

POLITICAL PRIMING AND AGENDA SETTING IN TWITTER FOR THE 2016
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my family, and their continuous and infinite support throughout everything I ever do.

ABSTRACT

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This study provides evidence and groundwork for testing the existence of priming and agenda setting effects in news coverage through social media by comparing national polling of issue importance and Twitter data. Content analysis of presidential candidates' tweets with Twitter coverage of news stories of the 2016 presidential cycle were conducted. Also, positive and negative news stories about each front-running candidate, a comparison to national polling of the most important issues to voters and favorability ratings of the candidates were analyzed. This study found that in the issues covered, there are statistically significant correlations between news on Twitter and what polling revealed to be the most important issues on the public agenda. I found that in all issues: economics, foreign affairs, immigration, social issues, and guns, there is evidence to suggest that media priming can exist within social media, and not just newspapers and television as previous studies have concluded. These findings support that if a social media user engages in causal political news consumption via Twitter, there is a possibility that Twitter news coverage can prime the consumer to change the prominence of certain political issues.

KEY WORDS: Priming, Agenda setting, Twitter, Social media, Political communication, Presidential election

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Politics and mass media have always had a symbiotic relationship, as they survive and thrive on each other's existence. It has been crucial for politicians, and all involved in the process of American democracy (voters and voted alike), to analyze media and how they affect politics. Arguably, the core of the United States democratic system is the presidential election. The election is a chance for every eligible citizen to voluntarily choose a new leader for their country.

Media in the United States have always been the catalyst of public thought and policy, through which collective conversation and political ideologies are supported and born. It is important to note that the reason the U.S. media institution, in regards to politics, has survived as long as it has is because it adapts to the political sphere that serves contemporary America. "Media institutions evolve over time; at each step of their evolution past events and institution patterns inherited from earlier periods influence the direction they take." (Hallin and Mancini, 2004, p. 12) Of course, this description could be posited as a general description of the role of media, but nonetheless presents the key point of media and its future. To further describe the unique relationship between media and the president, Gans (1979, p.116) states "[t]he relationship between sources and journalists resembles a dance, for sources seek access to journalists, and journalists seek access to sources. Although it takes two to tango, either sources or journalists can lead..." There is no defined superiority or hierarchy within the relationship itself, only understood provisions of one side needing each other at any given point.

Priming and agenda setting are key theories of mass communication worth revisiting in regards to contemporary United States politics and mass media. Social media are the new wave of information age media, and it's apt to include them in an analysis for presidential elections, specifically, the upcoming 2016 presidential election. According to Caumont (2013), the internet has outpaced radio and newspapers as an individual's main source for national and international news. Television still leads, but is not far from being outpaced as well. Television is at 69 percent of an individual's primary source for news, while the internet is at 50 percent, however, the internet has the largest positive trend out of all media.

There is a dynamic worth exploring between priming and the social media platform. Social media is a dominating factor in contemporary politics and as Cook (2013) states, "...Social media has redefined communication, leaped across borders and is now influencing the world of politics. The recent U.S. presidential election has shown that platforms like Facebook and Twitter reach voters in ways that traditional media circa 20th century could only dream about. The key is in targeting the right demographic, refining a message and sending it to voters through friends who are already supporters of candidates." (Cook, 2013 p. 4) And the concept of priming has never been explored in this regard before. It becomes even more important when a presidential election is added, an event that's been historically analyzed with priming, but with media such as newspapers and television. In this study, I focus on the effects of political priming through social media, and the effects they have with the presidential candidates and the social media audience. The candidates themselves, or the engagement by the public,

whichever it may be or a combination of the two, have yielded record turnout in both opening state primaries (Iowa, New Hampshire) record numbers (Schultz, 2016).

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Priming Effects

According to Severin and Tankard (1997), political priming is “the process in which the media attend to some issues and not others and thereby alter the standards by which people evaluate election candidates.” In 1997, according to IDC (International Data Corporation), Internet users were hovering around 70 million, which was almost double the amount 1996 posed. What that means is that there is a possibility that Severin and Tankard proposed the term ‘media’ to be not only all encompassing, but to include internet medium as well due to the sheer amount of users.

