Microblogging and the News: Political Elites and the Ultimate Retweet

Kevin Wallsten

Department of Political Science

California State University, Long` Beach

1250 Bellflower Blvd.

Long Beach, CA 90840-4605

USA

kevin.wallsten@csulb.edu

phone: (510) 207-7155

fax: (562) 985-4704

Abstract

A particularly important question that has yet to be addressed about microblogging is the extent to which tweeting from politicians influences the traditional media's news coverage. This study seeks to address this oversight by tracking print, broadcast and online news mentions of tweets from political elites during the five and a half years since microblogging started. Consistent with previous research into “new media” effects and journalistic sourcing patterns, I find that although reporters, pundits and bloggers are increasingly incorporating tweets into their news discussions, the group of Twitterers who are consistently quoted is small and drawn almost exclusively from the ranks of nationally recognizable political leaders. In addition to contributing to the emerging literature on Twitter, the analysis presented here suggests a new way of conceptualizing influence on the site. Rather than focusing strictly on Twitter-centric measures of message diffusion, the findings of this paper suggest that researchers should begin to consider the ways that tweets can shape political discourse by spreading beyond the fairly narrow world of microblogging.

Keywords: Twitter, social media, agenda setting, media coverage, politicians

With its estimated 600 million users (who generate nearly 400 million tweets a day), Twitter – a microblogging and social networking service – has become one of the most visited sites on the Internet (Alexa.com 2012). Unsurprisingly, political elites in the United States have taken notice of the potential communicative power of Twitter and have recently started to embrace microblogging themselves.[[1]](#footnote-1) Tweeting by candidates and sitting government officials was fairly rare prior to the 2010 election cycle. Indeed, early accounts of elite tweeting found that Twitter use was the exception rather than the rule in 2008 and 2009 (Garrison-Sprenger 2008; Senak 2010; Sifry 2009). By 2010, however, Twitter use among politicians had become nearly universal. In fact, only two senatorial candidates and one gubernatorial candidate did not maintain active Twitter accounts during the 2010 election campaign (Headcount.com 2012). Nor does tweeting stop once the campaign is over. TweetCongress, an organization whose mandate is to increase government transparency by encouraging politicians to microblog, currently lists 387 members of Congress who use Twitter (157 Democrats, 228 Republicans and two Independents). In short, tweeting has become an integral part of the way most politicians campaign and govern.

One particularly important question that has yet to be addressed about microblogging is the extent to which all of this tweeting from politicians influences the traditional media's news coverage. This oversight is, in many ways, a curious one. Communications and public relations scholars have consistently shown that information resources from candidates and government officials, such as political advertisements, direct mail, speeches, press releases and Web page content, can have a strong influence on the content of news reporting (Gandy 1982; Roberts and McCombs 1994; Turk 1986; Turk and Franklin 1987; Tedesco 2002; Tedesco 2005a).[[2]](#footnote-2) What’s more, debates about the impact of so-called “new media” tools on “old media” institutions have been fairly ubiquitous in scholarly circles over the last decade. Indeed, a burgeoning literature on the political consequences of Web 2.0 has illustrated that message board debates, blog discussions and online viral videos exert an important influence over the way that traditional media outlets cover political events.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This study seeks to address this oversight by tracking print, broadcast and online news mentions of tweets from political elites during the five and a half years since microblogging started. Consistent with previous research into “new media” effects and journalistic sourcing patterns, I find that although reporters, pundits and bloggers are increasingly incorporating tweets into their news discussions, the group of Twitterers who are consistently quoted is small and drawn almost exclusively from the ranks of nationally recognizable political leaders. In addition to contributing to the emerging literature on Twitter, the analysis presented here suggests a new way of conceptualizing influence on the site. Rather than focusing strictly on Twitter-centric measures of message diffusion, the findings of this paper suggest that researchers should begin to consider the ways that tweets can shape political discourse by spreading beyond the fairly narrow world of microblogging.

# XX.1 Literature Review – Politicians and Twitter

Despite the rapidly expanding popularity of tweeting among members of the American public, political scientists, mass communications scholars and journalism researchers have devoted fairly little attention to explicitly political microblogging by average Internet users. Indeed, apart from the nearly 40 research notes written by Bob Boynton on the dynamics of various political message streams within Twitter[[4]](#footnote-4), there have been only two case studies of politically oriented microblogging – a minute-by-minute analysis of tweeted responses during a controversial BBC Question time in the UK (Anstead and O’Loughlin 2011) and a one week, examination of tweets during the 2010 special Senate election in Massachusetts (Metaxas and Mustafaraj 2010).

Most of the nascent research into political microblogging has focused on how and why American political elites use Twitter. One group of studies has focused on enumerating the list of factors that lead politicians to start tweeting. These studies have shown that political, demographic and contextual factors explain why some members of Congress begin microblogging while others do not. In a study of members of the House of Representatives, Williams and Gulati (2010) found that Republicans and those with larger campaign resources were more likely to adopt Twitter and more likely to use it extensively. In a similar study of both houses of Congress, Lassen, Brown and Riding (2010) found that Members are more likely to adopt Twitter if their party leaders urge them to, if they are young, or if they serve in the Senate. Employing a more dynamic approach based on social learning effects, Chi and Yang (2010) found that successful use of Twitter by members of Congress significantly increased the rate of Twitter adoption by other representatives.

A second line of research has explored how politicians actually use Twitter once they have chosen to adopt it. The main finding from this body of work is that politicians have eschewed the interactive potential of Twitter and decided, instead, to use the service as a one-way broadcasting channel.[[5]](#footnote-5) In a case study of tweeting by one Minnesota state legislator, for instance, Ostermeier (2009) found that Representative Laura Brod devoted most of her Twitter messages to discussions of substantive policy issues and to relating stories about her personal life. Adopting a broader view of tweeting at the national level, a Congressional Research Service study (Glassman, Straus and Shogan 2009) of over 1,000 messages by members of the House and the Senate found that most tweets were little more than a forwarding of a link to press releases or a summary description about of the legislator’s official duties. Replicating these findings with a study of 6,000 tweets, Golbeck, Grimes and Rogers (2010) found that more than 80% of messages present basic information about the lawmaker’s activities or simply link to a news article or press release.[[6]](#footnote-6)

A third line of research has explored the density and structure of the political connections made on Twitter. The findings of this research suggest that politicians rarely engage with other Twitter users and, in the rare circumstances when they do use the service to interact, tend to communicate primarily with other political elites who share their ideological predispositions.[[7]](#footnote-7) In an evaluation of the communications strategies of members of Congress, for example, Senak (2010) found that most legislators who use Twitter follow only a handful of people through the service and many lawmakers do not follow anyone. Using social network analysis to evaluate the relationships on Twitter between 133 members of Congress, Sparks (2010) found that the links between political elites on Twitter have a strong partisan dimension – with majority of connections established between members of the same political party and very few connections occurring across party lines. In perhaps the most comprehensive study of the political networks between politicians on Twitter, Livine et al. (2011) examined the accounts of nearly 700 House, Senate and gubernatorial candidates during the midterm (2010) elections. In addition to showing that conservatives conveyed a more coherent message in their tweets, they found that Republicans and Tea Party members maintained a denser and more homogenous graph of connections on Twitter than Democrats.

