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Hashtag Politics: The Polyphonic Revolution of #Twitter

By Bud Davis

Traditional door-to-door, hand-out-flyers-on-the-curb campaigning faces a burgeoning threat. Democrats and Republicans alike are at the cusp of a revolution in political strategizing. Lengthy, flowery speeches compete with messages only 140 characters long, and political analysts' televised monologues compete with online dialogues between everyday people. Twitter has reshaped American culture and thrust the political machine into the blogosphere of social media. There have been several attempts to adapt to this new medium, such as President Obama's first ever "Twitter Town Hall" in 2011 (Shear, 2011). And with the number of accounts increasing each day, the appeal of tapping into this communication tool is greater than ever.

Twitter proves to be massively popular for both informal communication and decisive political strategizing. Specifically, the 2008 presidential campaign demonstrated how Twitter could be tactfully employed to target key constituencies, develop an attractive online impression, and remain connected to millions of supporters and potential voters. This paper seeks to trace the evolution of Twitter as a political resource and determine what influence it has in disseminating talking points, weighing platforms, and maintaining mass communication. Ultimately, I argue that Twitter's unique intertextuality contains the potential for spurring widespread political activism by

encouraging voices from all echelons of society to be heard and how formats such as Obama's "Twitter Town Hall" can be utilized to engage the citizenry.

Intertextuality & Polyphony

Before exploring the influence of Twitter in political campaigning, a word about intertextuality is needed. This poststructural literary theory, popularized by Julia Kristeva in the late 1960s, has several definitions and applications in cultural and literary analysis (Allen, 2006). It essentially posits "every text has its meaning...in relation to other texts" (p. 6). That is, all utterances and artifacts exist within a complex web of interconnected meanings and messages (Kristeva, 2002).

Intertextuality's theoretical foundation resides in Bakhtin's formulation of heteroglossic meaning, which maintains "all utterances are dialogic, their meaning and logic dependent upon what has previously been said and how they will be received by others" (Allen, 2006, p. 19). This acknowledges the polyphony of discursive voices in which no single voice can be objectively distinguished from others. These literary concepts of intertextuality and polyphony are salient when discussing how Twitter's technical functions, specifically the hashtag, influence communication in political campaigns and why it is so crucial to capitalize on this social media resource.

Twitter's Functionality

Twitter originally launched in 2006 as a small interoffice communication platform consisting of quick blurbs of text, which co-founder Jack Dorsey denoted as "tweets" resembling "a short inconsequential burst of information [such as] chirps from a bird" (Sarno, 2011). Since its inception, Twitter averages approximately one billion tweets per week and 460,000 new accounts per day (Smith, 2011). With an average 140 million tweets posted each day ("Twitter blog," 2011), the circulation of information is incredibly extensive. From posting updates, photos, and web links, the advent of citizen journalism has enabled ordinary people to tweet breaking news quicker

than many broadcast networks (Murthy, 2011). Coupled with a person's list of followers and the unconventional public access to each tweet, information percolates at an incredible pace.

One of its distinguishing features is the 140-character length restriction, unlike other popular social media platforms including Facebook. Such a restraint can "produce at best eloquently terse responses and at worst heavily truncated speech," not to mention the infamous, inconsequential updates about one's daily routine (p. 780). This unusual brevity, however, has benefited citizen journalists because it enables "tweets to effectively communicate timely information during disasters and social movements" among other important newsworthy events (p. 780). Users can then instantaneously retweet another's post, leave a comment, or mark the original tweet as a "Favorite." The secondary response in either case is shown publically on one's news feed. Overall, the message's terse formatting and instantaneous percolation of information allows citizens to act simultaneously as eyewitnesses and reporters by snapping photos from their mobile devices and uploading a firsthand account within 45 seconds (Murthy, 2011).

The next important feature is the hashtag, which is arguably a modern day adaptation of Kristeva's intertextuality. These attached labels exhibit many characteristics associated with participatory culture. Tags are created by Twitter members (rather than constructed as preselected options authorized by the site), and may be of various kinds, ranging from tags which categorize the subject matter of the tweet...to idiosyncratic examples which function as expression punctuation (Page, 2012, p. 184).