There lies an inherent issue with 20th century “social media,” in that the social media know today was not prevalent enough to warrant any criticism and analysis in regards to the priming definition proposed. Hendricks (2013) touches on the inception of the social media we understand it to be today, “Sites like MySpace and LinkedIn gained prominence in the early 2000s, and sites like Photobucket and Flickr facilitated online photo sharing. YouTube came out in 2005, creating an entirely new way for people to communicate and share with each other across great distances.” Severin and Tankard’s definition still serves as a ‘generic’ conceptualization of priming, and allows us to explore other avenues of priming that will better serve our study.

Priming History

The development of priming could attach itself to another term, agenda-setting, which was first discussed in 1972 by McCombs and Shaw. Priming is almost an

extension of agenda-setting, so it's important to explore beyond the history of priming.

McCombs and Shaw's 1972 study stated:

In our day, more than ever before, candidates go before the people through the mass media rather than in person. The information in the mass media becomes the only contact many have with politics. The pledges, promises, and rhetoric encapsulated in news stories, columns, and editorials constitute much of the information upon which voting decision has to be made. Most of what people know comes to them "second" or "third" hand from the mass media or from other people. (p. 1)

This assessment is ideologically aligned with political communications, and how media and politics are inherently symbiotic, due to the mass consumption of media during a political cycle. The implications of the study, and of agenda setting (and later priming), is that media have a more than coincidental effect on a viewer, in relation to his or her voting habits, or politics in general.

Fifteen years after the theory of agenda-setting, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) proposed a basic assessment for priming, in which they state, "[priming] refers to the changes in the standards that people use to make political evaluations" (p. 63),

The concepts are staying within the discipline of political communications, as well as important integration of media effects. A study conducted by Allen et al (1994) analyzed the public's understanding and opinions on the 1991 Gulf War, mainly with the use of the theoretical concepts of priming, agenda setting and framing. "Taken together, framing, priming, and the spiral of silence offer an explanation for the second increase in public support for Operation Desert Storm and for the endurance of overall support, long

after most rally effects would have dissipated. Regardless of the message, the authors attribute the pro-war agenda to the media and its utilization of the three concepts named (framing, priming, and the spiral of silence). It seems that the combination of framing, priming, and the spiral of silence, which posits that individuals have a fear of isolation, and will not voice unpopular dissenting opinion due to dominant ideas and opinions (Scheufele 2007), provided a newly found sense of patriotism among the American public, mainly priming in how it “limited the understanding of patriotic values.”

Priming Effects in News

News serves as one of the popular outlets of political coverage, not only because of the journalistic necessity to cover politics, but because there is evidence that priming can be effective through news. As Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) posit, “...Priming occurs when news content suggests to news audiences that they ought to use specific issues as benchmarks for evaluating the performance of leaders and governments.” (p. 11) This definition, which was an extension of the study proposed by Price and Tewksbury (1997), was tested within the same year by Malhotra and Krosnick (2007), and suggested “there are some indications that news media priming may have occurred with regard to Iraq, the economy, and terrorism during the 2004 campaign in response to the shifts in media coverage volume that we documented.” From Iyengar & Kinder’s 1987 study, there are themes to priming, namely ‘competence’ and ‘integrity’:

This particular effect becomes relevant during election campaigns, especially in presidential ones, when attention is highly selective.

Therefore, the impressions people form of candidates are built on a few central themes, such as the political affiliation, their opinions on different

policies, their achievements or failures, or their character, specifically their apparent competence and integrity (p. 64).

As defined above, and revisited by Malhotra and Krosnick (2007), the news serves as a medium for priming to ultimately shift political thought and discourse amongst the American audience. Of course, both of these studies align their findings exclusively to newspaper and/or television, which has been the running commonality of priming research for the better part of the past two decades. But, nonetheless, the latter study proposes great foundation in a campaign and election context, which will supplement my study. Before social media, presidential candidates had to use the news media as part of their campaigns and thus might not have been able to directly prime viewers to the issues that were important to their political platforms. Along with news media, presidential candidates now use social media to directly communication with potential voters. This study will focus mainly on ‘competence’ and ‘integrity’ and how they manifest within the data provided by Twitter and national polling.

Some limitations arise for the importance of priming, though. According to the study done by Valenzuela (2009), one limitation aligned with priming is that if a media consumer (a viewer) is highly informed in politics, policies, or candidates in general, he or she is less susceptible to priming.