A final line of research has sought to evaluate how “successful” various candidates and government officials have been in their use of Twitter. These studies have relied on a wide variety of metrics extracted from Twitter, such as the number of followers a politician has, the number of “@ mentions” a politician receives and the number of times a politician’s tweets are “retweeted,” in order to determine how far elite messages travel within the Twittersphere. Using Klout, which weighs 25 different variables from a user’s Twitter account to assess their relative influence, Sifry (2009) found that Representative Joe Wilson was the most powerful legislator on the site and that congressional Republicans were using microblogging far more effectively than congressional Democrats. Reaching a similar conclusion about partisan differences using a similar set of Twitter-based measures from Twitalyzer, Senak (2010) showed that Republican lawmakers were significantly more influential and engaging on Twitter than their Democratic counterparts.[[8]](#footnote-8) In a comprehensive study of over twenty two million tweets, Romero et al. (2010) found that while John McCain’s 1.7 million followers made him Twitter’s most popular member of Congress, Nancy Pelosi’s high rate of retweeted messages[[9]](#footnote-9) made her the site’s most influential legislator.[[10]](#footnote-10) More informally, online magazines, such as Politico.com (Ball 2011) and Time.com (Sun 2011), have created their own lists of the “top tweeters” in the political realm. There is no shortage of work, in other words, that draws on Twitter-based metrics to assess which politicians are most successful in disseminating their messages through Twitter.

Collectively, this emerging body of research illuminates a great deal about the content and dynamics of political discourse within Twitter. Whether alerting us to the fact that politicians use Twitter in fairly traditional ways or illustrating the homophily of elite networks, each one of these studies reveals something important about a compelling new form of political communication. What is missing in this research, however, is an acknowledgement of the political world that exists outside of Twitter. None of the studies I have mentioned attempt to conceptualize or measure the impact of elite microblogging on the outcomes that constitute the “stuff” of politics. The above studies illustrate, for example, that politicians use their Twitter feeds as broadcast tools. In part, this is motivated by a belief that microblogging is an effective way to reach constituents that they would not otherwise be able to communicate with (Congressional Management Foundation 2011).[[11]](#footnote-11) But are these tweeted broadcasts heard by those who never log on to Twitter? Is Twitter an effective way for politicians to communicate?

Boynton’s work on non-elite tweet streams comes closest to addressing the consequences of the messages sent out via Twitter. In a number of studies, Boynton (2010, 2011) has carefully traced out exactly how large the audience is for tweets on a wide variety of topics. Boynton shows that because microbloggers often re-tweet the messages they see on Twitter, one tweet can reach many thousands (if not millions) of unique users.[[12]](#footnote-12) Although Boynton’s work is laudable for attempting to specify the impact that Twitter is having on political communication, it does not go far enough. If we are to truly understand how microblogging is changing the dynamics political discourse, we must look for how messages that begin as tweets can wind up as fodder for bloggers, opinion columnists and cable news pundits. If we really want to understand the consequences of tweeting, in other words, we need to start looking outside of Twitter.

# XX.2 The Influence of Elite Tweeting on Media Coverage

This paper is an initial attempt to measure Twitter’s influence on political discourse. Specifically, it looks for evidence that microblogging by political elites is changing the content of news reporting. There are four reasons why statements from the Twitter accounts of political elites may influence news coverage. First, news organizations and their employees have almost universally embraced Twitter and used it to follow the accounts of candidates and government officials.[[13]](#footnote-13) According to a recent study by the Radio Television Digital News Association (2010) and Hofstra University, 77% of television newsrooms have a Twitter account and more than 70% of these stations report using the service constantly or on a daily basis. Even more dramatically, Messner et al.’s (2010) study of the top 99 newspapers and top 100 television stations in the U.S. found that all but two outlets had Twitter accounts. Muckrack.com, a site devoted to listing journalists who microblog, provides links to 420 Twitter accounts maintained by individual reporters. Perhaps more importantly given my purposes here, many of these journalists and news organizations follow the tweets of political elites. In a report on the networks on Twitter, Sysomos (2010) found strong links between prominent members of the political Twittersphere – with many media personalities and news organizations following a large list of politicians. CNN Breaking News (@cnnbrk), for example, followed 18 of the 58 politicians tracked in the study and the LA Times' Top of the Ticket (@latimestot) followed 21 of the study’s 58 politicians. The fact that so many journalists and media outlets follow politicians on Twitter creates the potential for elite tweets to find their way into news reports.

The second reason to suspect that tweets from politicians may shape news coverage is that journalists have frequently and publicly spoken about how Twitter is exerting a strong influence on their reporting. According to the testimony of many media professionals, Twitter helps journalists find story ideas is by giving them an easy way to monitor public discussions about potentially interesting issues and events.[[14]](#footnote-14) For example, Daniel Victor, a local news reporter at the *Harrisburg Patriot-News*, says he routinely uses Twitter to derive story ideas from the "normal conversations" that people have on the site (White, 2008).[[15]](#footnote-15) Similarly, Jimmy Orr closely monitors Twitter when doing political reporting for the *Christian Science Monitor*’s “Vote Blog” because “it provides a real time snapshot of what people are talking about.” The *Daily Telegraph*'s U.S. news editor Toby Harnden says he uses the service to find “morsels of information and thoughts as soon as news breaks” and “to keep tabs on what a member of Congress or political operative is doing and thinking” (Harnden 2009). Echoing these sentiments, Myra MacDonald, Reuters senior editor on the Middle East and Africa desk, has said that “Twitter is the modern-day equivalent” to the decades old news gathering practices of scanning the morning papers and meeting with colleagues to catch up on the latest buzz (Butters 2011). In short, monitoring discussions on Twitter can draw journalistic attention to issues and events that may have otherwise gone unnoticed.

