

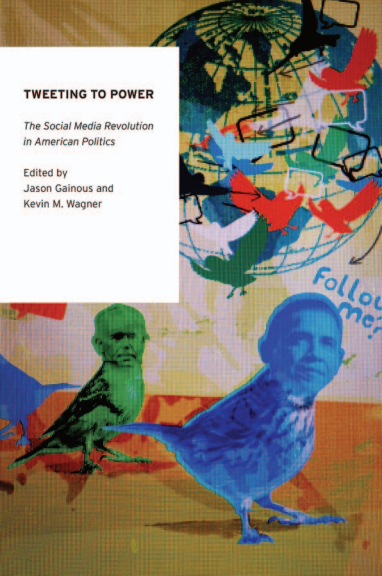
TWEETING TO POWER

*The Social Media Revolution
in American Politics*

Edited by

Jason Gainous and

Kevin M. Wagner



Tweeting to Power

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Tweeting to Power

THE SOCIAL MEDIA REVOLUTION
IN AMERICAN POLITICS

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KEVIN M. WAGNER

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I would like to dedicate this book to my loving parents: John and Kay Gainous, Pamela and Rick Steinberg, and Richard Carter. None of this is possible without their undying support throughout my life.—Jason Gainous

To my wife Jodie, the best writer I know. Your love and unwavering support make everything I do possible. To my children: Madeleine, Alexander, and Harrison. Nothing helps you consider the future and its endless possibilities like three imaginative and wonderful children. Never shy away from a challenge. Believe in yourselves, and know that I believe in you.—Kevin M. Wagner

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Jason Gainous and Kevin M. Wagner*

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Tweeting to Power

Social Media—The New Dinner Table?

Online social networking websites have exploded in popularity. The number of adult Internet users actively using online networking websites, such as the hugely popular social portal Facebook, more than quadrupled between 2005 and the end of 2009 (Lenhart 2009; Pew 2011a; Pew 2011b). Between December 2008 and December 2009, global consumers spent nearly six hours per month on social networking sites (SNSs), an 82% increase from the previous year and more than double the previous annual growth rate (Nielsen 2010). Twitter, which allows users to send out short messages to potentially large numbers of followers (sometimes called microblogging) has become one of the most popular sites on the Internet with an estimated 200 million users and growing (Alexa.com 2011; Quantcast 2010). An estimate of Twitter's growth was calculated at 1,300% in one year (Golbeck, Grimes, and Rogers 2010). The use of Twitter daily by users also quadrupled from late 2010 to 2012 (Pew 2012c). The growth in the use of SNSs generally, including Facebook and Twitter, is particularly significant among younger demographics. By 2012, around 92% of young adults (18–29) used SNSs (Pew 2012a). The frequency with which older generations used social media by 2012 is nothing to scoff at either. Nearly 73% of Internet users ranging from 30 through 49 years of age used social media, approximately 57% from the ages of 50 through 64 used social media, and even many of those Internet users over 65 used social media at 38%.

In the political sphere, the importance of this growth in the use of online social networking websites ("social media") is grounded in our understanding of American political thought. The foundational notion of American democracy is the idea that people exercise sovereignty through a republican form of governance, or as James Madison noted, a "scheme of representation" (Wagner 2010). Information communication systems are vital to that process, as they structure what people know and how they understand it (Bennett 2011). Social media alters the political calculus in the United States by shifting who controls information, who consumes information, and how that information is distributed. We posit that social media changes two vital elements of the political learning process. First, by enabling the consumer to pick his or her own network of communication, social media allows citizens to self-select their content in a way that avoids any disagreeable ideas or interpretations. Second, the networks themselves exist outside the traditional media machine, allowing political actors—including parties and candidates—to shape and dictate their content.

Understanding how these new networks affect political information and communication is increasingly relevant. The expansion and intensification of social media use for political gain is significant even by Internet growth standards (Pew 2012a). In just a

few short years, the American political system is awash in social media from candidates, interest groups, parties and even the voters themselves. Members of Congress are using Twitter to send short statements to their supporters and followers at almost all times, including while the President is speaking to Congress at the State of the Union address. By 2011, one measure had 387 members of Congress using Twitter (TweetCongress.com 2011), and virtually every member had some kind of Internet and social media presence (Gainous and Wagner 2011). As the use of social media becomes ubiquitous, measures of the impact of the new medium and testable theories of its importance are becoming vital to understanding this new political environment.