Tags are unique because they enable "searchable language" by which words and phrases are categorized and aggregated into corpus-based lexicons that users can selectively explore and incorporate into their own messages (Page, 2012; Zappavigna, 2011).

For instance, one can search #election2012 and retrieve all tweets incorporating the tag into a user's message. This renders users' speech as more findable and relatable, which in effect strengthens interpersonal connections and creates a sense of commonality through shared values and interests (Zappavigna, 2011). This point is particularly significant in examining presidential campaigns during which candidates seek to gain constituents' adherence. The hashtag can also generate popularly referenced topics, otherwise known as "Trending Topics" on the Twitter website's sidebar. If a tag achieves trending status, then assumedly it is one of influence, popularity, and importance in the general linguistic marketplace (Page, 2012). Such is the case with important cultural events including #election2012, #olympics2012, #worldcup, and so forth.

It is evident thus far that the function of the hashtag and role of citizen journalism conjointly have a revolutionary influence on the exchange of ideas. No longer is breaking news disseminated solely from the top-down nor distributed through traditional media including television and from the same handful of primetime reporters. Rather, there is an influx in the polyphony of voices that compete in asserting opinions and perspectives. Such polyphony is characterized and categorized into unique, searchable lexicons that increase commonality and identification through linguistic affiliation while still encouraging dissent and debate.

By this interpretation, Twitter embodies an intertextual exchange of messages and opinions by which each tweet is connected with another, whether written in response to an event or another's post. None exists in isolation, unlike Facebook status updates, because each can be categorized and aggregated through its evaluative and ideational language (Zappavigna, 2011). Therefore, the rapid exchange of intertextual messages presents a critical opportunity for political strategists and candidates to interject their own thoughts into this circulating linguistic

marketplace that catches and releases breaking news in an incredibly short period of time and to engage with constituents through an entirely new experience.

Political Strategizing & Twitter

When examining how politicians have utilized Twitter, their attempts are still nascent and confront a series of advantages and drawbacks. For instance, President Barack Obama's 2011 virtual "Twitter Town Hall" demonstrated a novel approach to directly addressing public concerns. In theory, this televised event would allow citizens to tweet questions to Obama with the hashtag #AskObama to which the President would succinctly respond (Shear, 2011). In practice, however, Obama violated Twitter standards. With questions limited to 140-characters, Obama instead responded verbally and at length to questions on the economy that were repeated by Twitter's co-founder Jack Dorsey (Shear, 2011). More so, hundreds of citizen-posed questions were ignored at the expense of addressing House Speaker John Boehner and *New York Times* columnist Jack Kristof (Shear, 2011). The issue, then, is what value Twitter possesses if only the prominent voices are heard and if Twitter's unique format is disregarded.

Page (2012) touches upon this obstacle and notes how celebrity-like entities, including corporations, politicians, and cultural icons, exert their influence in Twitter, which in effect maintains social norms and resembles broadcast talk more than dyadic conversation. This is accomplished primarily through hashtags that

broadcast in one-to-many updates, which emphasize declarative forms or imperatives that in turn seek to persuade the addressed audience to engage with the promoted commodity. This form of branding is clearly in line with the discourse of marketing, which use strategies of amplification to promote commodities to be consumed by others (p. 198).

The result of branding, therefore, creates commodified identities that consumers follow, tweet, retweet, and mark as favorites—and only the most well known and most powerful are heavily “consumed.” Adherence is attained only when users affiliate with popular entities that have large numbers of followers and incorporate popular hashtags that “have become ‘hyper-charged’ with an additional semiotic pull” (Zappavigna, 2011, p. 801). This is referred to as ambient affiliation by which Twitter users “affiliate with a copresent, impermanent community by bonding around evolving topics of interest” (p. 800). It is ambient in the sense that users most likely lack direct interaction with one another, a process that is facilitated by Twitter’s searchable language schema which does not necessitate dyadic contact (Zappavigna, 2011).