In addition to providing an easy way to identify emerging topics of interest, Twitter may shape coverage by providing the sources that journalists need to inform their reporting.[[16]](#footnote-16) For example, Jake Tapper, the Senior White House Correspondent for ABC News, has said he uses Twitter “for reporting and to find sources” and even recounted a time when he found a guest for Good Morning American by using Twitter to ask, “Is there anybody out there who is a customer of Anthem Blue cross who got their insurance premiums raised?” (<http://media.twitter.com/newsrooms/report>) *Cincinnati Enquirer* reporter Alex Shebar claimed “I’ve found sources [on Twitter] for stories that I never would have found otherwise.” Jason DeRusha, a reporter for WCCO-TV in Minneapolis, uses Twitter to find sources for his stories and “will use those Twitter comments on the air, or use the contact to set up an interview.” Brian Stelter, a media reporter for *The New York Times*, has described Twitter as, among other things, "a database of sources for stories." Kara Matuszewski, web producer for CBSBoston.com, reports that Twitter is “where we go; it’s what we turn to” when looking for sources and information on a story (Brooks 2011). Kashmir Hill, a writer at Forbes.com, said “I see someone’s Twitter page as a little series of public releases/statements, if they’re not tweeting from a private account.” When coupled with the above statements about using Twitter to identify potentially interesting stories, these quotes suggest that tweets from politicians may play an important role in determining the content of media coverage (Busis, 2010).[[17]](#footnote-17)

Third, surveys of news professionals have also suggested that statements issued on Twitter by politicians may be an important factor in shaping media coverage. A 2011 survey of nearly 500 reporters in 12 different countries, for example, found that nearly half of respondents (47%) used Twitter to source new story leads (Oriella PR Network 2011). Similarly, a recent survey of North American journalists found that 69% of journalists use Twitter as a tool to assist in reporting – with 24% relying on Twitter to find story ideas, 23% employing Twitter to locate sources and 23% using Twitter to keep up on issues or topics of interest (Society for New Communications Research 2011). In a more finely grained assessment, a 2010 survey of journalists found that although use of material from Twitter is widespread among reporters, there are significant differences based on the kind of media outlet respondents write for (PRWeek/PR Newswire 2010). Specifically, bloggers, online reporters and television news journalists were more than twice as likely to use Twitter as a research tool (36% to 18%) and to use Twitter posts in stories (40% to 20%) than newspaper and magazine reporters. Put simply, large segments of the news reporting industry turn to Twitter when determining what to write about and how to write about it.

Finally, there is a considerable amount of anecdotal evidence to suggest that journalists are attentive to the statements made by political elites via Twitter. The mainstream media’s widespread quoting of Sarah Palin’s tweets provides perhaps the best example to date that the tweets of politicians influence the stories print and broadcast outlets choose to carry. In late 2010 and early 2011, Palin’s Twitter account was so frequently referenced by mainstream media outlets that a *National Journal* article claimed that “every [Palin] tweet triggers news cycles of full analysis” (Ambinder 2011) and Time.com concluded that Palin’s tweets “command the media’s attention.” As Ezra Klein (2010) put it, “the reason Palin's Twitter account matters is that the media loves Sarah Palin and reports on everything she says, does, or tweets.” On a December 2010 episode of the Daily Show, Jon Stewart labeled Palin “America’s Tweetheart” and asserted that “the mainstream media is utterly fascinated by everything [Sarah]Palin tweets.” In fact, coverage of Palin’s tweets was so intense in January 2011 that Ross Douthat used his *New York Times* column to advise the media that “every time you’re tempted to parse her tweets for some secret code or crucial dog whistle, stop and think, this woman has fewer Twitter followers than Ben Stiller, and then go write about something else instead.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

# XX.3 Methods

Although these quotes, anecdotes and surveys establish a useful starting point for exploring the impact of Twitter on media outlets, they leave a number of important questions unanswered. Are journalists, for example, influenced by a large number of politician tweets from all sides of the political spectrum or are there only a few Twitter users that serve as their guides for whether a story is worth covering? Similarly, do tweets influence media coverage on a wide array of important political issues or is their influence tightly constrained to a small set of peripheral concerns? On a somewhat different note, how exactly do journalists incorporate the information they read on Twitter into their reporting on political events? If tweets are quoted, how prominently are they featured in news reports?

In an initial attempt to answer some of these questions, I chose to track references to tweets in a number of different news outlets. In order to measure the impact of microblogging on traditional media coverage over the entire duration of Twitter’s existence, I used a daily count of the number of articles printed in “U.S. newspapers and wire services”[[19]](#footnote-19) and the number of stories aired on national news broadcasts[[20]](#footnote-20) that mentioned at least one of the following phrases between March 1, 2006 and August 9, 2011: “tweeted” or "announced on twitter" or "said on twitter" or "claimed on twitter" or "via Twitter" or "wrote on twitter" or "posted on twitter." In order to explore the extent to which tweets are influencing the commentary of political bloggers, I also recorded the number of times the aforementioned phrases were used on one of the most popular liberal blogs and one of the most popular conservative blogs in the blogosphere: Daily Kos and Hot Air.[[21]](#footnote-21)

This study, therefore, tracks references to statements made on Twitter in political news stories run by print, broadcast and online news outlets during the nearly five and a half year life span of the microblogging service. It is important to point out, however, that this approach is likely to significantly underestimate the true extent of Twitter influence over media coverage. If journalists pick up on material from a large number of Twitter users and reference only “what those on Twitter are saying” or “the buzz on Twitter” rather than specific quotes from specific Twitter users, searching only for the phrases mentioned above will leave us with the impression that tweets are less important than they actually are for media coverage. More generally, this approach will miss instances of Twitter influence where journalists take information from tweets without explicitly referencing the site. The results presented here, in other words, should be taken as only one, very conservative estimate of the influence of Twitter on political news coverage.

# XX.4 Findings

Despite the relatively conservative approach adopted here, there is strong evidence that Twitter has had a significant impact on media coverage of politics. During the five and a half years of this study, tweets were quoted or cited in 873 unique newspaper articles, 1,123 broadcast stories and 643 blog posts.[[22]](#footnote-22)As Figure XX.1 shows, however, Twitter influence on news reporting is a fairly recent development. Indeed, bloggers did not mention statements from the microblogging service until December 2007 and the first newspaper citation did not occur until August 2008. As Figure XX.1 also shows, March 2009 appears to be the moment when a critical mass of journalists began following political discussions on Twitter. Since that time, tweets have become a fairly consistent part of blog, newspaper and broadcast television political reporting.

If journalists are frequently citing tweets, the question inevitably becomes: whose tweets are they citing? In order to assess which kinds of Twitter users were most likely to be cited, I coded each reference to a tweet based on the characteristics of the author. Specifically, quoted Twitterers were placed into one of six mutually exclusive categories: (1) non-partisan government officials; (2) politicians (including elected officials, candidates, spokespeople, political parties and campaign organizations); (3) media professionals (including journalists, editors, bloggers and political commentator); (4) academics; (5) celebrities; (6) average users.[[23]](#footnote-23) Table XX.1 displays the results of this classification.

Political science research has demonstrated that political discourse in the United States is fundamentally top-down and elite-driven. Although definitions of who constitutes this all important “elite” vary from account to account, there is strong consensus that political elites are those individuals who spend most of their lives working within the normal boundaries of the political system. Carmines and Kuklinski (1990), for example, draw a distinction between elites, “those whose primary business is governing the nation” and non-elites, “those for whom politics is secondary” (9). Similarly, John Zaller (1992) defines elites as “persons who devote themselves full time to some aspect of politics or public affairs….these elites include politicians, higher level government officials, journalists, some activists and many kinds of experts and policy specialists” (6).

