

Twitter as arena for the authentic outsider: exploring the social media campaigns of Trump and Clinton in the 2016 US presidential election

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Abstract

In the 2016 US presidential election campaign, social media platforms were increasingly used as direct sources of news, bypassing the editorial media. With the candidates' millions of followers, Twitter has become a platform for mass communication and the candidate's main online information channel. Likewise, social media has provided a platform for debating and critiquing the mainstream media by the campaigns and their networks. This article discusses the Twitter strategies of the democratic candidate Hillary Clinton and republican candidate Donald Trump during their US 2016 presidential election campaigns. While the Clinton campaign's strategy confirms theories regarding the professionalisation of election campaigns, the Trump campaign's more amateurish yet authentic style in social media points towards de-professionalisation and even amateurism as a counter-trend in political communication.

Keywords

Election campaigns, social media, professionalisation, authenticity, Twitter

Introduction

Social media is the latest fascination of political communication strategists, particularly during election campaigns. While television and newspapers remain dominant sources of news in general, social media has become an increasingly important source for political news in particular. In the 2008 US presidential election cycle, with Democratic candidate

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Barack Obama as its icon, the social media political campaign became a buzzword of sorts, and the potential of social media to mobilise voters was thoroughly hyped as well.

Since then, social media has developed and grown in scale and scope – new platforms and services have emerged, and established platforms have expanded. These platforms have replaced campaign websites as the parties' and candidates' main online information channels. Yet there is no evidence that social media has replaced traditional channels for political communication – TV debates, advertising, rallies, door knocking, the news media and press conferences are still highly prioritised by the campaigns and their candidates (Craig, 2016; Nielsen, 2012). Yet, all of these activities are now impacted in some way by social media – documented, debated and mentioned on Twitter, Facebook or Instagram by the campaigns and those who follow them.

The research literature on social media and election campaigns can be divided into three main strands. The first strand is concerned with the *historical development* of digital campaigns and the use of blogs, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter to mobilise voters (Bruns and Highfield, 2016; Howard, 2006; Kreiss, 2012; Stromer-Galley, 2014). According to these studies, blogs were included in US election campaigns starting in 2004, but it was the 2008 Obama campaign that represented the first 'social media election'. The second strand looks at the level of *interaction with voters* in social media campaigns (Enli and Naper, 2016; Graham et al., 2013; Jackson and Lilleker, 2011; Stromer-Galley, 2000, 2004). A key finding in these studies is that politicians are reluctant to engage in dialogue with voters on social media and that campaigns use social media primarily as an arena for political marketing. The third strand of research deals with the level of *professionalisation* of campaigns (Kreiss, 2014; Kreiss and Jasinski, 2016; Lilleker and Negrine, 2002; Stromer-Galley, 2014).

Contributing to these three strands of research, this article asks the following: What are the most recent developments in social media election campaigns in the United States and to what degree do these developments point in the direction of increased interaction with voters and/or increased professionalisation of the campaigns?

These research questions will be answered through an analysis of tweets posted on the official Twitter accounts of the democratic candidate Hillary Clinton and republican candidate Donald Trump during the US 2016 presidential election cycle.¹ In addition, the discussion will draw on insights from recent European election campaigns.

The article is divided into three main parts. The first looks at the recent developments in the election campaigns' use of social media, the second deals more specifically with the candidates' interactions with voters and the third addresses the level of professionalisation in the campaigns.

Recent developments in social media campaigns

In order to discuss recent changes in the social media and technology-driven election campaigns, it is useful to take a step back and discuss the development of political communication prior to the current phase. It is nearly two decades since Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) divided political communication in Western democracies into three distinct historical phases, starting with the two decades following World War II and what has been called the 'golden age of the parties' – that is, a party-dominated communication system. The

second phase, starting in the 1960s, was the ‘era of television’. The third, more generally termed the digital era, is characterised by an intensified personalisation of political advocacy and increased anti-elitism, popularisation and populism.

The recent developments in social media campaigns connect well with these characteristics, and it is not difficult to find examples of personalisation, anti-elitism or populism in political communication on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Yet, the term ‘digital era’ also covers up the current trends in political communication, and I will thus tentatively suggest that, from the 2010s onwards, a forth phase is emerging: the ‘era of social media’, which represents a new shift in the power balance between politicians and editorial media; as a direct channel to the voters, social media returns us to the ‘golden age of the parties’, as defined by Blumler and Kavanagh (1999), except that this time around, the parties have been replaced by the campaigns.