While the term “social media” is typically used in reference to the networking websites Facebook or Twitter, it is actually a more general term. Social media¹ includes a broad and growing portion of the Internet that is designed as a platform which allows users, and groups of users, to create and exchange content, often in an interactive or collaborative fashion (see Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). The Internet has been moving in the direction of more user-generated content for some time, with the first iteration of the idea referred to as Web 2.0 (see Stanyer 2008). Users of Web 2.0 were given the ability to personalize news or entertainment web pages by indicating what they want to see, hear, or read (Gainous and Wagner 2011). This approach, based on a user-defined experience, is what underlies social media, and its popularity is fairly easy to understand. Instead of drawing users by trying to anticipate what content they might prefer, this system permits the user to define an entire experience based on exactly what they favor. Giving the consumer what they desire is good business. However, as we will explore throughout this book, the implications of consuming only the information you prefer to see has some clear consequences in the political sphere.

There is no defining protocol for social media, and many different approaches to it exist on the Internet. Some of the leading social media include Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, and Google+, just to name a few. While social media is becoming almost ubiquitous and integrated into many different activities online, the protocol of choice does change. In truth, the rise, evolution, and sometimes fall of social networking websites and protocols is happening at such a rapid pace, we are reluctant to name leading protocols as their popularity may be eclipsed by the next appealing idea. Just as few saw the meteoric rise of the networking website MySpace, just as few saw its rapid decline and replacement by Facebook (Hoge 2009). Newer, and perhaps more intuitive social networking protocols, are introduced regularly with mixed and somewhat unpredictable success.

Even if a particular social media protocol wanes in popularity, we anticipate that this user-dominated system will continue to expand and more people will flock to it. As noted above, the growth and participation of Americans in social media continues to grow at a significant pace. This is particularly true for the political aspects of the social media. By 2010, 22% of Internet users used social media websites for political activity (Smith 2011). This is likely to continue as social media becomes easier to access through mobile devices, allowing people to carry their networks with them. Already more than half of mobile phone users access the Internet from their device (Pew 2012b). The names and systems may change, but the importance of online social networking is likely to be a fixture going forward. We are not certain which social media protocol will draw the most users in the next few years, but we expect at least some of

you are reading this book after being alerted to it by friends or acquaintances through a social media website.

In this research, we explore the implications of this new media and how it may alter the political landscape. Scholars have considered and measured how the Internet and technology are influencing political participation (Barber 2001; Bimber 1999; Bode 2012; Bonfadelli 2002; Boulianne 2009, 2011; Delli Carpini 2000; DiMaggio et al. 2004; Gainous and Wagner 2011, Gainous, Marlowe, and Wagner 2013; Gibson, Lusoli, and Ward 2005; Hendriks Vettehen, Hagemann, and Van Snippenburg 2004; Kittilson and Dalton 2011; Krueger 2002; Norris 2001; Polat 2005; Shah, Kwak, and Holbert 2001; Wagner and Gainous 2013; Ward, Gibson, and Lusoli 2003; Weber, Loumakis, and Bergman 2003; Xenos and Moy 2007). Some have also looked specifically at the relationship between social media use and political participation (Bode 2012; Conroy, Feezell, and Guerrero 2012; Gainous and Wagner 2011; Gainous, Marlowe, and Wagner 2013; Gil de Zúñiga, Jun, and Valenzuela 2012; Pasek, More, and Romer 2009; Valenzuela, Park, and Kee 2009) and at how politicians' use of social media influences the traditional media's news coverage (Wallsten 2011). We build on this impressive body of research to explore how and why social media may affect political discourse and participation and fill in the blanks with measures of the use and importance of social media in the political sphere. To do so, we rely on measures both of politicians' use of social media, Twitter in particular, and of public use of social media.