When defined in this way, it is quite clear that journalists and bloggers are concerned primarily (if not exclusively) with the tweets of political elites. As Table XX.1 shows, a vast majority of the tweets quoted by all media outlets were posted by government officials, politicians and media professionals. While celebrities, such as Lady Ga Ga and Oprah, were able to leverage their popularity into media citations of their politically-oriented tweets, true “non-elite” microbloggers were rarely mentioned in news coverage. In fact, statements by average Twitter users did not constitute more than eight percent of the Twitter statements quoted by any of the media forms studied here. In short, those who are not already part of the political establishment – regardless of how many followers they have – are not likely to have their tweets picked up by those who are.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Unsurprisingly, not all political elites seem to be accorded the same status by journalists and bloggers. What is surprising, however, is the extent of the disparities in mentions across. As Table XX.2 shows, the tweets of the 10 most frequently quoted politicians account for well over one-third of all mentions across the different media studied here. Perhaps the most surprising finding emerging from Table XX.2 is the extent to which Sarah Palin dominates all other political actors when it comes to having her tweets broadcast on television, written about in newspapers and blogged about in the blogosphere. Indeed, more than one out of every ten quoted tweets during the last five and a half years from a politician was from Sarah Palin. When considered alongside of the fact that hundreds of candidates, legislators and former elected officials send out thousands of tweets each day, the concentration of attention on the small group of well-recognized politicians listed in Table XX.2 (and Palin in particular) suggests that microblogging has not made it easier for lower level political figures to be noticed. Indeed, leaving aside an Anthony Weiner-type debacle or a Gabby Giffords-like tragedy, tweeting does not appear to be an effective way for lesser known politicians to catapult themselves onto the national stage. In one sense, therefore, journalists are maintaining their traditional gatekeeping roles by selectively filtering whose tweets are discussed and whose are ignored.

Due to the heavy attention given to Sarah Palin, Republican politicians were far more likely to have their Twitter statements cited and quoted than Democratic politicians. Specifically, Republican politicians received over 53 percent of all print media citations, over 55 percent of all newspaper citations and over 57 percent of all blog citations. The disparities are even greater when considering the context of most citations to Democratic politicians. The two most frequently quoted Democrats were Anthony Weiner (whose Twitter account was cited frequently for the scandalous pictures he sent to some of his female followers) and Gabby Giffords (whose tweet about returning after an assignation attempt to vote on the debt ceiling package was widely quoted). Removing these two politicians from the citation counts would give Republican politicians a 2-1 advantage in Twitter quotations. Put simply, Republican politicians are using Twitter much more effectively at Democrats when it comes to attracting discussion from journalists and bloggers.

# XX.5 Discussion

These findings make a number of contributions to our understanding of political communication and media coverage. First, the data here speak to long standing questions about sources and the agenda building process. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) define news sources as “external suppliers of raw material, such as speeches, interviews, corporate reports and government hearings” (178). Beginning with the work of Sigal (1973), numerous studies of news production have attempted to clarify the role that these “external suppliers” play in structuring media coverage. Most notably, Gans (1979) described the relationship between journalists and their sources as a complicated, yet mutually beneficial, dance – where sources seek out journalists in order to reach the media’s large audience and journalists nurture relationships with sources in order to establish reliable channels of access to newsworthy information. According to Gans, the heavy informational demands and tight time constraints of the news business inevitably mean that this dance is more likely to be led by sources than by journalists.

As a result of the fact that journalists so frequently follow their lead, sources are seen to be essential components of so-called “agenda building” – the process by which media outlets decide which issues to cover and which to ignore. Unsurprisingly, therefore, academic researchers have conducted numerous studies of sourcing patterns in an attempt to identify the kinds of actors that are most influential in shaping the media’s agenda. While these studies have tracked media citations to a diverse array of actors, including interest groups (Danielian and Page 1994), anonymous individuals (Denham 1997; Martin-Kratzer and Thorson 2007) and academics (Lasorsa and Reece 1990), the bulk of the evidence shows that journalists draw primarily from a narrow range of official, government sources in their reporting on political issues (Brown et al. 1987; Berkowitz 1987; Dominick 1977; Hoynes and Croteau 1991; Sigal 1973; Solely 1992; Whitney et al. 1989).

When coupled with survey and interview evidence that journalists rely on tweets from microbloggers to provide some of the “raw material” for their reporting, the findings presented here suggest that Twitter is becoming an important source for the media’s coverage of politics. Not all microbloggers, however, are likely to serve as sources. As discussed above, journalists and bloggers alike display a clear preference for quoting statements from the Twitter accounts of candidates, government officials and media personalities. There is very little in this data to suggest that bloggers journalists pay any attention whatsoever to the microblogging of non-elite actors. In other words, the findings presented here show that Twitter has not loosened the stranglehold that political elites have on the agenda building process. Rather than expanding the range of sources that journalists draw on in formulating their coverage, therefore, it is safe to say that Twitter has served to simply increase the media’s dependence on a small group of political elites.

Second, the findings presented here touch directly on the burgeoning body of research into the influence of “new media” discussions on “old media” coverage. A large literature in political science and mass communications has demonstrated that political blogs (the forerunners to the microblogging enabled by Twitter) exert a powerful influence on the agenda of print and broadcast media outlets (Davis 2009; Drezner and Farrell 2008; Wallsten 2007; Wallsten 2010). It is important to point out, however, that not all blogs are likely to matter for how media covers politics. As Matthew Hindman (2008) has shown, most blog readership and, therefore, most blog influence is highly concentrated among a handful of mainstream, well-educated professionals. In other words, although Web 2.0 technologies make it very easy to speak in cyberspace, it is exceedingly difficult to use blogging as a platform to be heard, particularly when trying to capture the ears of professional journalists.

Similar to the findings from research into blogging, there is evidence in the data presented here that statements found on Twitter are influencing traditional media coverage of politics. Also similar to the findings from research into blogging, Twitter influence over media coverage appears to be limited to a very small group of elite actors. Specifically, tweets posted by candidates, government officials and media personalities, have a far greater chance at being broadcast to the general public than tweets posted by ordinary microbloggers. The emergence of Twitter has not, in other words, made the borders of media access more porous for average citizens. In short, the following and filtering decisions made by journalists mean that familiar voices are amplified and new and different voices remain unheard.

Third, the findings contribute to research on how Twitter is changing the functioning of traditional newsrooms. According to a recent article in the *American Journalism Review* (White 2008), journalists use Twitter to “to find story ideas, develop sources, connect with local communities, network, and share and break news.” Mass communications and journalism scholars have eagerly tackled questions about how media professionals use Twitter to connect with local communities, network and to share and break news. More specifically, a number of studies have shown that media outlets use Twitter primarily for promotional purposes. Blasingame (2011), for example, found that most of the 2,300 tweets from the San Antonio newsrooms he studied were used to promote online articles. Similarly, in an extensive analysis of the 180 most prominent American print outlets and television stations, Messner et al. found that the vast majority of tweets from media organizations were “shovelware” – messages that did little more than point followers to stories carried on the channel or newspaper’s website. A cross-national study of tweeting by Iberian and Latin American news agencies revealed that media organizations overseas have adopted a similar approach to their Twitter feeds (Torres et al., 2010). A great deal of work has been done, in other words, to show that media outlets have tried to use Twitter – albeit somewhat ineffectively – to break news, network and connect with their audience.

