

#Activism

Tracking Twitter's Impact on Campaigns for Political Change

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INTRODUCTION

Since the turn of the century, the global community has experienced a constant wave of popular uprisings and public protests. The “Arab Spring” triggered a chain reaction that spread not just to the Eastern world, but also to many stable Western democracies, including the *indignados* (indignant citizens) movement of Spain, the Portuguese *Geração a Rasca* (desperate generation), and the *Occupy* campaigns worldwide (Theocharis et al. 2014). Although these movements occurred in different places, addressed different issues, and featured different demands, one common underlying pattern unites them together: the use of social media to mobilize citizens and push for change.

Recent research on social movements has thus become increasingly devoted to understanding the role of social media in facilitating citizen communication, coordination, and organization. Scholars contend that the widespread popularity, expansive network reach, and unique “feedback” engagement characteristics of social media mark it as particularly well-suited for mobilizing systematic action (“Grassroots” 2012; Hampton et al. 2011; Nisbet et al. 2012). Among this research, the microblogging platform Twitter has received praise for its ability to simplify the complexities of mass protests and effectively organize community action (Theocharis et al. 2014). Various interest groups have thus increasingly begun to adopt social media – and Twitter in particular – as a means to achieve institutional goals. However, as social communication has moved to online networks, the scope and variety of information that citizens receive has begun to shrink. Understanding how different groups have utilized social media has become imperative to examining what messages people see, and as a result, how social media may change activism in the future.

This study thus seeks to answer the following questions: How have interest groups utilized social media, and Twitter in particular, to facilitate political change? How does partisan affiliation affect and shape social media strategy?

SECTION 1:

Background and Relevant Information

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Interest groups often rely on the media in order to promote successful political change. Traditional mass media, such as newspapers and television, allow organizations to reach an enormous audience due to the simplicity of disseminating information through these mediums (Fominaya 2014). Most scholars agree that the success of interest group advocacy campaigns hinges on the media, as news coverage frequently shapes which issues people think about. Indeed, without the media, social movements regularly become lost amongst the highly competitive process for public attention (Thrall et al. 2014). News consumption thus involves a fundamental trade-off: given the finite attention resources of consumers, focusing on one issue requires ignoring another (Cao 2010). Traditional communication theory refers to this process as journalistic “gate-keeping,” or the ability of the media “to control on a large scale what citizens know and how a story is presented to them” (Neff 1995: 981). The public therefore relies upon the media to not only provide the news, but to also interpret it and identify which issues should receive the public’s attention.

Thus, although interest groups need the media to accomplish their goals and receive publicity, media have far less reliance on these organizations. Many sources of news compete with interest groups for media attention; losing one story does not significantly impact the media’s ability to report on other topics. An asymmetric power structure hence dominates interest group/media relations. The media, which control the bulk of power in this relationship, have the ability to frame messages and transform issues – often in ways that can dictate either the success or failure of an interest group’s campaign (Zoonen 1992). As a result, interest groups regularly find it necessary to adapt their messages to the mainstream narrative to receive sufficient media coverage (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993).

The advent of the Internet, however, has fundamentally challenged the traditional media/interest group power structure as news consumption increasingly shifts towards online services. In 2004, 24% of Americans reported using the Internet to retrieve news; nearly four-in-ten (39%) reported doing so in 2012 (Kohut et al. 2012). This trend stems partially from the explosive popularity of social media. Defined by Boyd and Ellison (2008: 211) as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system,” social media platforms have experienced exponential growth over the last decade. As of January 2014, 74% of online adults use social networking sites – a staggering 66-point increase from the 8% of networked adults in 2005 (“Social Networking Fact Sheet”). Social media have thus created an entirely new infrastructure for “the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (qtd. in van Dijck 2013: 4). Some scholars refer to this phenomenon as “demassification,” whereby a hybrid model of “many-to-many” communication has begun to overtake the conventional “one-to-many” model (Metzger 2014). As a result, social media have become instrumental in shaping campaign agendas and organizing global collective action independent of traditional channels (Lopes 2014).

Modern social media trace back to the development of the World Wide Web in 1991. The Internet’s hypertext capabilities created a series of networked communities supported by weblogs, list-servers, and e-mail providers. With the advent of Web 2.0, these connective services shifted towards building an interaction-based functional infrastructure, creating the perfect environment for social media. Websites such as Myspace, Facebook, and YouTube began gaining popularity just as the Internet became ritualized into everyday routine. Thus, since the mid-2000s, social media platforms have proliferated at an astonishing rate. As van Dijck (2013: 8)

notes, “some have succeeded (Facebook, YouTube), others have waxed and waned (Flickr, Myspace), and yet others have quietly disappeared (remember Xanga?).”