Beyond simple measures relating to the magnitude of usage, we use inferential statistics to examine the variables that are affecting, and are affected by, the use of social media. However, this is not simply a book of quantitative measures. Descriptions of social media are interesting, but alone are only fixed pictures of moments in time. Using the data, we develop our theoretic explanation to combine with our empirical examination of social media, in an attempt to create a larger comprehensive understanding of the implications for US politics. In this way, our research should have broader implications, as it is not tied to any social networking protocol but rather establishes a foundation for understanding how the very nature of digital communication through social networks will likely change the political processes in the United States.

While social media applications are the focus here, at its essence, this book is primarily concerned with measuring, understanding, and predicting a transformation in the political environment. It is about a fundamental shift in the way people interact with each other, obtain and process information, and ultimately use this information to choose who governs. Social media presents a foundational change in the preexisting media landscape and structures guiding political communication. It presents an alternative environment by which opinion leaders, politicians, and citizens can engage with each other that is multidimensional and largely unique in the history of our political system. Technology advances are not new, but we contend the character of the change here is. Rather than simply being just the latest progression in communication technology, social media presents an entirely new paradigm on how people engage with each other. Instead of waiting for traditional media to explain limited elements of the news, the networker is interacting with not just the news itself but with entire networks of friends and acquaintances without limits from borders or geography. It is a network that lacks an editor or gatekeeper, and one that is governed by a new set of rules and codes of behavior that are only now being developed.

In this chapter we lay the predicate for the measures and models in this book. We will offer a review of the literature and findings in the study of mass media, including the growing amount of research focused on the Internet and social media. This will be followed by a detailed explanation of our theory regarding how the nature and scope of political communication is changing and shifting the American political system. We will set forth our reasoning and supporting analysis for our theoretical assertion that social media allows consumers to create networks of preferred information which result in greater degrees of influence for political actors and interest groups. Finally, we will highlight upcoming chapters where we test our theories and model the effects of social media on the political landscape.

Rethinking Politics in the Age of Social Media

Social media has generated a broad set of implications, and we do not attempt to answer, let alone address, them all. In this book we examine, measure, and predict the likely changes in political communication and the implications for the greater political system. Our central questions are as follows: (1) How are political actors using social media to shape citizens' perceptions? (2) How does the new social media fit into traditional theories of citizen information processing? and (3) What are the implications of the answers to these questions for the relationship between those who govern and those being governed?

While there has been no moment when the media environment was static, the changes brought through the Internet, and the subsequent creation of social media, present a change of a different order than previous advancements. This is not to say that other advances were insignificant. Political scientists have long known that differences in the way information is propagated can generate changes in the political behavior of large populations (Converse 1962; Kernell 1994; Prior 2007). The most noticeable effect of this shift in information technology is in the amount and timeliness of the information available (Kinder 2003). There is a substantial difference between the media environment that existed in the 1930s, a time when newspaper circulation reached one out of three Americans, and the 1960s, when television became almost universal (Prior 2005). Television was particularly influential as it brought information directly into the home in a visual medium that was often easier to digest and more viscerally effective than previous channels, such as printed news (Graber 2010). Yet the improvements did not change who was speaking and who was listening.

The growth of social media is not simply an improvement in communication technology but rather a foundational change in how people communicate, not just between each other but with political actors and institutions. While all of the technological changes in how we communicate with each other are important milestones, social media is not only a huge leap in efficiency. It is also a substantively new way to interact. Each previous advance in communication technology influenced how we chose our leaders and even why we chose our leaders. It is no accident that the visual medium of television has led to an electoral advantage for taller candidates (Sommers 2002). Nonetheless, we suggest that social media, while a progression on this continuum, is not just another step but rather a leap into a fundamentally different environment because of the nature

of the communication. Online social networking is a change of a different order and will create a new paradigm by redefining to whom each citizen is talking and how, when, and why that communication occurs.

Our assertion is based on significant differences that online social networking present from previous advances. Most significantly, social media is a two-way form of mass communication. Each previous advance was a form of one-way mass communication. Campaigns have been a singular message from a candidate, distributed through mass media to constituents and voters. Politicians spoke through the media, and the people were a largely passive audience. Social media allows the user to not only choose what network to be part of but also to be an active participant in the network. The user is a news creator, not simply a receptacle. This ground-shifting advance creates an entirely new way to view politics and the values attributed to advertising and campaigning. Different political behaviors are incentivized, including short video messages and virtual town halls, while some traditional behaviors, such as printing and mailing physical brochures, are no longer as useful or productive. The direct interaction generated by retail politics is far more costly and reaches far fewer people than digital strategies (Gainous and Wagner 2011). Social media creates interaction without regard to geography, and substantial increases in the efficiency of political communication create a new calculus in the political arena.