The ‘era of social media’ does however not imply that platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram has replaced television (or newspapers or radio, for that matter) but it has changed it and the way audiences watch it (Chadwick 2014; Enli and Syvertsen, 2016). TV is no longer a stand-alone medium for political communication, because its mainstream media presence currently exists in tandem with social media, in the context of both multi-platform campaigns and multi-tasking users. This means that politicians are increasingly required to have a ‘performative flexibility’ in the interests of connecting with voters (Craig, 2016), moving comfortably between different format criteria and expectations, from the formal to the informal, from the professionalised to the personalised. This ups the threshold for political candidates’ communicative skills and presents the need for a professional yet highly flexible communication division within their campaigns.

Between the 2008 and 2016 US presidential election cycle, social media has changed and become more various and omnipresent. In 2008, both the democratic and the republican campaigns used Facebook, YouTube, Myspace and Flickr. By 2012, Facebook had increased its user base significantly, and Twitter had emerged as the new social media network with a critical mass of devotees. In the 2012 US presidential election cycle, the democratic Obama campaign used far more social media platforms (nine) than the republican Romney campaign (five). The 2016 US presidential election cycle saw a drop in the total number of social media platforms; the Clinton and Trump campaigns both used Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram, and the Clinton campaign also used Pinterest (Pew Research, 2016).² In the past decade or so, then, US campaigns have seen a period of expansion and experimentation, then a period of consolidation around the most widespread social media platforms.

A key development between the 2012 and the 2016 US presidential election campaigns is that the focus on images and videos has grown. This is especially evident in the ascent of the online mobile photo-sharing platform Instagram, which was used by the aforementioned campaigns as well as that of Bernie Sanders (Pew Research, 2016). Moreover, the use of video on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter increased significantly since the 2012 election cycle; the 2016 Hillary Clinton campaign, in particular, regularly posted videos as part of their social media messages. In sum, social media has become a more prominent communication channel for US campaigns since 2008, particularly in relation to campaign websites. In addition, in 2016, social

media platforms are increasingly used as direct sources of news, bypassing the editorial media (Pew Report, 2016).

Hillary Clinton for example launched her presidential candidacy by tweeting: ‘I’m running for president. Everyday Americans need a champion, and I want to be that champion. – H’ (tweet, 12 April 2015). Rather than initiating a press conference and relying on the mainstream media to share her news, Clinton’s campaign staff chose Twitter, in tandem with a YouTube video release titled ‘Getting started’,³ in which Hillary Clinton tells us that she is ‘getting ready to run for president’.

Likewise, social media provided Donald Trump with a platform to critique the mainstream media as biased and untrustworthy. In addition to several other established media companies, the *New York Times* was subjected to harsh judgment:

The failing @nytimes is truly one of the worst newspapers. They knowingly write lies and never call to fact check. Really bad people! (Tweet, 13 March 2016)

Even though the numbers are not directly comparable, it is worth noting that Trump had 17.6 million followers on Twitter and the *New York Times* has 1.2 million online-only subscribers in the last quarter of 2016.⁴ In turn, Trump’s Twitter campaign might critique the mainstream media, but is also in itself a mass media channel. Social media is contributing to a shift in the power relation between the politicians and their campaigns and the mainstream media and the journalists, because the politicians now have access to the means of production as well as efficient and direct distribution channels. These distribution channels differ from broadcasting and newspapers also in their interactive potential, which is a crucial factor to discuss as new trends in political communication.

Controlling the message

Historically, every new media technology seems to have brought with it a set of expectations related to the revival of democracy and the empowerment of the people in relation to the power elites (Barber, 1998; Benkler, 2006; Brecht, 1983 [1930]). These idealistic expectations have often led to disappointment, as new media revert to the reinforcement of existing power hierarchies.

This disappointment is also found by those who study social media in political communication; at various stages in the development and in various national contexts, researchers have documented profound reluctance among politicians regarding enhanced interactivity with voters. Rather than using social media as a way to interact with voters or encourage dialogue which might empower the citizens, the political campaigns primarily use social media as a channel for political marketing. As pinpointed by Jennifer Stromer-Galley (2000, 2014) in several studies over the course of more than a decade, US campaigns do not prioritise dialogue and interactivity. In one of the more recent studies, she noted that: ‘Campaigns wish to mobilize the public in the service of the campaign, but getting too close to them, really listening and empowering them, is dangerous and at least disadvantageous’ (Stromer-Galley, 2014: 187). Politicians’ reluctance to engage in dialogue is also uncovered by studies of European political campaigns; in the United Kingdom, for example, online campaigns and social media usage were found to

simply replicate the one-way communication pattern established by mass media campaigning (Coleman, 2001; Jackson and Lilleker, 2011).

