, to the stance that the US government took against protestors in the 2009 G-20 Summit in Pittsburg that used Twitter to dodge riot police. Police arrested a man that tweeted out cop locations on charges of "criminal use of a communication facility" (Ems, 2014). As Ems suggests, these events clearly illustrate the government's awareness of the power of social media and their attempts to control the medium, though not in the interest of democracy as they may claim.

The nature of Twitter and many digital media is somewhat paradoxical, and the full implications are yet misunderstood. There are many ways in which Twitter positively impacts communication, particularly political communication. It provides a decentralized, egalitarian outlet for mobilization, dissemination, and discussion. However, this medium also widely neglects good content, and may be susceptible to manipulation. Still, the role of this SNS will be critical to the future of political discourse

and campaigning in America, and provides an overall positive opportunity for democracy and real interaction between candidates and voters.

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