Another limitation that must be explored is the state of new media. All priming effects studies have been conducted through the platform of television and newspapers, which have been the dominant media in political communications. However, in present day on, the internet and specifically social media have become the staple in contemporary

American politics. The limitation currently is if priming still applies to these forms of media.

Agenda Setting and Social Media

This study is valuable not only to understand the dynamic between voters and social media, but to also further understand existing studies that explore agenda setting and its presence in Twitter, especially during a presidential election. Conway et al (2015) examines the intermedia relationship between newspaper publications, the 2012 presidential candidates' Twitter accounts, and their symbiotic relationship. Much like this study, Conway et al (2015) focused on specific issues dominating the political news cycle at the time, and tried to extrapolate data that would give bearing on the relationship between newspaper coverage and presidential candidate tweets. "Positive correlations between issue ranks in news coverage and Twitter feeds suggest newspapers, candidates, and parties placed similar emphasis on issues. Newspapers lead on the budget when it came to all tweet sources, but influenced and were influenced by posts from candidates and parties on both sides of the aisle on most issues." Candidates and their campaigns focus on the prominent issues that the media legitimizes, which, according to Conway et al, posits that traditional media still has the power of agenda setting at hand. "Have traditional media completely lost their agenda-setting power? Our study suggests that the answer is no. Candidates are still going to look to the media for legitimacy, just as social media users are going to look to the media for information on unobtrusive issues." The main difference between Conway et al (2015) and this study is traditional newspaper is not integrated into the methodology, rather, it is news media via their Twitter account. Another distinction is the time frame of different data gathering. Conway et al (2015)

gathered data between a broad range of months, this study collects data specifically on the dates that proceed certain release of public opinion polls. Despite the distinctions, Conway et al (2015) indicates that there can be agenda setting in the realm of social media and politics, specifically Twitter and presidential campaigns.

Defining Agenda Setting for This Study

Though similar to priming, agenda setting differentiates enough from priming to be studied in separate conditions in this study. Agenda setting was first theorized in 1968 during the presidential election. The researchers found statistically significant data to support the new theory. In this study, McCombs and Shaw (1972) posited that agenda setting is "ability [of the news media] to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_Agenda." Salience of topics is important to note, as this study will analyze data that suggests importance of issues (salience) over others as time progresses and media is consumed.

Issues are important, especially since prominent figures claim to be ‘single-issue’ voters, which would suggest that a person votes for a presidential candidate based off his or her stance on one single issue. For example, back in January of 2016, President Barack Obama declared that he is now a single-issue voter on the topic of guns. “I will not campaign for, vote for or support any candidate, even in my own party, who does not support common-sense gun reform.” More than anything, these types of statements and media coverage of them provide topic awareness, importance, and potentially the full encapsulation of ‘agenda setting.’

Using the original definition of agenda setting will be ideal, as the original study was used in a presidential election, and now in the 2016 presidential election, agenda

setting can be possibly observed through Twitter. In the original definition, news media is the subject of testing, as it is in this study, but in different platforms.

Two Types of Agenda Setting

Agenda setting is a vital theory in political communications, but like most theories, as time as progressed, studies have found agenda setting to be more complex than initially proposed by in the early 1970's. This evolution of sorts creates different aspects of the theory as well as derivatives that branch off as a sub-theory. There is a 'level' out of many of agenda setting that is integral to this study. Weaver, McCombs, & Shaw's 2004 study stated that:

At the first level, agenda-setting theory explains how people's perception about the most important issues in their country is affected by the salience of those issues in media news reports. At the second level, attribute agenda setting theory stipulates that by emphasizing certain attributes or characteristics while describing issues or objects, mass media draw their audiences' attention to those properties (p. 259).

For the purposes of this study, the first level of agenda setting is prevalent, as I will be focusing on media news coverage and how salient those issues are in social media news coverage.

Digital Media and Agenda Setting

There is the same issue with agenda setting as there is with media priming, and that is addressing the transition from traditional media (newspapers and television) to digital media. McCombs (2005) noted that, "whether the basic agenda setting effects of news media continue in much the same fashion as the previous decades or eventually

disappear because of the changing media landscape, measuring these effects will remain high on the research agenda for at least the near term” (p. 546).