In the Scandinavian countries, the picture is more mixed; studies have demonstrated both a reluctance to interact with citizens using social media (Larsson and Moe, 2013) and the opposite inclination – the Norwegian prime minister, Erna Solberg, for example, has frequently traded tweets with journalists as well as citizens (Larsson and Ihlen, 2015). This willingness to engage in dialogue with voters, however, brings with it a cost, in the form of reduced control over one's message and a greater risk of making a mistake. Solberg experienced the latter when she was mocked by one of her followers for a couple of spelling mistakes in her tweets. Even this worked out in the end, however: she politely explained that she suffers from dyslexia, and the Norwegian Twittersphere promptly voiced its support for her candour and accessibility. This episode perhaps demonstrates less political reluctance to engage in dialogue with voters in egalitarian societies like those in the Nordic region than in more polarised societies like the United States. Moreover, the episode pinpoints the advantages of being regarded as authentic, and the potential power of networked support from users (Enli 2015).

In the 2016 US election campaigns, familiar patterns from previous cycles reappeared, including a tendency towards one-way communication and little sign of voter–campaign interactivity. In fact, it would appear that the opportunities for public participation in digital political campaigns have decreased between 2012 and 2016. While the official campaign websites of recent election cycles firmly controlled the message and any resultant public participation, 2016 campaign websites lacked comment sections altogether. In addition, the campaigns clearly used social media platforms as channels to promote candidates and mobilise voters, not to engage with the public (Pew Research, 2016).

Retweeting or directly reposting content already posted by another user is a more passive and less demanding form of engaging with users on social media. Comparing the two main candidates in the 2016 US campaigns, the 2016 Trump campaign retweeted more frequently (about a quarter of his tweets were retweets) and engaged most extensively with the general public (78% of the retweets were written by ordinary users). In comparison, the Clinton campaign retweeted considerably less frequently (only 15% of her tweets were retweets), and the messages Clinton retweeted were not posted by the general public but by her team's related campaign accounts (Pew Research 2016). Consequently, the Twitter strategies of the two presidential campaigns diverged – the 2016 Trump campaign was more willing to engage with the general public and thus also to take the risk of retweeting content it did not control, whereas the 2016 Clinton campaign was more guarded and geared towards total control over the message.

Professionalisation meets amateurism

The divergent Twitter strategies around user engagement of the two campaigns in the 2016 US election point to a fundamental difference between professionalisation and amateurism in the social media strategies of the two campaigns. The 2016 Clinton campaign's social media activity confirms theories regarding the professionalisation of election campaigns in Western liberal democracies, while the 2016 Trump campaign has a more amateurish yet authentic style in social media.

Following the 2008 Obama presidential run, social media campaigns were no longer an amateur activity – technical expertise, focus group research and specialisation of staffing all contributed to what was an international trend. European political parties were eager to study the strategies used in Obama effort, and social media expertise was exported from the United States to European countries such as Norway and the United Kingdom to help political campaigns there to exploit the marketing potential of social media. The largest political party in Norway, the Labour Party, visited Obama 2008 campaign staffers for training and skill development regarding social media (Karlsen, 2013). Likewise, the UK Conservative Party hired the 2012 Obama campaign manager Jim Messina before the 2015 British election to ‘bring to their operation the same binding marriage of social media and political organization that many in the US credit with securing Mr. Obama a second term’ (Stratton, 2013).⁵ The export of expertise contributed to a higher emphasis on the candidate rather than the party, also in party-centred political systems like in the United Kingdom and Norway (Enli and Skogerboe, 2013). As with the arrival of earlier technologies to the realm of political marketing, such as radio or TV, the United States represented the international spearhead regarding the accompanying tendency towards professionalisation of campaigning (Maarek, 2011). Professionalisation of social media in election campaign is mainly found in the form of increasing standardisation of messages for the purpose of efficiently promoting the candidate, and research-based and advanced methods for mobilising voters (Kreiss, 2014; Stromer-Galley, 2014). As such, the new opportunities offered by digital technology results in an increasing professionalisation of election campaigns.