While these studies reveal important elements about how media organizations use Twitter, they say little about how it helps journalists find story ideas and develop sources. This study provides the first empirical assessment of how Twitter matters in these more subtle ways. Most importantly, the findings reveal something about the process by which journalists go about monitoring discussions on Twitter. To cast the issue in fairly blunt terms, there are two very different ways to monitor discussions on Twitter to find story ideas. One approach is to tap into the overall zeitgeist of the site. Using applications such as Tweetdeck, Tweetfall and TweetMeme, journalists can inform their decisions about what to report by determining which topics are most popular among the entire population of Twitter users. By contrast, journalists may eschew this kind of aggregated assessment of popularity and focus, instead, on the topics that a small group of trusted microbloggers are discussing.

Despite anecdotal evidence to suggest that journalists are using the first method of finding story ideas,[[25]](#footnote-25) the findings presented here suggest that journalists rely more heavily on the second method. Indeed, the vast majority of references to Twitter in every kind of media studied was to a government official, candidate or fellow media personality. Almost no reference was made to the general Twittersphere and there were almost no quotations from average Twitter users. Journalists, it seems, turn primarily to the Twitter feeds of the usual group of suspects when reaching determinations about which issues are new, interesting and worthy of more attention.

Finally, this study contributes to the nascent research on microblogging by suggesting a new measure of influence. As suggested above, every attempt to quantify influence within the Twittersphere thus far has relied exclusively on metrics derived from the complex relationships that exist between microbloggers on the site. Indeed, the most commonly used statistics for ranking Twitter users have been the number of followers, the number of retweets and the number of times a user is mentioned by other users. The logic behind relying solely on this particular set of within-site metrics is simple: Twitter users who have larger numbers of followers, larger numbers of mentions and larger numbers of retweets will be more influential because their messages will reach larger audiences. Put simply, influence on Twitter is singularly determined by how many people are exposed to a user’s tweets.

If influence truly does entail nothing more getting a large number of eyes on one’s messages, then tracking the movement of tweets within the site while ignoring the extent to which they spread across other media venues offers a woefully incomplete and potentially inaccurate assessment which users are using Twitter effectively. There are two reasons for this. First, although tweets begin on Twitter, they can reach many who do not microblog because they are commonly quoted, cited and commented upon in newspapers, television programs and on a diverse variety of sites around the Internet. A tweet that is quoted in the New York Times, for example, may be read by 2 million people. A statement pulled from Twitter and included on a broadcast of the O’Reilly Factor may be heard by over 3 million people. As a result, equating influence with the number of people likely to see a tweet on the site alone inevitably obscures the true level of exposure a Twitter user’s messages are receiving. What’s more, if some microbloggers are more likely to have their messages repeated in print, broadcast and online media reports than other users, Twitter-centric measures will paint a misleading picture of influence. In short, measurement strategies that implicitly assume that influence ends at the edges of the twitter.com domain will provide, at best, an incomplete and, at worst, a significantly distorted view of where power on the site resides.

Second, when a tweet travels exclusively within Twitter, it is destined to find an audience that is fundamentally unrepresentative of both the general public and the population of Internet users. Indeed, a recent Pew study found that only 13 percent of online adults now tweet and, more importantly, that Twitter users are drawn disproportionately from the ranks of young, non-white, highly educated urbanites. The audience of print and broadcast news outlets, by contrast, tends to be older, whiter and more geographically dispersed. If our conception of influence includes exposing a larger and even marginally diverse group of people to a tweet, supplementing Twitter-centric measures with data about how frequently traditional media outlets reference statements by microbloggers must become an essential component of our measurement strategies. This, of course, is not to discount the impact that political messages communicated solely on Twitter can have. Because the individuals who use Twitter for political communication are “opinion leaders” (Boynton, 2010), tweets that are widely distributed on the site may have a greater impact on public discourse than the absolute number of microbloggers who read them might otherwise imply. It does suggest, however, that researchers interested in a thorough assessment of a Twitter user’s overall influence should look beyond the narrow connections found on the site and evaluate the extent to which tweeting allows users to reach a more diverse audience. In other words, because they significantly expand the size and diversity of people exposed to a tweet, media quotes of Twitter statements can be thought of as the “ultimate retweet” and should be included in how we approach assessments of influence.

# XX.6 Conclusion

Despite the fact that may observers have typically discussed “new media” technologies a way for politicians to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and communicate directly with their constituents, previous research has shown that skillful candidates and government officials can use websites, blogs, YouTube to shape news reporting (Lipinsky and Neddenriep 2004). In that tradition, the findings presented here have shown that Twitter matters because the microblogged statements of political elites have become regular components of political news coverage in the United States. To be more precise, the evidence drawn from an extensive content analysis of newspaper, broadcast television and blog discussions clearly shows that a small group of nationally recognizable political leaders have been able to use their Twitter accounts to attract widespread media attention to their personal musing and policy pronouncements. In short, Twitter is becoming an increasingly important part of the way American political discourse is constructed – both online and off.

A happy consequence of illustrating the impact that elite tweets are having on media coverage is to challenge the current fetish in microblogging research on Twitter-centric measures of influence and message diffusion. Much time and energy has been spent determining how many times a tweet has been retweeted by other microbloggers and how many people may or may not have read the message on the site. While this work is certainly an important first step in understanding Twitter’s impact on political discourse, it should not consume our attention entirely and the measures used in this assessment should not become singularly equated with our understanding of influence. The findings presented here suggest a new approach to conceptualizing influence on Twitter.

The findings presented here also suggest four directions for future research. First, future work should explore the relationship between traditional media coverage and Twitter-centric measures of influence. When a prominent print or broadcast media outlet quotes a tweet, does it lead the message’s author to attract more followers or receive more retweets? Similarly, do more followers and retweets increase the likelihood that a politician’s tweets will be quoted in newspapers and on television programs? The data presented here suggest that there is no clear or straightforward relationship between influence inside of and outside of the Twittersphere. For example, according to Romero et al. (2010), Paul Ryan was the most second most influential member of Congress on Twitter in 2010. The evidence from newspaper citations, however, tell a different story. Congressman Ryan’s tweets were completely ignored by the print media and mentioned on only one television news program. Additional research is needed in order to better understand the factors that lead a tweeting politician to attain influence among microbloggers and journalists alike.

Second, future work should further explore the complex and multidirectional relationship that exists between Twitter discussions and traditional media coverage. As the evidence presented above suggests, journalists are attentive to what is being discussed on Twitter and frequently use it in their news reporting. Recent work also suggests that microbloggers are attentive to (if not dependent) on the content provided by newspapers and television stations. Specifically, a study of over 16 million tweets by Asur et al. (2011) concluded that Twitter “functions more as a filter and an amplifier for interesting news from traditional media” than as an independent, alternative source of information. In order to tease out the dynamics driving this complicated relationship, future work should marry longitudinal content analyses of news reports with the kind of easily accessible, aggregated measures of Twitter discussion trends found on sites like Tweetdeck, Tweetfall and TweetMeme.