Social networking sites (SNSs) encompass the majority of social media. Boyd and Ellison (2007: 211) define these sites as:

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

In short, SNSs promote interpersonal contact that connect both pre-existing social networks and new communities based on shared interests. Websites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google+ all fall under this category.

SNSs thus provide interest groups with an expansive network over which to spread activist messages. By their very definition, SNS services tap into users’ pre-existing connections and allow information to instantaneously traverse spatial confines (“Grassroots” 2012). This characteristic facilitates the development of “weak ties,” thus allowing advocates to extend their social networks to encompass distant groups (Theocharis et al. 2014). According to a recent Pew Research Study, the average Internet user has 669 “social ties” — a full 163 more than the 506 ties of non-users (Hampton et al. 2011). Furthermore, the average Internet user tends to have more “close ties” (average of 2.27) than non-users, who average 1.75 discussion partners (Hampton et al. 2011). SNSs also expand interest group network reach through the use of hashtags, which create “an identifier or tag for fellow activists, as well as a way to track multiple uses of the same phrase” and “continually predicate renewed attention” to campaign messages (Stache 2015). The hashtag function thus enables users to physically link an individual post to a larger movement,

thereby forming a connected body of searchable content. Social media have therefore given participants the chance to extend their community far beyond traditional boundaries.

SNSs also give interest groups the ability to “bypass the gatekeepers” of traditional media through the production of user-generated content, thereby giving voices to a wide range of organizations. Indeed, this characteristic has led many scholars to dub SNS services as a “vehicle of democracy” due to its “decentralized citizen control as opposed to hierarchal, elite control” (Meraz 2009: 682). Singer (2005: 178-179) likewise notes, “In a media environment with unlimited sources of information, the concept of discrete gates through which such information passes is obliterated; if there are no gates, there is no need for anyone to tend them.” SNSs thus facilitate the circumvention of traditional journalistic gatekeeping processes, thereby allowing marginalized groups to articulate alternate interests and identities to the public (“Grassroots” 2012). However, as many scholars have noted, this ability does not always manifest itself in reality. The public has a limited amount of attention to consume information, regardless of the medium used, and thus the competition for public attention remains a zero sum game. Organizations have therefore “simply traded one attention-getting competition for another,” offsetting the democratizing components of SNS services (Thrall et al. 2014: 139).

The user-generated content that facilitates online democratization also creates interactive feedback loops. These systems serve an integral role in the “many-to-many” communication model by allowing advocacy groups to engage directly with the public in a way not available through other mediums (Obar 2014). Thus, since information can flow in both directions, SNSs allow users to contribute content rather than passively receive it (Frankel and Hillygus 2014; Nisbet et al. 2012). Penney (2015) notes that various advocacy campaigns often take advantage of SNS services’ interactive capabilities by asking the public to engage with virtual support. One

common tactic, for example, entails linking followers to fundraising websites or online petitions. SNSs have therefore altered the structure of traditional information flow by enabling both user-generated content production and “personalized action frame sharing” within one’s network (Theocharis et al. 2014).

However, the very characteristics that enable this interactivity and widespread information diffusion have led some scholars to question the effectiveness of SNS services in encouraging citizen participation. An especially large concern, broadly deemed “slacktivism” (a neologism of *slacker* and *activism*), refers to an individual’s willingness to perform a token display of support online without devoting the effort needed to enact meaningful change (Kristofferson et al. 2014). For example, changing one’s profile picture to a designated campaign image on Facebook commonly receives criticism for failing to produce any significant offline action (Rotman et. al 2011). According to Malcolm Gladwell (2010), “Facebook activism succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice.” Despite the prevailing negative assessment of slacktivism in academic discourse, however, not all evidence supports the concept. A 2010 study of 61 million voters published in *Nature*, for example, demonstrated that receiving just one social message from a “friend” on Facebook with the words “I Voted” increased voter turnout by approximately 340,000 voters (Bond et. al 2012). Likewise, Breuer and Farooq (2012) have found that online participation in legislative campaigns contributes positively to more active engagement with politics. As Vie (2014) notes, the power of “slacktivist” campaigns may lie in their ability to draw attention to important issues and campaigns rather than facilitating traditional offline mobilization. Thus, although many scholars have undertaken detailed examinations of slacktivism, no definitive findings have established its existence.