The internet has been a driving force in providing basis for digital media, and consequently has provided the agenda setting theory more opportunity to manifest. Blogs predated Twitter in the digital age, and were subject to researching as media researchers delved into another avenue of potential agenda setting. Some researchers found that blogs (representative of digital media) did have an impact on the agenda setting theory, albeit miniscule compared to traditional media. According to Meraz (2009) “though traditional media’s agenda setting power is no longer the sole influence, its influence still remains a driving, “A-list” force in the creation of blog agendas” (p. 701).

Even with studies conducted in the realm of digital media, there is research with agenda setting and social media, but it is important to build upon current studies, specifically regarding Twitter.

Defining Social Media

Social media, according to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), are "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content," (p. 61).

According to Strickland (2007), Web 2.0 was coined in 2004, but in 2005, the creator of the term, Tim O’Reilly, expanded on his new terms and its ‘philosophies’. According to O’Reilly, Web 2.0 included: using the web as an applications platform, democratizing the web, and employing new methods to distribute information. When looking at any form of social media in contemporary internet society, I submit that it’s more than possible to provide evidence that social media is using the web as an applications platform – as

Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, among others, provide services and computational data (i.e. applications) – and that social media provide new methods of distributing information. Before Web 2.0, or more accurately, contemporary social media, information distribution via internet was very linear and based on previous forms of mass communications. Information was exchanged, normally, between two parties in a linear fashion, as opposed to contemporary social media (Web 2.0) which offers lateral movements through the power of being viral, an attached hashtag, and so on down the information sharing line. There isn't sufficient evidence to satisfy the third standard in which I hold the definition accountable by its Web 2.0 assertion, and that is the democratization standard. Though there is a higher volume of content that can be published on Web 2.0, there is not a fundamental difference between Web 2.0 and Web 1.0, in terms of setting a foundation for internet browsing. We can confirm this assertion with Cormode and Krishnamurthy (2008), "Web 1.0 metrics of similar relevance in Web2 include the overall share of Internet traffic, number of users and servers, and share of various protocols" (p. 26).

There are still limitations and censorship that challenge the idea that social media has democratized the internet, as we see in the case of *Elonis v United States* (2014), the case in which an individual used social media to post lyrics to a comedy sketch that referenced killing the President of the United States, but replaced the president with the individual's wife. The Supreme Court ruled in favor (8-1) of the defendant, so free speech 'won' in this case, but still face legal and societal ramifications. To add on, as the Associated Press (2014) reported, "The case has drawn widespread attention from free-speech advocates who say comments on Facebook, Twitter and other social media can be

hasty, impulsive and easily misinterpreted. They point out that a message on Facebook intended for a small group could be taken out of context when viewed by a wider audience.”

Another definition of social media that should be considered is one proposed by Wyrwoll (2014), which states “social media comprises platforms that contain user-generated content.” A lot more succinct than the original definition from O’Reilly, but it still shares the one basic principle, which is that social media is driven by user-generated content.

Some benefits that can be utilized through social media are sharing and being ‘viral’. Of course those tools are the catalyst of user generated content, but after said content is shared throughout social media, the content loses its authenticity, and becomes more of viral content, rather than “user-generated”. For example, let’s say a major national newspaper decides to break a story with its Twitter account, by any author of its choosing. The author writes the news piece, and then publishes a TinyURL to link to his or her story. This story is undoubtedly user-generated content, but the overall objective is to get the content shared as much as possible to display on as many screens as possible. So, I submit that even more than user generated content, social media is more reliant on viral and shared content.

For my research purposes, my definition of social media will be appropriately utilized, and will include various elements of the myriad of social media definition occupying the internet, (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Agichtein et al, 2008; Pavlik and MacIntoch, 2015). Social media is an evolved form of the internet, which a platform to

publish viral content that serves a new medium to distribute information. To specify, I will be researching Twitter and the data it provides.

The following research questions will guide the methods used and analysis of the importance of priming through news and presidential candidates on social media:

RQ1: What is the correlation between issues covered by news stories on social media and public opinion on what are the most important issues during the 2016 election cycle?

RQ2: Does the correlation from RQ1 provide any evidence of agenda setting via Twitter?

RQ3: Do presidential candidates have any influence on agenda setting using their own social media on the general population?

RQ4: What is the correlation between positive/negative news coverage on social media and presidential favorability ratings?

RQ5: Does the correlation from RQ4 provide any evidence of priming effects?