Third, future work into how and why politicians tweet should explore the extent to which politicians use microblogging as a means to attract attention from newspapers, blogs and television shows. As suggested above, there have been many studies of the factors that make politicians more likely to tweet. A number of these studies have shown that congresspeople use their microblogging accounts to broadcast messages and one survey has found that Twitter is attractive to politicians because it may help them communicate to a broader audience. Standing in stark contrast to these findings, some evidence suggests that politicians use Twitter not to communicate with the general public but to, instead, communicate with people whose primary occupation is politics. As Republican political consultant Wesley Donehue said, “I use Twitter to talk to mainstream media. I think that Twitter is a place to talk to opinion leaders. That's where you talk to the press, you talk to activists, big donors, other legislators…you have to do is realize who your audiences are ... the press is on Twitter and is always monitoring what's going on” (Judd 2011). No research to date, however, has empirically assessed the impact that media attention may have on how politicians choose to write tweets. The findings presented here suggest the need for studies that explicitly probe staffers and campaign managers about how strongly the desire to attract attention from newspapers, television shows and blogs figures in to the calculations about what to tweet and when to tweet it.

Finally, future work is needed to explore the impact that the content of the tweet has on its ability to attract media attention. This study has concentrated on the source of tweets. It has shown that although most quoting is devoted to restating the tweets of political elites, there is only a small group of nationally recognized politicians that can count on consistent discussion of their microblogged messages. It is possible, however, that the source is only one, small part of the story when it comes to understanding why some messages spread across the Internet, television and newspapers. Indeed, one alternative hypothesis is that content is king and it is the “quality” of the tweet that determines how widely it is diffused. At the very least, content must be taken into account because even Sarah Palin writes many tweets that are never repeated beyond Twitter. Future work should supplement the analysis done here in order to determine whether the source or the message is a more powerful predictor of a tweet becoming a meme.

**References**

Ahmad, AN (2010) Is Twitter a useful tool for journalists? J Media Pract 11: 145-155

Alexa.com (2012) Top sites. <http://www.alexa.com/topsites>. Accessed 29 August 2012

Ambinder M (2011) Is the press fair to Palin? <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2011/05/is-the-press-fair-to-palin/239686/>. Accessed 21 December 2011

Anstead N, O’Loughlin B (2011) The emerging viewertariat and BBC question time: Television debate and real-time commenting online. The Int J Press/Polit 16: 440–462

Asur S, Huberman BA, Szabo G, Wang C (2011) Trends in social media : Persistence and decay. Presented at the 5th Int Conf on Weblogs and Social Media

Ball M (2010) 50 politicos to watch: Top tweeters. <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0711/59944_Page2.html>. Accessed 15 April 2011

Berkowitz D (1987) TV news sources and news channels: A study in agenda building. Journal Q. 64: 508-13

Blasingame D (2011) Twitter first: Changing TV news 140 characters at a time. <http://online.journalism.utexas.edu/2011/papers/Dale2011.pdf>. Accessed 21 March 2012

Blevis M (2010) House of tweets: Twitter and the House of Commons. <http://markblevis.com/house-of-tweets/>. Accessed 20 January 2012

Boynton GR (2010) Audience: the reach of political messaging on Twitter. <http://www.boyntons.us/website/new-media/analyses/audience-twitter/twitter-followers.html>. Accessed 20 May 2012

Boynton GR (2011) Retweeting in Big Numbers. <http://www.boyntons.us/website/new-media/analyses/winning/judge-says-no/retweets-happen.html>. Accessed 20 May 2012

Brooks R (2011) How social media helps journalists break news. <http://www.socialmediaexaminer.com/how-social-media-helps-journalists-break-news/>. Accessed 13 March 2012

Brown JD, Bybee CR, Wearden ST, Straughn DM (1987) Invisible power: Newspaper news sources and the limit of diversity. Journal Q 64: 45-54

Busis H (2011) Blog post on Forbes.com uses tweets in lieu of quotes. <http://www.mediaite.com/online/blog-post-on-forbes-com-uses-tweets-in-lieu-of-quotes/>. Accessed 14 March 2012

Butters AL (2011) How old media are using new media. <http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/about/news/item/article/how-old-media-are-using-new-media.html>. Accessed 30 March 2012

Carmines, E. G. & Kuklinski, J.H. ( 1990). Incentives, opportunities, and the logic of public opinion in American political representation. In: Ferejohn JA, Kuklinski JH (eds) Information and Democratic Processes. University of Illinois Press, Urbana

Chi F, Yang N (2010) Twitter in Congress: Outreach vs. transparency. [http://ssrn.com/abstract=1630943](http://ssrn.com/abstract%3D1630943). Accessed 21 January 2012

Congressional Management Foundation (2010) #SocialCongress: Perceptions and use of social media on Capitol Hill. <http://www.congressfoundation.org/projects/communicating-with-congress/social-congress>. Accessed 22 March 2012

Danielian L, Page R (1994) The heavenly chorus: Interest group voices on TV news. Am J Polit Sci 38: 1056-1078

Davis R (2009) Typing politics: The role of blogs in American politics. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Denham BE (1997) Anonymous attribution during two periods of military conflict: Using logistic regression to study veiled sources in American newspapers. Journal and Mass Commun Q 74: 565-578

Dominick J (1977) Geographic bias in network TV news. J Commun 27: 94-99

Douthat R (2011) Scenes from a Marriage. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/17/opinion/17douthat.html>. Accessed 12 January 2012

Ellis J (2011) Seeking out sources, made transparent on Twitter. <http://www.niemanlab.org/2011/01/seeking-out-sources-made-transparent-on-twitter/>. Accessed 14 June 2012

Farrell H, Drezner D (2008) The power and politics of blogs. Public Choice 134: 15-30

Gandy OH (1982) Beyond agenda-setting: Information subsidies and public-policy. Norwood, NJ: Ablex

Gans H (1979). Deciding what's news. New York: Vintage.