In sum, social media – and particularly SNSs – have created a backdrop for news consumption characterized by its “diversity, fragmentation, and complexity” (Frankel and Hillygus 2014). While this splintered environment has given organizations the ability to circumvent the traditional media, it has also contributed to an increasingly divided and niche-oriented society. MIT technology specialist Nicholas Negroponte predicted this shift towards an individualized communications culture in his description of “the Daily Me” – a personally designed and pre-determined communications package for each individual user (Sunstein 2007). Now termed the “filter bubble,” social media and new technology enable news consumers to control the content they see and remove undesirable results from alternate viewpoints. Scholars have observed corresponding social fragmentation, a decline in group loyalties, and an augmented “echo chamber” effect in political communication due to the filter bubble (Bennett 2012). Thus, as the information citizens consume has become increasingly limited to like-minded ideological groups, determining how various organizations utilize social media has become exponentially more important.

Viewer choice in this fragmented media environment frequently reflects demographic, cultural, and political differences. On television, for example, viewers of Fox News, the History Channel, the Golf Channel, and ESPN lean Republican; Democrats generally tune in to MSNBC, CNN, Comedy Central, Lifetime and Bravo (Gilbert 2011). Media strategists from both parties have begun to take this research into account, resulting in diverging partisan communication tactics. For example, after finding that viewers of the main venues for political ads (broadcast programming and local news) were overwhelmingly liberal, the 2004 Bush re-election campaign shifted their ad budget towards television programs (college sports, “cop shows,” etc.) and cable channels with a larger documented Republican viewership (Gilbert 2011). This strategy resulted

in Bush airing four times as many ads on “NYPD Blue” as his opponent, John Kerry, did, “twice as many on ‘CSI,’ four times as many on golf tournaments and five times as many on car-racing” to compensate for the double-digit disparity between Democrats and Republicans on broadcast television (Gilbert 2011). This type of niche microtargeting in partisan communication has become increasingly prominent as a result of media fragmentation.

Not all differences in communications strategy stem from the new media environment, however. Scholars across various eras have consistently attributed at least partial variations in partisan media use to structural differences between the parties (Freeman 1986; Solman 2003; Gainous and Wagner 2014). The Republican Party has historically utilized a largely top-down power flow from senior party leadership, thus developing a unitary approach to representation and messaging (Gainous and Wagner 2014). Conversely, the Democratic Party revolves around a “bottom-up” power flow, whereby its pluralistic constituent groups each attempt to address multiple issues on the national platform (Freeman 1986). Republicans have consequently experienced success in thematic branding, whereas Democrats often create more disjointed messages. Some scholars argue that these structural differences lend more autonomy to Democratic social media teams, thereby enabling staffers to respond to events in the moment and with a style that fits the norms of social networking (Kreiss 2014). Republican communication specialists, by contrast, must go through a stricter vetting process from the leadership hierarchy, leading to delayed responses and heavily “prepackaged,” inorganic content (Kreiss 2014).

Most research on partisan media use has focused on political elites, such as politicians, who attempt to influence the formal political process. However, relatively little scholarship has focused on examining the communications styles of interest groups and other such “non-elite” political actors. To that end, this project aims to discover how advocacy organizations from both

the ideological left and right have utilized social media to mobilize support and facilitate political change.

METHODS: ANALYZING PARTISAN SOCIAL MEDIA

This project undertook a comparative analysis of Twitter during two separate social movements in order to better examine advocacy in the new media environment. Specifically, this project aimed to understand (1) how different sides of the ideological spectrum utilize Twitter and (2) how effectively each group's strategy has facilitated political change.

Case Studies

This project selected two recent social movements – the campaign to redact AP United States History curriculum changes and the Ferguson social justice protests – to serve as comparative case studies. Both movements feature strong structural similarities, but stem from different sides of the ideological spectrum. Performing a comparative study thus allowed for an in-depth analysis of Twitter's role in each campaign, leading to a more nuanced understanding of how media usage varies between partisan groups.

Time Period

Social media's popularity in recent years has grown at an unprecedented rate. Websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram experienced a massive influx of use in the late 2000s; examining cases before this growth in popularity would thus not present an accurate picture of social media usage today. To eliminate this impediment, the two cases selected occurred within the same recent three-year time frame:

- AP U.S. History: September 2013 – present
- Ferguson: August 2014 – present

Analyzing these cases therefore limits the study to current social media usage and does not provide insight into historical trends.

Ideological Leanings

The two cases selected for study represent two different sides of the political spectrum. The first case – backlash to changes in the AP U.S. History curriculum – stems primarily from conservative interest groups, while the second case – the Ferguson movement – receives mostly liberal support. Focusing on movements from both the political right and left allowed for an in-depth examination of variations in partisan social media use. Given the fragmented media environment and “filter bubble” discussed in this study’s theoretical framework, understanding how partisan groups disseminate information has become increasingly important for analyses of contemporary political engagement.