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Content analysis was conducted on five different news outlets' social media, specifically Twitter. The three news outlets under examination were CNN (@CNNPolitics), NPR Politics (@nprpolitics), Real Clear Politics (@RealClearNews). Their social media platforms will be the main subject of content analysis, as well as the content produced by the front-running candidates (Hillary Clinton @HillaryClinton, Donald Trump @realDonaldTrump). Table 1 shows the amount of viewers or followers for each media outlet.

Table 1

Amount of Followers or Viewers for Media Outlets and Political Candidates.

Media Outlet	Consumption
@CNNPolitics	427K followers
@nprpolitics	1.96M followers
@realclearnews	63.8K followers
@HillaryClinton	5.41M followers
@realDonaldTrump	6.2M followers
MSNBC – Primetime television (Gold 2015)	525K viewers
Fox News – Primetime television (Gold 2015)	1.65M viewers
CNN – Primetime television (Gold 2015)	576K viewers

Between the dates of November 1, 2015, and January 1, 2016, all tweets between these dates were pulled from the news agencies' accounts as well as the presidential candidates'. Five different issues emerged from each account (economy, foreign affairs, immigration, social issues, and guns). In regard to Iyengar & Kinder (1987), stories reflecting upon the candidate's competence or integrity were also pulled and analyzed. In Table 2, the operational definitions and keywords that are attributed to each category of topics are provided.

Table 2

Issues and Keywords of Operational Definitions

Issues/Attributes	Operational/Keywords
Economy	Economy, jobs, wages, government spending, Wall Street
Foreign Affairs	Iran, ISIS, San Bernardino, Paris, Terrorism, National Security
Immigration	Amnesty, wall, illegal immigration, border security, refugees
Social Issues	Minority issues, women's rights, Planned Parenthood, Civil Rights
Guns	Gun violence, second amendment, gun control, background checks, automatic assault weapons

The two front-running candidates tweeted in relation to the categories of economy, foreign affairs, immigration, social issues, and guns. This would allow the agenda setting theory to be tested, as issue salience was tracked via national polling and Twitter news coverage.

All tweets were gathered 10 days prior to the set polling Gallup data, for example, the first set of data from the Gallup poll is October 7th – 11th, therefore all stories analyzed were from Twitter timelines spanning from September 27th through October 6th. The Gallup poll provides the necessary data that presents public opinion a month prior to the collection period and a couple weeks after. According to the Gallup (2016), October 7th – 11th showed that economy was at 33% for the most important issue, while foreign affairs was at 14%, immigration at 8%, social issues at 12%, and guns at 7%. November 4th – 8th showed 39% for the economy, 15% for foreign affairs, 9% for immigration, 10% for social issues, and 3% for guns. December 2nd – 6th showed 21% for the economy, 33% for foreign affairs, 5% for immigration, 11% for social issues, and 7% for guns. Lastly, January 6th – 10th showed 27% for the economy, 20% for foreign affairs, 8% for immigration, 11% for social issues, and 7% for guns.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

In Table 3 and Figure 1, the data is presented to compare the findings in national polling (the Gallup poll), and lay it over the social media news coverage of the days prior to Gallup's data collection.

Table 3

Number of Stories and Their Specific Issue Addressed.

Dates	Economic Story percent	Foreign Affairs Story percent	Immigration Story percent	Social Issues Story percent	Guns Story percent
October	15.5	37.9	2.6	8.6	35.3
November	34.2	39.5	0	25	1.3
December	4.3	47	22.2	15.4	11.1
January	8.8	38.6	7	19.3	26.3

Note. 116 stories were analyzed in October, 76 in November, 117 in December and 57 in January.