However, there is also a counter-trend to professionalisation: de-professionalisation and even amateurism. This trend was for example seen in the 2016 Trump campaign, where the focus group tested tweeting seems to be replaced by a more gut-feeling tweeting. The appeal of the de-professionalised campaign was to a degree also already acknowledged by the 2012 Obama campaign, which explicitly sought alternatives to the professional staffer and consulting model and worked to *de-professionalise* its own staff (Kreiss and Jasinski, 2016: 15). It would appear, then, that there are benefits to both approaches to social media, depending on the context, targeted audience and goal.

The 2016 Clinton campaign represented a continuation of the professionalised social media campaigns established in previous presidential campaigns by the Democratic Party – technological expertise and digital communication structure, after all, tend to transfer from one cycle to the next (Kreiss and Jasinski, 2016). In contrast, the 2016 Trump campaign started from scratch in the realm of political communication; while Donald Trump was already a savvy exploiter of the media as both a celebrity and a business owner, he had never been involved in a political election campaign. In light of the theory of an increasing professionalisation of American election campaigns, then, the 2016 Trump campaign represented a counter-trend.

Rather than copying the social media strategies of the professionalised campaigns run by the Democratic party, Donald Trump chose a strategy better described as amateurism. Its amateurism did not derive from any lack of strategy or competence about basic media logics, however, because Trump knew how to get media coverage, validating those studies that have demonstrated that celebrity politicians are several times more likely than unknown politicians to be quoted in the mainstream news on the basis of their social

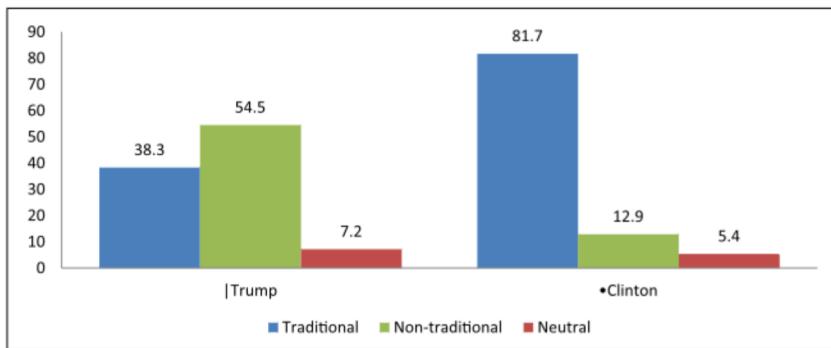


Figure 1. Tweeting style of candidates, coded as traditional, non-traditional or neutral ($n = 898$).

media posts (Chadwick, 2014; Wallsten, 2013). His celebrity status therefore fuelled the Trump campaign and enabled a strategy based on a controversial and unexpected use of social media, and in particular, Twitter. His image as a candidate was largely formed by his widely circulated tweets, which were often quoted and debated in the mainstream media.

The controlled politician versus the authentic outsider

In order to analyse these two divergent strategies more closely, I compared the tweeting styles of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in terms of professionalism versus amateurism. Figure 1 presents the results of a quantitative comparison based on the coding of tweets as either *traditional*, meaning professionalised and in line with the established standards for tweets posted by a presidential candidate, or *non-traditional*, meaning amateurish, in the sense that they do not follow the standards.

The comparison clearly demonstrates the contrast between the 2016 Trump campaign and the 2016 Clinton campaign in terms of standardisation and professionalisation. While 82% of Clinton's tweets are categorised as traditional, only 38% of Trump's tweets are in line with established stylistic standards. Likewise, almost 55% of Trump's tweets were unconventional, as opposed to only 13% of Clinton's tweets.

Again, this is not to say that this kind of amateurishness is ineffective or inferior as strategic communication. There is a rhetorical strength in this voice that responds to the ideal of authenticity of the speaker (Enli, 2015). By not even attempting the guise of professionalism using digital media staffers or communication experts, that is, Donald Trump made a statement regarding his positioning as a genuine outsider.