The true story of social media is bigger than choosing more effective political campaigning strategies. A larger shift is occurring. Social media presents a substantial change to our media system in both how information is reported and distributed, with significant implications for the industries that make up modern media. While the business implications are both interesting and worthy of discussion and research, it is beyond our scope. The political implications alone are substantial.

Contrasting Old and New Media

Social media presents significant departures from the traditional political media model that has existed and dominated political communication in the United States (see Bennett 2011; Graber 2010; Prior 2005). Each previous advance from the penny press to the radio to television was an advance in efficiency and distribution. However, the paradigm of one-way communication controlled by a small and readily identifiable group or groups of people was unchanged. Social media has created a different news paradigm alongside, and in some ways replacing, the traditional model. It operates in both directions allowing the parties to communicate with each other, rather than one side speaking and the other listening. Further, the conversation works in a remarkably open environment that allows information that is perceived as the most interesting or appealing to be distributed to the widest audience. The user chooses not only what to access but also what content is worth redistributing across the network.

The traditional media, such as newspapers and broadcasts, were ways for those with means to transmit ideas and information to the mass public. The conversation largely had one party talking and another party listening. Corporations, governments or other groups of influence controlled the information conveyed with laws or sometimes simply by owning the means of distribution (Bennett 2011). The power of the content

provider has repeatedly been shown to be influential for both television (Prior 2007) and radio (Barker 2002). In the radio sphere, talk show hosts such as Rush Limbaugh have influence often by framing and priming issues for their audience in ways that lead to support for particular outcomes and conclusions (Barker 2002). In an environment where the information provider controls how and what is distributed, the framing, especially when articulated through preferred value positions, can be very persuasive. Talk radio in particular allows the show host great latitude to control his or her message and to use heuristics to frame it in a particular value structure (Barker 2002). As the owner of the means of communication has the ability to not only control what information is conveyed but also how that information is framed and contextualized, the traditional media concern has often been over the diversity, or the absence of diversity of media ownership. More directly, where there are only a few microphones, the owners of those microphones have an outsized role.

In contrast, the social media universe is user driven. This is not to say that the consumer of social media has replaced the owners of the media machines as the producer of content. But rather, the user has greater control of his or her content in an environment where the user has far more choices than exist for radio or television. Further, as an active participant in the news network, the user is more attentive and engaged because it is the user who chooses the content that is available to them to watch, read, and listen. This type of engagement increases the attention span of the user. People who choose their content, such as clicking on a link to a website in their social media stream, are going to spend more time reading and digesting the information (Klotz 2004). The end result is a new media that is more effective in conveying information and engaging its audience.

In addition, the information itself is not limited in time, scope, and content. A physical copy of a newspaper has a finite amount of space, and it cannot be updated after it is printed. The content is limited to what was known at the time of printing and the number of pages available. Even broadcasts, which are not frozen in time, are limited by the nature of the medium to address only one idea or event at a time. If the broadcast is not covering an issue important to the viewer, the viewer has no recourse and cannot alter the nature of the program, though he or she can certainly change the channel. Social media is by far the most versatile, comprehensive, and interactive form of communication. It differs from traditional media in not just speed and scope of distribution but in the character of the interaction between the news and the consumer of the news. Further, what makes this particularly significant is that the nature of the interaction widens and deepens as new protocols and applications are added and expanded. Social media grows more interactive and accessible with each day that passes.

Social media connects people to each other and binds them with no concern for distance, geography or traditional political cleavages. Unlike other mediums, the communications can be immediate. The feedback and the discovery of some information and its distribution can travel at speeds never before seen. During the 2012 Democratic National Convention, President Obama's nomination acceptance speech generated huge networks of social media discussions. While the speech was being delivered, over 50,000 Obama-related tweets per minute were happening. The three-day event generated nearly 10 million tweets that were directly relevant, and countless more that were related in some way but not easily sorted (Twitter 2012). The growth of broadband