Underlying Themes

Both of this project’s case studies feature two different surface level issues, but connect on a thematic level of racial tension:

- AP U.S. History: movement to redact curriculum and framework changes, which conservatives believe emphasize a negative view of American history by highlighting oppression and exploitation.
- Ferguson: movement to foster debate on the topic of institutionalized racism, particularly in regards to the relationship between law enforcement and African-American citizens, and to facilitate effective policy and attitudinal changes.

Selecting movements that deal with the same core issue allowed this study to minimize the number of extraneous variables influencing each organization’s social media strategy.

Support by Interest Groups

Both of the selected movements experienced broad structural support from established interest groups:

- AP U.S. History: Republican National Committee, Concerned Women for America, National Association of Scholars, etc.
- Ferguson: American Civil Liberties Union, Organization for Black Struggle, Black Lives Matter, etc.

The groups listed above provide a representative sample of the organizations that contributed to each movement's logistical efforts. Due to practical limitations, however, this study restricted its scope to only two interest groups per movement. American Principles in Action and the National Association of Scholars were selected for the conservative AP U.S. History movement, while Black Lives Matter and Hands Up United were selected for the liberal Ferguson movement. Each of these interest groups played a pivotal and vocal role in pushing the agenda of their respective movement.

Twitter Usage

The four models of public relations, which describes the progression of organizational communication from one-sided emotional messages to two-sided engagement in conversations, served as the coding schema for this project. Studies have found that the four models significantly impact how communications specialists craft messages in a variety of contexts – including fundraising, integrated marketing, and traditional media relations – thereby making it a viable standard for content analysis (Fleisher and Blair 1999). In order to accurately code for each of the models, common indicators found during content analysis guided media coding. A table to summarize each content coding category is included in the appendix.

The one-sided models of public relations contain both asymmetric and symmetric flows of information. The asymmetric structure, known as press agency, primarily focuses on persuading the audience of an idea by any means necessary (Waters and Williams 2011). Typical features of press agency include attention-grabbing headlines, sensationalized language, and embellished content. Content such as positive and negative valence, the use of attention grabbing “buzz” words, and emoticons primarily served as indicators for this model. Conversely, the one-sided symmetric model, described by Waters and Williams (2011) as “public information,” conveys accurate and factual content to the network’s audience. Thus, messages that disseminate pure information constitute the bulk of this category. Other identifiers include fact-based discussion of issues, rationales behind movements, and links to online educational resources. Such content does not directly engage consumers, but rather functions as a way to spread information, similar to the role of the traditional media.

The two-sided models of public relations feature greater audience engagement than the one-sided models, but still contain both asymmetric and symmetric information flow structures (Waters and Williams 2011). Social media’s reliance on user-generated content and the “feedback loop” thus uniquely suits it for use in the two-sided models. The first two-sided model, asymmetric, largely consists of communication that seeks to promote audience mobilization offline (Waters and Williams 2011). Identifiers for this model include content such as surveys, polls, links to donations or petitions, and calls to action. The final model, two-sided symmetric, moves further into full-engagement by encouraging a balanced, two-way dialogue between an organization and its audience (Waters and Williams 2011). This category thus contains messages

that both promote follower feedback and respond directly to other content. Conversations between the organization and its followers, using social media to connect with other movements, and referencing other accounts serve as identifiers for this category.

Content for evaluation was scraped from each interest group's Twitter account using the NCapture web extension for NVivo 10 on Microsoft Windows. NCapture collects all posts from a designated Twitter handle, including original tweets and re-tweets, and imports the content into NVivo. This software then stores each tweet individually, along with component data such as date, time, hashtags, mentions, and number of retweets. Other NVivo functions include a word frequency search, nodal coding, and transcription capabilities. The scope of this study, however, only required the use of NVivo's content collection and storage functions.

Following data collection, each organization's entire content archive underwent a qualitative analysis in order to identify relevant movement tweets, with a hard collection cutoff date of July 1, 2015. A series of key terms and thematic qualifiers served as content markers for tweet identification. Tweets not marked as movement-relevant were subsequently removed from the data set. To ensure that each organization had an equal amount of content, the study then collected only the first sixty movement-relevant tweets from the data set. Finally, each tweet was hand-coded according to the four models of public relations.