Garrison-Sprenger N (2008) Twittery-do-dah, twittering pays. Quill 96: 12-15

Glassman ME, Straus JR, Shogan CJ (2010) Social networking and constituent communications: Member use of Twitter during a two-month period in the 111th Congress. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R41066.pdf>. Accessed 31 January 2012

Golbeck J, Grimes J, Rogers A (2010) Twitter use by the U.S. Congress. J Am Soc for Inf Sci and Technol. 61(8): 1612-1621

Grant WJ, Moon B, Busby Grant J (2010) Digital dialogue? Australian politicians' use of the social network tool Twitter. Aust J Polit Sci 45: 579-604

Harnden T (2009) Twitter taking off among Washington journalists. <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/tobyharnden/8571977/Twitter_taking_off_among_Washington_journalists/>. Accessed 21 March 2012

Heim K. (2008) Blogs and the Iraq war: A time-series analysis of intermedia agenda setting and agenda building. Presented at Annu Meet Assoc for Educ in Journal and Mass Commun, Chicago

Hermida, A. (2010). Twittering the news. Journal Pract 4: 297-308

Hindman M (2008) The myth of digital democracy. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press

Hoynes W, Croteau D (1991) The chosen few: Nightline and the politics of public affairs television. Crit Sociol 18: 19-36

Judd N (2011) Quote of the day: A southern Republican view of Twitter. <http://techpresident.com/short-post/quote-day-southern-republican-view-twitter>. Accessed 11 April 2012

Karpf D (2008) Understanding blogspace. J Inf Technol and Polit. 5: 369-385

Karpf D (2009) Stability and change in the blogosphere in the 2008 election. Presented at Annu Meet Midwest Polit Sci Assoc , Chicago

Klein E (2010) The media's pro-Palin corruption. <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/ezra-klein/2010/11/the_medias_pro-palin_corruptio.html>. Accessed 20 March 2012

Lasorsa, DL, Reese, SD (1990) News source use in the crash of 1987: A study of four national media. Journal Q 67: 60-71

Lassen D, Brown A (2010) Twitter: The electoral connection? Presented at Annu Meet Midwest Polit Sci Assoc , Chicago

Lipinski D, Neddenriep G (2004) Using ‘new’ media to get ‘old’ media coverage: How members of Congress utilize their web sites to court journalists. The Int J Press/Polit 9: 7-21

Livine A, Simmons M, Adar E, Adamic, L (2011). The Party is over here: Structure and content in the 2010 election. Presented at the Fifth Int Assoc for the Adv of Artif Intell on Weblogs and Soc Media

Martin-Kratzer R, Thorson E (2007) Use of anonymous sources declines in U.S. newspapers. Newsp Res J 28: 56-70

Messner M, Linke M, Eford A (2010) Shoveling tweets: An analysis of the microblogging engagement of traditional news organizations. Presented at Int Symp on Online Journal, Austin

Mustafaraj E, Metaxas P (2010) From obscurity to prominence in minutes: Political speech and real-time search. Presented at WebSci10: Extending the Front of Soc On-Line, Raleigh

Morton J (2010) Staying neutral. <http://www.ajr.org/Article.asp?id=4837>. Accessed 7 December 2011

Oreilla PR Network (2011) Clicks, communities and conversations: The state of journalism in 2011. <http://www.orielladigitaljournalism.com/view-report.html>. Accessed 21 January 2012

Ostermeir E (2009) How do politicians use Twitter? A case study of Rep. Laura Brod. <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/cspg/smartpolitics/2009/07/how_do_politicians_use_twitter.php>. Accessed 20 May 2012

Perlmutter DD (2008) Blogwars. New York: Oxford University Press

Plotkowiak T, Ebermann J, Stanoevska-Slabeva K (2010) A longitudinal social network analysis of German politiciansʼ Twitter accounts. Presented at Sun Belt XXX Conf

PRWeek/PR Newswire (2010) Media Survey 2010: News update. <http://www.prweekus.com/media-survey-2010-news-update/article/166956>. Accessed 21 April 2012

Radio Television Digital News Association. 2010 RTDNA/Hofstra Staffing & Profitability Survey - Full Data. <http://www.rtdna.org/pages/media_items/2010-rtdnahofstra-staffing-profability-survey--full-data1944.php>. Accessed 21 April 2012

Roberts M, McCombs M (1994) Agenda-setting and political advertising: Origins of the news agenda. Polit Commun 11: 249-262

Romero D, Galuba W, Asur, S, Huberman B (2011) HP labs: The 100 most influential members of U.S. Congress on Twitter. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/43155500/HP-Labs-The-100-Most-Influential-Members-of-U-S-Congress-on-Twitter>. Accessed 20 May 2012

Roth MM (2004). How journalists see the blogosphere. <http://www.asc.upenn.edu/usr/mmccoy/blogs.pdf>. Accessed 20 January 2007

Schiffer, AJ (2006) Blogswarms and press norms: News coverage of the Downing Street memo controversy. Journal & Mass Commun Q 8: 494-510

Senak M (2010) Twongress: The power of Twitter in Congress. <http://www.eyeonfda.com/eye_on_fda/2010/01/twongress-the-power-of-twitter-in-congress.html>. Accessed 1 May 2012

Shoemaker PJ, Reese SD (1991) Mediating the message: Theories of influences on mass media content. New York: Longman

Sifry ML (2009) Who has the most Twitter Klout in Congress? (The answer will surprise you). <http://techpresident.com/blog-entry/who-has-most-twitter-klout-congress-answer-will-surprise-you>. Accessed 20 May 2012

Sigal L (1973) Reporters and officials. Lexington, MA: DC Heath

Society for New Communications Research (2011) How are media and journalism evolving? Insights from the third annual Middleberg/SNCR Survey of media in the wired world. <http://www.slideshare.net/sncr/how-are-media-journalism-evolving>. Accessed 21 February 2012

Soley L (1992) The news shapers: the sources who explain the news. New York: Praeger

Sparks D (2010) Birds of a feather tweet together: Partisan structure in online social networks. Presented at Annu Meet Midwest Polit Sci Assoc , Chicago

Sun F (2011) The 140 best Twitter feeds of 2011. [http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2058946\_2059021\_2059005,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0%2C28804%2C2058946_2059021_2059005%2C00.html). Accessed 1 May 2012

Tedesc JC (2002) Network news coverage of campaign 2000: The public voice in context. In: Denton RE (ed) The 2000 presidential campaign: A communication perspective. Praeger, New York

Tedesco JC (2005a) Issue and strategy agenda setting in the 2004 presidential election: Exploring the candidate-journalist relationship. Journal Stud 6:187-201

Tedesco JC (2005b) Intercandidate agenda setting in the 2004 Democratic presidential primary. Am Behavioral Sci 49: 92-104

Torres EG, Yezers'ka L, Rost A, Calderin M, Rojano M, Edo C, Sahid C, Jerónimo P, Arcila C, Serrano A, Badillo J, Alfonso L (2011) See you on Facebook or Twitter? The use of social media by 27 news outlets from 9 regions in Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Portugal, Spain and Venezuela. Presented at Int Symp on Online Journal, Austin

Turk JV (1986) Information subsidies and media content: Study of public relations influence on the news. Journal Monogr 100

Turk JV, Franklin B (1987) Information subsidies: Agenda-setting traditions. Public Relat Rev13: 29-41

Wallsten KJ (2007) Agenda setting and the blogosphere: An analysis of the relationship between mainstream media and political blogs. Rev Policy Res 24: 567-587

White L (2008) All the news that’s fit to tweet. <http://www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=4601>. Accessed 14 June 2012

Whitney DC, Fritzler M, Jones S, Mazzarella S, Rakow L (1989) Geographic and source biases in network television news, 1982-1984. J Broadcast & Electron Media 33: 159-174

Williams CB, Gulati GJ (2010) Communication with constituents in 140 characters or less: Twitter and the diffusion of technology innovation in the United States Congress. Presented at Annu Meet Midwest Polit Sci Assoc, Chicago