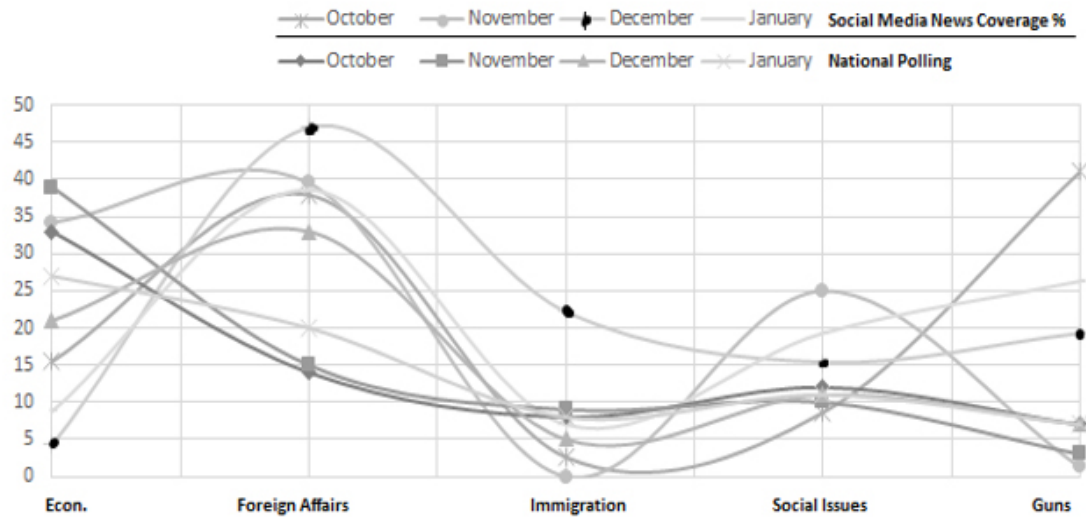


Figure 1. National polling vs. Social media news coverage.

Using Pearson's r , I calculated the correlation presented between the two sets of data for all of the respective 'issues', as they progressed over the time that data was collected. Pearson's r shows correlation between two data points and will give us an idea of a relationship between said two data points. For the economy, ($r = 0.945407046$), which would indicate a statistically significant and positive correlation between the fluctuation of the poll numbers and the social media news coverage. For foreign affairs, ($r = 0.946161652$), which would also indicate statistical significance, as well as positive correlation, akin to economics as an issue. Out of the five issues, three of them had positive correlations, the aforementioned economics and foreign affairs, and guns. In analyzing guns as an issue, I found that ($r = 0.836112703$), which is a positive correlation, but a bit weaker in statistical significance. As for the other two issues, immigration and social issues, I found negative correlation. For immigration, ($r = -0.982641181$) and for social issues, ($r = -0.971835855$). Both are statistically significant, but do pose a negative correlation.

To answer ‘RQ3: Do presidential candidates have any influence on agenda setting using their own social media on the general population?’ The same test and data comparison is conducted between social media coverage and the most important issue polling. Instead of examining media outlets’ social media, I looked at the two front runners’ Tweets leading up to a most important issue poll. With the two tables (4 and 5, respectively) below, there are tweets analyzed from both candidates Trump and Clinton, and every tweet they made 3 weeks prior to national polling on important issues.

Table 4

Donald Trump’s Topic Coverage.

Issues	October	November	December	January
Economy (percent)	38.1	35.9	8.3	12.9
Foreign Affairs (percent)	14.3	33.3	41.7	67.7
Immigration (percent)	23.8	17.9	38.9	12.9
Social Issues (percent)	20	10.3	11.1	12.9
Guns (percent)	4.8	2.6	0	6.5

Table 5

Hillary Clinton's Topic Coverage.

Issues	October	November	December	January
Economy (percent)	8.5	16	31.4	13.3
Foreign Affairs (percent)	4.3	14	13.7	30
Immigration (percent)	2.1	4	11.8	3.3
Social Issues (percent)	76.6	50	31.4	36.7
Guns (percent)	23.4	16	11.8	16.7

There is limitation, again, with sample size of the amount of tweets that could be collected before a certain specified time of the national issue polls. The same analysis with Pearson's r is still optimal. The data shows that most correlations between a candidate's coverage of a certain issue and the national poll do not correlate, and most are statistically insignificant. The only r that was statistically significant was for Clinton's immigration tweeting and national polling ($r = -0.908981871$), and for Trump's economy ($r = 0.906341398$), immigration ($r = -0.888975347$) and social issues ($r = 0.896095411$) tweets and national polling. Though the data is not ideal due to the sample size, there is something to note, as both correlations between the candidates' tweets and national polling are negative when the issue is immigration. This is noteworthy considering that when doing the comparative data with the media outlets, the correlation with immigration was negative as well. This would imply that the more immigration is discussed, the less it becomes a primary issue with voters.