SECTION 2:

Twitter Case Studies in Social Movements

Conservative Case Study: Backlash to AP U.S. History Curriculum Changes

Relevant Background Information

In October 2012, the College Board – a private non-profit corporation that operates the Advanced Placement (AP) program – announced a framework change to the popular AP United States History (APUSH) course. The revamped curriculum aimed to foster “critical thinking skills” to bring the course in line with the national Common Core standards, while simultaneously encouraging “teachers to go more in depth into fewer topics” (Felton 2014). To that end, the College Board cut back the number of historical periods studied from 28 specific sections to nine “big picture” units. Other changes emphasized the study of “national identity and group identities” with “special attention given to the formation of gender, class, racial, and ethnic identities” (qtd. in “AP United States History”). Broadly speaking, the curriculum changes represented a distinct shift away from traditional fact and date memorization and towards a more nuanced, contextualized understanding of history.

The College Board’s APUSH alterations went relatively unnoticed until July of 2014, when the Texas State Board of Education expressed concern that the curriculum changes would bring Common Core – an educational initiative prohibited by Texas law – into the state (Stutz 2014). The issue then vaulted onto the national scene in August of that same year after the Republican National Committee (RNC) passed a resolution condemning the curriculum. According to the RNC, the revised APUSH course “reflects a radically revisionist view of American history that emphasizes negative aspects of our nation’s history while omitting or minimizing positive aspects” (qtd. in Gewertz 2014). Finally, in September 2014, the APUSH debate reached its boiling point. National conservative groups ranging from Concerned Women for America to the Tea Party took up the fight against the College Board. Curriculum critics appeared on national news

networks; APUSH opponents drafted petitions, organized conference calls, and created shareable action item lists. What had begun as a regular curriculum review quickly blossomed into a nation-wide, partisan debate.

The two conservative interest groups selected for this study, American Principles in Action (APA) and the National Association of Scholars (NAS), served as two of the most vocal critics of the APUSH curriculum changes. According to the independent fact-checking website Politifact, APA is “a conservative group ‘dedicated to preserving and propagating the fundamental principles on which our country was founded’” (“American Principles in Action’s file”). Education currently constitutes one of APA’s four core issues, alongside economics, Latino partnership, and life, marriage and religious liberty. On their education policy project page, the organization comments, “Our children’s schools, textbooks, libraries... are riddled with propaganda that pushes promiscuity, pornography, violence, and Leftist ideology” (“APIA Education”). Given the prominent conservative belief that the APUSH revisions “can only be interpreted as an attempt to hijack the teaching of U.S. history on behalf of a leftist political and ideological perspective,” APA holds a clear stake in the debate (Kurtz 2014).

NAS describes itself as a non-profit dedicated to upholding “reasoned scholarship and civil debate in America’s colleges and universities... with understanding of core subjects including Western civilization and American history” (“NAS Overview”). Although the organization does not officially identify itself as a conservative interest group, its preference for right-wing political views is common knowledge (Curtin 2008). Unlike APA, NAS exclusively focuses on education policy and specifically concentrates its efforts on higher education. The Advanced Placement programs, which offer college-level courses to high school students and are often used for credit in post-secondary institutions, thus fall under NAS interests. Additionally, NAS cites

“overemphasis on issues of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation” and “exclusion of conservative and traditional viewpoints” as two of its main policy concerns (“Issues & Ideals”). These issues clearly lie within the realm of conservative pressure to redact the APUSH curriculum changes.

Findings

Both APA and NAS heavily favored the one-sided models of public relations when crafting tweets ($n = 95$, 79.1%). Moreover, within the one-sided models, the groups displayed a preference for the “symmetric,” or public information, method ($n = 57$, 60.0%). Sharing factual information – such as general movement updates, educational resources, and frequently asked questions – characterizes the one-sided symmetric method. Accordingly, the conservative interest groups primarily linked to media articles ($n = 45$, 78.9%) in order to facilitate information dissemination. Tweets of this nature tended to only use original content as a “header” or opening summary for its link, much like a headline for traditional print media. From July 1-7 of 2014, for example, NAS published only two “public information” tweets related to the APUSH movement. These tweets contained two links and only seventeen total words of original content, not including hashtags: “The New AP History: A Preliminary Report <http://t.co/g81doqz4jj> #highered” (2014, July 1) and “Look What the College Board Has Done to U.S. History <http://t.co/n1zDUeYwaf> #highered” (2014, July 7). Furthermore, nearly one-third of article links tweeted by both APA and NAS redirected the user to content published by the respective organization ($n = 15$, 33.3%). All other public information links connected the user to content published by either traditional print journalistic sources ($n = 11$, 24.4%), online news websites ($n =$

14, 31.1%), blogs ($n = 3$, 6.7%), or other interest group websites ($n = 2$, 4.4%). Additional dissemination tactics included “live tweeting” panels and conference calls ($n = 4$, 7.0%), and linking to videos ($n = 3$, 5.2%) and radio content ($n = 2$, 3.5%).