With this challenge in mind, one must then consider politicians’ motivation in using different platforms for communication. In constantly seeking (re)election, “members of Congress...look for any opportunity to advertise themselves to constituents, publicize their issue positions, and claim credit for achievements” (Lassen & Brown, 2011, p. 420). The transition between different media has been surprisingly gradual. Politicians usually disdain news broadcast as a medium for explicating his or her platform because “he or she surrenders a large amount of control over the timing, context, and content of the message conveyed to constituents” (p. 421). They instead favor direct, unmediated, “no-spin” communication, which unfortunately leaves only a handful of options such as walking precincts, paying for airtime, and franking—all of which can be expensive, labor-exhaustive, and time-intensive (Lassen et al., 2011).

The need to find low-cost, direct, and immediate communication has pushed many politicians to implement e-newsletters into their campaign strategies. While effective in delineating personal and policy information, however, constituents still need to actively sign up to receive

the letters (Lassen et al., 2011). This rationale has prompted several candidates to utilize Twitter because not only is it direct and immediate but it also does not require active subscription because posts are public and easily searchable. Katie Hogan, one of Obama’s spokespersons, further notes that Twitter “not only [reaches] our supporters, but our supporters can drive the message, too,” by retweeting posts (qtd. in Tumulty, 2012, para. 16). Similarly, Zac Moffatt, Romney’s digital director, points out that “Twitter has an immediacy that not even Facebook can achieve. It has replaced the 6 p.m. deadline...liberating the campaigns from the traditional nightly news cycle” (qtd. in Tumulty, 2012, para. 17). These factors enable citizen journalists to essentially campaign on behalf of candidates without pay or intensive labor. All that is needed is to have enough citizens willing to percolate campaign updates through pithy tags and updates.

Political utilization of Twitter is now highly esteemed given Obama’s tactful use in 2008. As of March 2012, “members of the U.S. House of Representatives had 407 active, verifiable Twitter accounts, while members of the U.S. Senate had 97,” which constitutes over 90% of Congress (Hemphill et al., 2012, para. 1). Furthermore, 42 governors and 35 world leaders possess active accounts (Tumulty, 2012). Again, what has been critical to successful campaigning through Twitter is one’s incorporation of hashtags. President Obama has been at the forefront of this social media-based revolution.

For example, he directly included #dontdoublemyrate into a speech condoning a Republican increase in student loan interest rates. This phrase subsequently filtered into over 20,000 secondary posts that incorporated the tag within a matter of seconds, which was a sufficient number for it to be classified as a “Trending Topic” (Tumulty, 2012). Republicans responded to the instantaneous surge and fired a barrage of criticisms on gas prices and unemployment by

using the same tag (Tumulty, 2012). Forty-five minutes after the president's delivery, John Boehner "had picked up the hashtag on his Twitter feed to argue that Democrats, not Republicans, were responsible for the fact that student loan rates are set to double" (Tumulty, 2012, para. 8). This upset demonstrated the real time engagement of political discourse—an effect not seen in traditional media such as e-newsletters or even Facebook. Such an example shows how key issues can be publically discussed within a matter of seconds by thousands of people, which draws constant attention to online impression management.

This leads into another of Twitter's drawbacks. Since a campaign must constantly engage with the 24/7 cycle, tweets and hashtags demand close scrutiny. As Parker (2012) explains, Twitter "carries danger for the campaigns. It can quickly define the political debate, whether candidates like it or not, and a single 140-character missive can turn into a nightmare" (para. 4). In the 2012 Republican primaries, for instance, Mitt Romney "weaponized" Twitter and criticized Newt Gingrich through a hashtag #grandiosenewt that mocked his allegedly "grandiose" ideas and proposals. Followers instantly picked up on the tag, giving it trending status, and ultimately labeled Gingrich as unfavorably "grandiose" throughout the remainder of his presidential bid (Parker, 2012). A more memorable tag of similar effect is #bindersfullofwomen, which precipitated from Romney's response in the presidential debate during which he stated "I went to a number of women's groups and said, 'Can you help us find folks,' and they brought us whole binders full of women" ("Romney 'Binders,'" 2012). It is evident from such examples that tags can be stigmatizing and therefore heighten the need to carefully examine one's speech and avoid anomalous remarks.