To further examine the potential presence of priming, I refer to the Iyengar & Kinder's 1987 study in which 'competence' and 'integrity' are noted as specific attributes that consumers gauge political candidates as they make decisions on who to vote for. If we refer to Iyengar and Kinder's study, it is necessary to note the 'positive' stories on each candidate (Clinton and Trump) versus the 'negative' stories on each of the candidates. Each social media news story posted will be determined as a positive story, which can be deciphered as a positive reflection of the candidate's integrity or his or her competence, or a negative story on a candidate's integrity or competence, which infers a negative reflection on his or her integrity or competence. In an operational sense, competence is a story about tasks accomplished, leading poll stories, campaign spending, endorsements, and the like. Integrity can be noted as stories of candidate honesty, and moral principles.

The data examined and presented in Figure 2 shows fluctuating data points for positive news coverage and negative news coverage for both candidates.

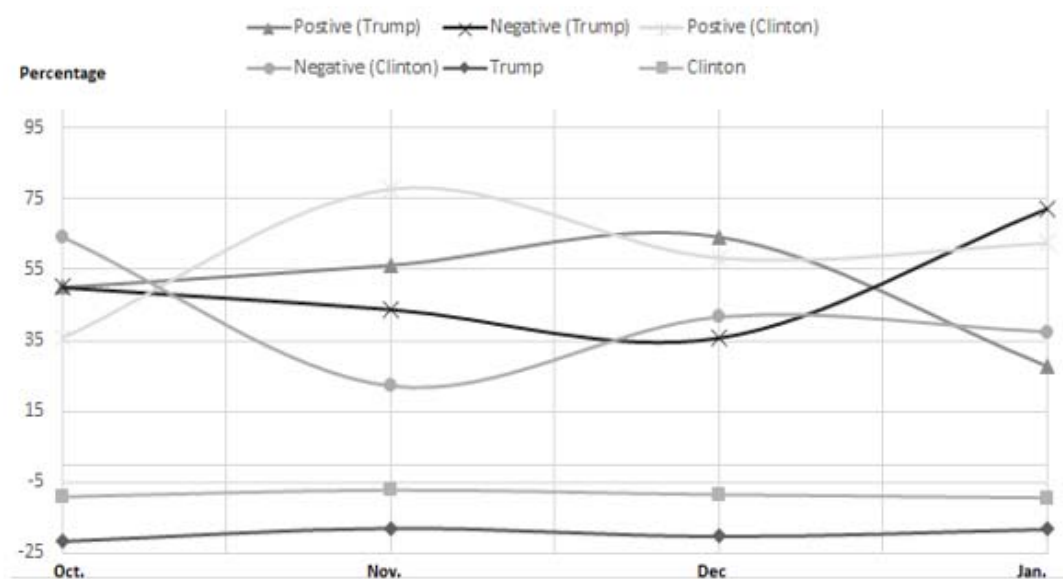


Figure 2. Positive and negative stories of the candidates.

There were too few stories about Sanders to include in this specific data analysis, thus only Trump and Clinton were examined. The horizontal axis includes the dates which the media outlets' (CNN, NPR Politics, RealClearPolitics) were extrapolated. Data was collected for the first week of each month, and then compared to a poll of favorability ratings provided by the Huffington Post, which the 8th of each respective month were examined. For example, tweets for @CNNPolitics, @NPRpolitics, and @RealClearNews were collected and examined between October 1 and October 7, then net favorability for a certain candidate was pulled from the Huffington Post favorability tracker on October 8th. An independent researcher examined the same stories regarding positive and negative article concerning Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, which gave an intercoder reliability of .8790322581. Similarly, with the data compared with national polls and issue coverage, both data sets were compared and Pearson's r was determined to examine correlation. Both candidates' monthly news coverage was set as a net percent,

for example, Trump's coverage in October was 50 percent positive, and 50 percent negative, thus his net percentage is 0. Each month's net was compared to the net favorability of each month to determine Pearson's r . For Trump, the correlation between his positive and negative news coverage and his net favorability was $r = -0.351499872$. For Clinton, the correlation between his positive and negative news coverage and his net favorability was $r = 0.691396265$.