APA and NAS demonstrated slightly less of a preference for the one-sided asymmetric model, or “press agency,” than the public information model ($n = 38$, 40.0%). Typified by emotionally charged or biased information dissemination, most tweets in this category once again relied upon links to media articles ($n = 34$, 89.5%). Journalistic pieces, which tend to emphasize objective reporting, generally do not fall under press agency unless they have a clear partisan bias. As a result, very few links in the press agency category redirected to traditional third-party articles ($n = 12$, 35.3%). Op-eds – which allow for a more informal writing style, an argument for (or against) the author’s opinion, and personal commentary on an issue – lend themselves more to press agency, and thus were more commonly featured ($n = 22$, 64.7%). Tweets of this type once again tended to only use original content as a title for the link, but utilized emotional words rather than traditional unbiased journalism ledes. On November 18, 2014, for example, APA tweeted, “Don't Let Elitists De-emphasize Patriotism in U.S. History Classes via @usnews - <http://t.co/wSrMpDV0i5> #APUSH.” The remaining press agency tweets from conservative groups featured original content with expressive valence ($n = 3$, 7.9%) and links to emotionally charged videos ($n = 1$, 2.6%).

Less than one-quarter of collected conservative tweets were coded as a two-sided messaging strategy ($n = 25$, 20.8%). Of these tweets, APA and NAS demonstrated a preference for the asymmetric, or offline mobilization, method ($n = 17$, 68.0%). Most offline mobilization encouraged followers to sign various petitions ($n = 7$, 41.2%), while the second most common tac-

tic distributed a variety of action items citizens to engage with ($n = 5$, 29.4%). Other mobilization strategies included giving feedback to the College Board ($n = 2$, 11.8%), becoming involved with the interest groups ($n = 2$, 11.8%), and general calls to action ($n = 1$, 5.9%). APA and NAS rarely used the two-sided symmetric method ($n = 8$, 32.0%), which emphasizes a balanced dialogue between the organization and outside parties. Tweets using this strategy primarily referenced actions taken by other movements ($n = 6$, 75.0%). Only one tweet directly engaged with followers through Twitter's "reply" function ($n = 1$, 12.5%); likewise, just one tweet referred followers to other interest group websites ($n = 1$, 12.5%).

Overall, the analysis found that conservative interest groups used the four models of public relations in varied amounts. Content coded as public information emerged as the most popular messaging strategy ($n = 57$, 47.5%). Conservative groups utilized press agency the second-most often ($n = 38$, 31.7%), offline mobilization third ($n = 17$, 14.2%), and balanced dialogue least often ($n = 8$, 6.7%). The one-sided models, which consist of public information and press agency, thus dominated conservative content. This strong preference for one-sided models indicates a conservative messaging strategy based in the conventional dissemination of articles and updates. As a result, although the groups occasionally utilized Twitter's connective functions, the majority of conservative tweets did not tap into the social network's unique capabilities and characteristics.

Liberal Case Study: Ferguson Protests

Relevant Background Information

On August 9, 2014, a white police officer shot and killed Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year old African-American male, on the street in Ferguson, Missouri. Several witnesses

claimed that Brown had his hands up in surrender at the time of the shooting. Crowds quickly began to gather at the site of the Brown's death, where his body had lay in the street for several hours. The next morning, the St. Louis County Police released a statement asserting that Brown had reached for the officer's gun, which prompted the officer to discharge his weapon. Protesters continued to gather throughout the press conference and created an improvised memorial near the site of the shooting. That same evening, police entered the area in riot gear in response to looting at local businesses.

Unrest and protests continued for weeks following the shooting, resulting in a declared state of emergency in Ferguson, heavily-armed police, deployment of the National Guard, an FBI investigation, and hundreds of arrests. The Ferguson protests uniquely attracted attention on a local, national, and international level unlike other similar movements. Additionally, a wide variety of organizations, ranging from well-established political heavyweights to smaller localized groups, participated in mobilization aspects of the protest.

The two liberal interest groups selected for this study, Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Hands Up United (HUU), formed in direct response to violence against African-Americans. BLM defines itself as “a call to action and a response to the virulent anti-Black racism that permeates our society... [to affirm the lives of] all Black lives along the gender spectrum” (“About the Black Lives Matter Network”). Created in response to the shooting of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, the organization primarily focuses on reducing violence against blacks by both the general public and law enforcement agencies (McKitterick 2015). BLM has received widespread mainstream coverage since 2013 for its organized marches, protests, die-ins, and popularization of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. Given its roots in combating police brutality and its overarching mission statement, the organization thus has a clear stake in the Ferguson protests.