Probably motivated by the Trump campaign's unconventional style, the Clinton campaign also posted some tweets with unexpected and informal content. A key example of this was the tweet 'Delete your account' (tweet, 09 June 2016), sent as a reply to Trump's tweet: 'Obama just endorsed Crooked Hillary. He wants four more years of Obama but nobody else does!' (tweet, 09 June 2016). This response was surprising, given the more formal and polite messages that were regularly posted to her account, and the tweet

gained enormous attention and was retweeted more than 500,000 times. The expression ‘delete your account’ is a standard ironic tweet used as a response to tweets, usually by politicians, which are inappropriate or out of touch with the Twitter community.

Moreover, the Clinton campaign quickly picked up on new trends such as *gamification*, meaning the use of gaming elements and game structures in new contexts. To encourage voter registration, for example, the Clinton campaign associated it with the location-based augmented reality game Pokemon Go only a week after the game’s launch.⁶ In a context of professionalisation, the Clinton campaign used social media to re-brand the candidate as trendier than she typically appears in mass media coverage (see Parry-Giles, 2014).

One communicative challenge for US presidential candidates is that their social media accounts appear personal but are usually overseen by campaign staffers. In the case of Clinton’s campaign, then, it might have been confusing for voters to meet such a digitally savvy and tech-trendy candidate who was inviting users to play online games or respond with emojis. Even when users are well aware of the fact that political advisers and media staffers are administering the candidates’ Twitter accounts, the image presented on social media might be simply too distant from the candidate’s general image to be compelling or believable. Accordingly, a key dilemma for the campaigns is to identify the right balance between the general image of the candidate and the candidate’s social media persona.

This dilemma was much less relevant to the Trump campaign than to the Clinton campaign. First of all, Trump simply stayed more involved in his staff’s tweeting and even wrote many of his own tweets. According to news interviews, Trump generally wrote the tweets himself after 7:00 p.m. at night, and during the day he dictated them by shouting words and even punctuation marks at his staffers.⁷ The candidate’s personal involvement was also underlined by the account name @real DonaldTrump, as though to underline that the tweets came directly from Trump himself and were not managed and crafted solely by his campaign.

In comparison, Barack Obama did not write any of his social media messages during the 2008 election campaign, and only 1% of the Tweets posted during the 2012 cycle were signed ‘b.o.’, the clue that they were in fact authored by the president (Enli and Naper, 2016). A similar strategy was used by Hillary Clinton, who used the ‘– H’ signature to indicate that a tweet was written by her. This signature was typically used quite seldom and selectively; it for example appeared in the tweet announcing her candidacy, but not in tweets criticising Trump. Consequently, the tweets posted on Clinton’s account came across as less spontaneous and genuine compared to Trump’s tweets . . .

A comparative study of the 2012 Obama campaign and the 2012 Romney campaign demonstrates that the autonomy of digital media staffers was considerably higher in the former, and that they could post messages and updates without always consulting with the political side of the organisation (Kreiss, 2014). The fact that Trump delegated much less social media work to professionals than either of the Obama campaigns and the 2016 Clinton campaign meant that his candidate image on social media was much closer to his self-presentation. To a degree, Trump therefore came across as more consistent an authentic compared to Clinton, and image that was strengthened by his position as a newcomer in politics. This image of the outspoken outsider was constructed through a dynamic between the mass media and social media.

A closer examination of the tweets posted on @realDonaldTrump demonstrates that more than one-third of the tweets included ‘authenticity markers’, in the sense that they expressed impoliteness and political incorrectness, often using capital letters. The following tweet, for example, incorporates name-calling, insults and stylistic devices such as all-caps and exclamation marks:

Crooked Hillary has ZERO leadership ability. As Bernie Sanders says, she has bad judgment. Constantly playing the women’s card – it is sad! (Tweet, 06 May 2016)

Capital letters are often used to emphasise one’s sincerity, spontaneity and engagement, offering the speaker an air of authenticity. In these regards, then, Trump’s tweets were fairly predictable, and his voice was very recognisable to his followers. Even in tweets with a political message that reference specific numbers or make promises, the Trump campaign used capital letters and exclamation marks as markers of an ‘authentic outsider’:

North Carolina lost 300,000 manufacturing jobs and Ohio lost 400,000 since 2000. Going to Mexico etc. NO MORE IF I WIN, WE WILL BRING BACK! (Tweet, 15 March 2016)

In comparison, only 5% of the selected tweets posted on Hillary Clinton’s account included ‘authenticity markers’, meaning elements displaying a kind of backstage or a passionate side of the candidate. Confirming her candidate image established in televised debates and public rallies, a typical tweet posted by the campaign *Hillary for America* (HFA) was crafted and policy-oriented:

Our families and workplaces have changed in the 21st century. It’s time for our policies – from paid leave to equal pay – to be updated too. (Tweet, 05 July 2016)

In light of the development of social media campaigns from 2008 onwards, which by scholars and commentators has been described as a process of professionalisation, the 2016 Trump campaign represent a relatively unexpected turn away from the norm for political communication on social media. The Trump campaign was extraordinary in many ways, including the rhetoric, the rallies, the groundgame, the mainstream media, and, as we have seen in this article, the social media strategy. Compared to the Clinton campaign’s innovative use of digital media, extensive use of staffers, and the democratic party’s expertise, the Trump campaign seemed pretty amateurish. Yet, ‘amateur’ might strengthen the image of a candidate as authentic; the term ‘amateur’ refers to someone who engages in an activity for pleasure and not as a paid job. Politicians who come across as too professional might therefore seem calculated and cynical, while the amateur has the benefit of perhaps seeming clumsy and imperfect, but yet authentic.

Conclusion

Since the mid-1970s, a growing strand of research has argued that a candidate’s image is an important factor in predicting voter behaviour and election outcomes. The voters are

interested in knowing more about the candidates' character and personality, in order to evaluate their trustworthiness as political leaders. These evaluations are largely based on the mediated image of the candidate and to what degree the candidate comes across as authentic and likeable (Kendall and Paine, 1995; Nimmo and Savage, 1976; Vavreck, 2009; Westen, 2008). Social media represents a new means of constructing and negotiating a candidate's image, and campaigns' social media strategies are important sources of information and perspective on a given year's election.

This article discussed social media use in the 2016 election campaigns of US presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, in order to explore recent developments in relation to the candidates' degree of interaction with voters and tendencies towards professionalisation. Three main findings stood out.

First, the election campaigns used social media *primarily as a marketing tool*, and the reluctance concerning online exchanges with voters that characterised previous US presidential election campaigns was very present in the 2016 election cycle. Even the candidate who broke all the rules, Donald Trump, kept his social media followers at arm's length and limited his engagement to retweeting selected tweets. The need to control the message and promote the candidate overwhelmed any campaign interest in initiating an open and enlightened public debate.

Second, social media election campaigns are constantly developing, and in the current phase of political communication *professionalisation is challenged by amateurism*. The technological infrastructure for networked communication is exploited differently by various campaigns in various political cultures. There are clear signs of professionalisation in social media campaigns, and in particular, the 2016 Clinton campaign clearly inherits the tendency in this regard of previous Democratic campaigns. However, the 2016 social media election cycle was also marked by amateurism, either as a calculated strategy or the result of a spontaneous candidate (or both). In any case, it has become clear that the amateur has a rhetorical claim to authenticity that manages to compete with the professionalism of a more polished or controlled campaign. From a political culture that is very different from the US presidential elections, Norwegian Prime Minister Solberg combines professionalism and amateurism on her social media sites and thus comes across as more accessible than Clinton but more composed than Trump.

Third, social media platforms might have *an agenda-setting impact* and constitute a powerful arena for constructing and maintaining a candidate's image. This effect is dependent on the candidate's capital, in the form of either celebrity status or economic resources, because these advantages will in turn attract coverage in the mainstream media. Yet it must be said that without Twitter or an equivalent social media platform, it would have been difficult for a candidate like Trump, who lacked political experience and a support structure within the Republican Party, to come across as viable. Social media represents an opportunity for both political outsiders and media campaign amateurs to succeed even as it disrupts the comfort zones of established politicians and their professionalised campaigns.

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Notes

1. The analysis is based on Twitter data collected via the Twitter capture and analysis tool-set dmi-tcat. Tweets posted on the official accounts of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump were collected in the period March-July 2016. The coding was conducted by two researchers, with high inter-coder reliability. Thanks to research assistants Linda Rosenberg and Chris Simonsen for data collection and coding.
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3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0uY7gLZDmn4>.
4. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/04/business/media/new-york-times-co-q1-earnings.html>.
5. <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-23551323>.
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7. <http://heavy.com/news/2016/06/does-donald-trump-run-his-twitter-account-page-operate-use-post-write-update-campaign-controversy-retweet-tweet-white-supremacist-bots-followers-first/>.

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