Both calculated figures show us that there is no statistical significance for both Trump and Clinton's news coverage and their favorability net ratings. However, there is a limitation in this specific data collection, as the sample size is minimal, and could show more concrete significance if there was more comprehensive look at news coverage, or a focus group that gave direct answers on their consumption of media and how it affected their 'favorability' of a typical candidate.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

RQ1 asked: What is the correlation between issues covered by news stories on social media and public opinion on what are the most important issues during the 2016 election cycle? The correlations for all five issues were statistically significant, though guns in general had a weaker correlation than the other four. The keys to these findings are the issues and their corresponding positive and negative correlations. Guns, the economy, and foreign affairs all had positive correlations, which could be interpreted as the more social media news coverage there was for an issue, the more a social media news consumer was affected by the media's agenda setting function to prioritize his or her most important issue by that factor alone. If I use McCombs and Shaw (1972) "ability [of the news media] to influence the salience of topics on the public," the data suggests that there is issue salience that Twitter provides in at least for three out of the five issues, and that there is positive correlation, and that the fluctuation can be extrapolated as social media giving more attention to certain topics over other topics, and thus resulting in a change in public opinion in the standard in which they believe is the most important in an election cycle.

As for the two other issues, immigration and social issues, which both had negative correlation, there was no evidence of agenda setting. Further studies need to be done in these specific issues. It could be that in the public discussion of social issues and immigration, news coverage was not powerful enough in relation to the other issues that were found to have the agenda setting effect to sway voters at large to make these issues

their primary concern, making them impervious to the agenda-setting effect. The issues with positive agenda-setting effects were more important to voters.

RQ2 asked: Does the correlation from RQ1 provide any evidence of agenda setting via Twitter? Though all five issues presented statistically significant data, only three issues were positively correlated, which would suggest agenda setting in the context of Twitter. As the news outlets covered different specific issues, national public opinion swayed with the respective issues, according to the national polls. This would indicate ‘gatekeeping’ and how news media can engage in agenda setting.

RQ3 asked: Do presidential candidates have any influence on agenda setting using their own social media on the general population? Concerning presidential candidates and their effect on digital media agenda setting, there is not enough evidence to suggest that there is significant correlation between what the presidential candidates post on social media, and the prominence of issues in national polling of voters. There are still limitations in sample size that need to be addressed to further solidify any potential relationship between presidential candidates and their audience on social media. Social media such as Twitter allow candidates to directly engage with voters rather than have their comments and platforms expressed through news stories. Future studies should track the political candidates’ social media messages and provide surveys to the candidates’ own social media followers about what issues are the most salient to see if candidates demonstrate the agenda-setting function. As stated in the introduction, candidates and media have traditionally relied on each other for the creation of news and access to those in political power. Future studies may ask if social media may increasingly allow candidates to bypass the press to speak to their follower directly.

RQ4 asked: What is the correlation between positive/negative news coverage on social media and presidential favorability ratings? Lastly, there was no statistically significant correlation to suggest that there is a relationship in how news media on Twitter posts stories about positive and negative reflections upon a candidate's 'competence' and 'integrity', and their net favorability rating in national polls. Again, there are limitations here in sample size and how much news can be posted within different polls. With this in mind, RQ5 asked if there were priming effects, but the results found no evidence to support a positive answer to the research question.

Provided all the findings in this research, one can surmise that an individual consciously thinking about a general election, or at least caring about certain political issues, potentially could be primed through the agenda setting function of the news into giving prominence to certain issues over others, based on the news consumption via Twitter that the consumer uses. Agenda setting was found in the study, but evidence of priming was not, as the data suggests that issue saliency is observed, but 'competence' and 'integrity' for a candidate are not statistically significant in context of Twitter news media coverage. It can be concluded that social media coverage on certain issues have potential positive effects on a reader's mind, but there are negative correlations to suggest that the more an issue (immigration, social issues) is discussed, the more likely it is to become a prominent issue. The implication of this is that these issues are mentally exhaustive and only lose credibility and importance the more it is discussed. As for the other issues (economy, foreign affairs, and guns) are solidified in historic relevance. There is more work to be conducted with the findings provided. For example, other issues may be addressed to categorize them in positive or negative relationships between

national polling and social media coverage. A focus group may provide detailed and open ended comments on the relationship between individuals and their respective social media consumption habits. Direct surveys with political candidates' social media followers could also be conducted to determine if there is a possibility of agenda setting and priming through social media. All five research questions were answered, whether it be from sufficient evidence, or lack thereof, this study provide either necessary foundation for future studies, or at least raises limitations in terms of the research questions that were not answered sufficiently.

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