Zaller J (1992) The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press

**Figure XX.1 – Print Media Citations to Twitter over Time**



**Table XX.1 – Twitter Citations by Type**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Twitter User** | **Newspapers** | **Television** | **Blogs** |
| Non-partisan Government Officials | 3.6% | 4.9% | 4.4% |
| Politicians | 61.7% | 53.4% | 64.8% |
| Media Professionals | 16.3% | 15.1% | 21.1% |
| Academics | 1.4% | 0.9% | 0.2% |
| Celebrities | 6.1% | 16.2% | 2.5% |
| Average Users | 6.9% | 7.9% | 4.7% |
| Others | 4.0% | 1.6% | 2.3% |
| **Total** | **100.0%** | **100.0%** | **100.0%** |

**Table XX.2 – Individual Twitter Users**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Twitter User** | **Newspapers** | **Television** | **Blogs** |
| Sarah Palin | 11.1% | 15.1% | 11.8% |
| Anthony Weiner | 6.4% | 9.5% | 5.5% |
| Newt Gingrich | 2.8% | 3.8% | 4.5% |
| Marco Rubio | 2.5% | 0.2% | 1.8% |
| Gabrielle Giffords | 2.2% | 0.4% | 1.8% |
| Nancy Pelosi | 1.9% | 1.5% | 4.5% |
| Arnold Schwarzenegger | 1.6% | 1.3% | 0.9% |
| Claire McCaskill | 1.3% | 1.3% | 3.6% |
| John McCain | 1.3% | 2.7% | 1.8% |
| John Boehner | 1.2% | 2.4% | 3.6% |
| **Total** | **32.2%** | **38.1%** | **40.0%** |

1. There have been studies of Tweeting by politicians in other countries as well. Most notably, Blevis (2010) details Twitter use by federal MPs in Canada and Tweetminster.com tracks tweeting by British politicians. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There is even evidence that changes in the media environment may be increasing the impact of candidates and government officials on the media agenda. As Tedesco (2005b) argues, today’s growing “interdependence between candidates and media, coupled with the 24-hour media cycle in modern campaigns, augments the likelihood that information resources from campaigns will have a powerful influence on news agendas” (92). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Representative works include Davis (2009), Farrell and Drezner (2008), Heim (2008), Perlmutter (2008), Roth (2004), Schiffer (2006), Wallsten (2007) and Wallsten (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Boynton’s “There’s a hashtag for that” project collects and archives microblogging streams about politics. He has generously made these available to researchers on his website (<http://www.boyntons.us/website/new-media/hashtag-archive-new-media.html>). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The fact that politicians use Twitter primarily as a broadcast tool does not mean that they use it exclusively to get their message out. Indeed, a recent survey by the Congressional Management Foundation (2011) found that more than one-third (42%) of congressional staffers believe Twitter is somewhat or very important for understanding constituent views and opinions. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. These findings are not unique to the United States. Will Grant, Brenda Moon and Janie Busby Grant (2010) have uncovered similar trends among Australian politicians. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The tendency to connect only with those who share your ideological predispositions is not unique to American politicians. Indeed, studies of tweeting by politicians in both Germany (Plotkowiak et al. 2010) and Australia (Grant et al. 2010) show strong levels of ideological clustering in the networks of political elites. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Blevis (2010) adopts a similar approach and employs data from Twitalyzer in his study of tweeting by Canadian legislators. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Grant, Moon and Grant (2010) study uses retweets to analyze influence among Australian politicians. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The list of the 100 most influential politicians as determined by this study can be found at: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/43155500/HP-Labs-The-100-Most-Influential-Members-of-U-S-Congress-on-Twitter>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. To be preceise, 72% of Congressional staffers said that social media allows them to reach people they would not otherwise reach (Congressional Management Foundation 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Assessing the actual size of the audience for a given political message on Twitter is somewhat difficult. Boynton (2010) has shown that when taking followers and retweets into account the potential number of readers for political discussions can be as high as 129 million. This number, however, should be interpreted as an upper bound for exposure. Many accounts following the discussions may not be checked frequently, many messages may be overlooked in the large stream of messages flowing into each account and, most importantly, the rate of redundancy within networks may mean that there are far fewer unique readers than there are potential readers. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. CNN was one of the earliest adopters with 150 employees tweeting by the fall of 2008 (Garrison-Sprenger 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. There is no shortage of tools that journalists can use to monitor discussions on Twitter. TweetBeep, for example, gives journalists email updates from Twitter. DailyRT and TweetMeme allows reporters to track what the top retweeted items are on Twitter. Another tool called BackTweets finds tweets by URL (even if the URLs have been shortened). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Specifically, he uses a combination of TwitterLocal and Tweetscan to find people from Harrisburg/Hershey. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. In one particularly telling instance, Caitie Parker, a woman who tweeted that the Gabrielle Giffords shooting took place near her house and that she was a former classmate of Jared Lee Loughner was sent more than 30 interview requests via Twitter (Ellis 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The use of material from Twitter has become so widespread in news reporting that most news organizations have issued guidelines to direct their employees approach to social media sites (Ahmad 2010; Morton 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Journalists are so willing to cite tweets from politicians that there are even instances of reporters quoting fake politicians. Most notably, Washington Post columnist Jonathan Capehart wrote an entire blog post about the comments of “RepJackKimble (R-Calif.)” – a Twitter account designed to parody the statements of conservatives. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. More specifically, I searched the Lexis-Nexis archives of “U.S. newspapers and wires” for stories that mentioned the phrases. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The specific broadcasts included all news programs carried by CBS News, ABC News, CNN, MSNBC and Fox News. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The determination of popularity was based on Dave Karpf’s Blogosphere Authority Index. For a discussion of this index see Karpf (2008, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The final number of stories excludes articles that appeared more than once in the Lexis-Nexis results and articles that were included for mentioning the word “tweeted” without actually referring to any specific content contained on the site (e.g. “the number of Congressmen who have tweeted has declined after the Anthony Weiner scandal” or “follow us via Twitter”). In addition, articles were excluded from the analysis if they had nothing to do with politics. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. A residual group contains all of the quoted Twitterers that could not be easily classified into one of the six main categories of analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. In one of the few studies of how media organizations blend Twitter content in to their break news coverage, Hermida (2010) shows that news outlets were drawing on a mixture of Twitter messages, unverified information and traditional accounts in their reporting of the Iranian elections. Hermida also points out that the BBC included “unverified tweets filtered by journalists” (300) as part of their breaking news coverage of the terror attacks in Mumbai. In other words, tweets from average users seem to be more important for media organizations when breaking news happens overseas. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Most notably, the *Daily Telegraph* has used Twitterfall, which monitors tweets about certain search terms and hashtags, in its newsroom to monitor breaking news events. Twitterfall is the first non-mainstream media news source to appear on the screens of the paper’s newsroom and the projection is given more space than Sky, BBC and CNN on the wall. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)