HUU describes itself as “a collective of politically engaged minds building towards the liberation of oppressed Black, Brown and poor people through education, art, civil disobedience, advocacy, and agriculture” (“Why We Fight”). Based in Ferguson, the social justice organization formed in direct response to the shooting of Michael Brown and aims to prevent future police brutality cases from occurring. As a self-described “different kind of... youth-led [social] movement,” HUU takes a three pronged approach to activism: amplifying youth voices, engaging citizens in a national conversation, and training youth with the skills to foster change (“Theory + Practice”). The organization also participates in traditional organizational activities – including over 500 protests since its founding – and stresses an international, community based approach to mobilization (“Why We Fight”).

Findings

BLM and HUU took a fairly balanced approach to utilizing both one-sided and two-sided messaging strategies, but showed a slight preference for the two-sided models ($n = 65$, 54.2%). Moreover, within the two-sided models, the groups most commonly approached messaging by using a balanced dialogue (two-sided symmetric) approach ($n = 42$, 64.6%). When using this method, both BLM and HUU primarily focused on publicizing protests organized by local citizens ($n = 30$, 71.4%). These tweets commonly featured a photo of some sort ($n = 19$, 63.3%), either attached directly or linked through the organization’s Instagram account. A typical tweet of this type, for example, was sent out by the BLM Twitter account on August 30, 2014 with the simple phrase, “Mothers Against Madness. #blacklivesmatter #Ferguson <http://instagram.com/p/sVDY1QO2Eu/>.” Additional techniques to balance dialogue included directly engaging with followers through the “reply” function ($n = 7$, 16.7%) and thanking other organizations participating in the movement ($n = 4$, 9.5%). Offline mobilization, the second two-sided

model, was used less prominently than balanced dialogue messages ($n = 23$, 35.4%). Tweets seeking to mobilize citizens primarily focused on fundraising ($n = 13$, 56.5%), raising local awareness of protests in the area ($n = 6$, 26.1%), and distributing action item lists for all citizens to engage with ($n = 3$, 13.0%). For example, on September 9, 2014, HUU tweeted, “If you want justice for #MikeBrown follow us + join our movement by signing up here: <http://bit.ly/HandsUpUnited> #Ferguson.”

Conversely, less than half of liberal tweets utilized one-sided models ($n = 55$, 45.8%). Within these categories, the interest groups again took a fairly balanced approach to dividing messages between public information ($n = 25$, 45.5%) and press agency ($n = 30$, 54.5%). Public information tweets had a significant focus on updating followers to the organization’s movement, such as their location within Ferguson ($n = 18$, 72%). A series of tweets posted on HUU’s Twitter account exemplifies this trend. The short sentences, posted every few minutes on the morning of August 26, 2014, chronicle the organization’s attempts to enter St. Louis City Hall: “Action set to start at noon today at St Louis City Hall!” (9:54 AM), “In front of St. Louis City Hall getting justice for Mike Brown and Kajieme Powell” (10:28 AM), “They won't let us in the building...we can't even be on the steps” (10:53 AM), “Eight people tried to get in the building to tell them their demands but only four got in” (11:35 AM), “Nobody's getting arrested or hurt” (11:35 AM). Tweets in the one-sided asymmetric category likewise relied on generating original content, but generally pushed facts or comments from the media with heavy emotional weight ($n = 28$, 93.3%). These tweets also heavily utilized Twitter’s photo attachment capabilities in this category as well, and mainly used photography to capture emotional protests scenes ($n = 15$, 53.6%).

The analysis concluded that liberal interest groups used the four models of public relations in fairly balanced proportions. Content coded as balanced dialogue ($n = 42$, 64.6%) emerged as the most popular messaging strategy, followed by press agency ($n = 30$, 54.5%), public information ($n = 25$, 45.5%), and offline mobilization ($n = 23$, 35.4%). The two-sided models of balanced dialogue and offline mobilization, which the liberal groups favored slightly over the one-sided models, correspond more directly with social media's unique characteristics. This preference indicates a messaging strategy based in the utilization of new and innovative information dissemination tactics. Thus, although the groups occasionally used Twitter in a manner similar to the traditional mass media, the majority of liberal tweets functioned by tapping into the social network.

SECTION 3:

Conclusions and Future Research

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study demonstrated a clear difference in the ways that conservative and liberal organizations utilize Twitter. Content coded as “one-sided” tended to dominate conservative interest groups, whereas liberal accounts did not heavily favor one type of content over another. The data trends suggest that conservative and liberal organizations employ a fundamentally different messaging strategy: while conservatives adapted traditional media strategies to Twitter, liberal groups looked to tap into the networking site’s unique connective capabilities.