In Romney's war room, political strategists and aides also closely monitored and analyzed journalists, reporters, and citizens' tweets to

discern their biases and then draft a plan of social media counterattack through Twitter posts, e-newsletters, or press releases (Parker, 2012). Furthermore, by monitoring posts and retweets, campaigns, including the recent Romney, Gingrich, and Obama campaigns, could all extrapolate the direction and magnitude of discussions, what arguments were resonating with the public, and what topics were most salient at a point in time.

This serves an important political advantage in utilizing Twitter. All candidates can work to preempt a firestorm of criticisms, tailor messages to certain groups to increase the potential voter base, and tweet trial balloons to determine if a talking point will take off or not. They can selectively reach out to voters' specific concerns and frustrations through public messages, request one's vote in an upcoming election, and provide more information on the candidate through links (Parker, 2012). This can make voter involvement easy and convenient. For example, Rick Santorum posted "Morning Iowa! Today is the day! Go here to pledge your vote for me and & find info on how to caucus" and included a link directing voters to a page on his website (Parker, 2012). Seeking endorsements and support no longer requires signing up with campaign headquarters; you only need to hit the Twitter icon and voice support within 140 characters.

Citizens & Politicized Twitter

Though Obama remains a social media giant in political strategizing, Republicans have matched Democrats in terms of social media implementation since the 2008 election with now "40 percent of Republican online users turning to social media to get politically involved in a campaign, compared to 38 percent of Democratic voters" (Preston, 2011, para. 17). Obama's strategic inclusion of email, text messaging blasts, YouTube clips, Facebook, websites, and Twitter all unite and energize voters by posing a simple question "Are you in?" for his 2012 reelection bid (Parker, 2012). From there, constituents carry out

the rest by commenting and retweeting so their followers can publically view their activism.

The 2012 presidential campaign dwarfed 2008 statistics in terms of social media use with over 20 million tweets that Tuesday night, making it “the most tweeted-about event in U.S. political history” (Bello, 2012, para. 3). On Election Day, #election2012 surpassed eleven million tweets before most polls closed with another 11,000 election-related tweets posted each minute (para. 2). After Obama was announced the winner, he posted “Four more years,” which was retweeted over 225,000 times within a matter of minutes and thereafter declared “the most popular tweet of all time” by BuzzFeed (para. 3). After the call, #election2012 “reached more than 325,000 [tweets] a minute, making it the most tweeted moment of the election,” as stated by Twitter (para. 7).

The hype of the election also preceded the hours before the networks announced the call. Voters, more so than in the 2008 election, “posted comments about long lines, photos of their ballots, and, in one case that went viral, a video of a voting machine gone rogue” (para. 1). Pictures of “I Voted” stickers and #ivoted tags imbued Twitter feeds as people expressed their excitement in participating in the democratic process by casting their ballots (Bello, 2012).

When examining the growing magnitude of Twitter’s use, it becomes apparent that this social media platform has incredible potential for further increasing voter turnout rates by generating excitement and disseminating the polyphony of voices for one to analyze and base decisions on. Whether listening to friends online or to the candidates’ own tweets, the availability of information on policies, propositions, and opinions is growing astronomically. Despite the plethora of biased, inaccurate information and dominance of celebrity-like voices that tend to preclude a number of citizen journalists from being heard, Twitter’s functionality still offers a unique experience in accumulating insight through publically searchable

language that can strengthen identification with candidates.

Its intertextuality further reveals how politics is no longer a topic distributed by the few traditional elite, as has been the case for decades. One would be hard pressed to find a tweet that is divorced from the broader discussions and wholly dismissive of popular tags. In the linguistic marketplace, everyday citizens are becoming a stronger force in analyzing opinions, expressing their own, reporting observations, and drawing conclusions. Citizens function more and more as proxy journalists, strategists, critics, and aides on behalf of candidates, which has redefined the dynamic between voters and political insiders. Aides now more than ever must listen to how and what constituents are talking about. This should be a point to be celebrated in the political sphere because it contains the potential for widespread civic engagement and discourse. By addressing the growth in citizen journalism and its percolation of information online, candidates can more intimately involve voters to grapple with the issues, formulate decisions, and inform the masses.

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