The difference in the two movements’ overarching goals may partially explain the diverging messaging strategies. While the conservative APUSH campaign has one clear policy goal – a concrete shift to redact the curriculum framework – the liberal Ferguson movement encompasses a variety of broad goals, ranging from organizing protests to empowering marginalized groups. As a result, conservatives primarily needed to reach a few “privileged elites” within the College Board, whereas liberals aimed to mobilize hundreds of thousands of everyday community members. Given the well-documented influence of the traditional media on governmental policymakers, it thus does not seem surprising that conservatives would adapt tried-and-tested strategies to the online world (Neff 1995: 982). Likewise, the liberal social media approach, which utilized Twitter’s unique capabilities, exploits the “weak ties” of social networks to reach as wide an audience as possible. Such a strategy feeds directly into the movement’s goal of starting a national conversation around systematic racism.

Partisan demographics may also contribute to diverging social media strategies, as communications specialists must tailor messages to their audience. The heaviest social media users, Millennials, tend to lean Democratic; Republicans, meanwhile, lead among the Silent Genera-

tion, which has never fully adapted to the digital world (Doherty and Weisel 2015: 3). As a result, liberal account followers are far more likely to understand exclusive SNS capabilities due to a high level of social media competence. This enables liberal organizations to more fully adapt their messaging strategy to the two-sided models of public relations, which are uniquely suited for use on social media. Conversely, conservative account followers will likely be older and less tech-savvy than their liberal counterparts. A social media messaging approach that strongly utilizes SNS-unique capabilities would thus fail to reach the organization's key constituents as effectively as a traditional media strategy. Hence, the difference in liberal and conservative social media strategies can be partially attributed to audience demographics.

Despite the variations in messaging strategy, however, each partisan organization heavily relied on social media to achieve its goals. For the APUSH campaign, this meant mobilizing citizens to pressure the College Board towards a concrete policy change; for the Ferguson protests, this meant raising awareness and sparking a national dialogue. Both movements have undoubtedly achieved success: the College Board has since reverted the APUSH framework to its original state, and conversations on institutionalized racism have spread effusively throughout the country. At least part of the movements' accomplishments must be attributed to social media. Without this resource, there remains a high probability that the two campaigns would have become lost within the competitive gatekeeping process of traditional media. Social media's ability to easily diffuse information across spatial confines to interconnected webs of users also enables movements to tap into new, passionate audiences that they may not have reached otherwise. Such a capability doubtlessly contributed to the success of each movement.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Although the cases selected for this study focused on the same underlying themes, they also contained many distinct differences. The Ferguson protests, for example, became much more intensely personalized than the APUSH campaign due to the core issues involved. Police brutality and murder have an understandably larger emotional charge than an academically-focused push to change a course's curriculum. The two cases thus embody the comparison term "apples and oranges": both deal with topics related to race, but contain vastly different fundamental qualities. These variations in essential characteristics may have contributed to the diverging social media strategy between conservative and liberal interest groups. To extend this study's research, then, future inquires should seek to address movements that connect across all intrinsic characteristics.

Furthermore, additional studies should begin to examine the use of social media to counter opposing ideological groups. The case studies in this project, for example, exclusively focused on analyzing the partisan-affiliation that most closely aligned with the movement's goals: conservatives for APUSH and liberals for Ferguson. This greatly limited the scope of the study. Conservative interest groups undoubtedly utilized social media to enter conversations on the Ferguson protests; liberals likewise used social networks to comment on the APUSH debate. Examining how an opposing partisan group used social media to counter a movement's efforts therefore provides another interesting thread for future research.

Overall, however, the most important arena for continued research belongs to the Internet at large. As the technology continues to grow and evolve, so does its significance and potential. By better understanding how partisan groups utilize the Internet's capabilities – and, in turn, the effectiveness of those strategies – advocacy organizations can skillfully exploit the Internet to successfully facilitate political change.

SECTION 4:
Appendix and Bibliography

APPENDIX

Content Coding

One-Sided		Two-Sided	
Asymmetric	Symmetric	Asymmetric	Symmetric
(1) Attention grabbing “buzz” words (2) Positive/negative valence (3) Emoticons	(1) Fact-based discussion of issues (2) Movement rationale (3) Links to educational resources	(1) Polls/surveys (2) Links to petitions or donations (3) Calls to action	(1) Online conversations (2) Connecting movements (3) Referencing other user accounts
“Press Agency”	“Public Information”	Question Asking/ Offline Mobilization	Balanced Dialogue

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