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## **New Communication Forms and Political Framing: Twitter in Donald Trump's Presidential Campaign**

**Abstract:** Technological development has made it possible for the modern individual to understand the world around them using a computer and screen as their fundamental means of accessing information. With analysis of certain features of modern communication and new media, and of communication forms determined by new 'agents' such as the Internet, the mobile phone, social media – and most of all Twitter – it can be concluded that new media channels are no longer merely an asset, but also a place of social interaction. The ways in which social media are used influence the creation of an altered image of the world around us. The custom-made environment of information which reaches the user serves to diminish the chances for a more comprehensive perception. The era of Donald Trump is a striking example of the use of new media, primarily Twitter, as a powerful means of reaching a significant number of future voters. The way in which information is framed on Twitter is rooted in the theoretical basics of framing, and as such has played a significant role in establishing Trump's political superiority.

**Keywords:** Trump; communication; Twitter; social media; mediation; framing

### **1. Communication and technology**

Communication has forever been one of the preconditions of human survival, because it serves to convey our experiences and traditions. The emergence of mass media brought about major changes in society and greatly facilitated human communication; but these media would in time create our reality, resulting in radical changes in their role.

#### **1.1 Changes in communication due to the development of technology**

Communication is always in a way dependent on the media. Referring to a position by Flusser, each media conveys information about reality in accordance with its own internal logic and law. If we change the structure of media, we change the perception of reality.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Michael Hanke, "Vilém Flusser Nucleus Research Group," *Flusserstudies* 2 (2006), <http://www.flusserstudies.net/sites/www.flusserstudies.net/files/media/attachments/vilem-flusser-nucleus-research-group02.pdf>, acc. January 10, 2017.

The year 1985 brought us the Internet, the most conspicuous mark of globalization. By the end of the decade, it had become apparent that, through gradual computerization, social communication as a whole would be transformed. In the 1950s, the economic base of modern western society had begun to move toward service and information economies; by the seventies it evolved into the so-called “post-industrial society” of Daniel Bell,<sup>2</sup> and later into the “network society” of Manuel Castells.<sup>3</sup> By the 1990s, the transformation was in full effect: culture was transformed into e-culture, computers into the universal channel of culture, and media into new media, whereby it has become crystal clear how media, as mediators, today influence the creation of an image of reality and of society as a whole.

Paired with the computer, the screen today is rapidly becoming the primary means of accessing any form of information. The visual culture of the modern age is characterized by one phenomenon, in particular: the existence of another, virtual space; another world, enclosed within a frame, and placed in a ‘normal’ space by way of a screen. Instead of functioning as a means of baring reality, the screen has become a tool of an immediate operation on reality.<sup>4</sup>

## 1.2 Changes with the emergence of Web 2.0 – interactions and social media

The introduction of Web 2.0 enabled interactivity among computer users. A vast expansion of information technologies (IT) led to widespread social interaction and exchanges, from which the information society was born. The emergence of virtual communities is sociologically rooted in the three spaces of human life: where we live, where we work, and where we socialize. A virtual community is a place where all needs for socializing can be met, as it cares not for the limits that exist in everyday human communication. The ‘third space’, which we enter through the screen, is the ‘place’ where people gather to socialize and which in modern society has become very crowded. More and more social interaction is embedded in media channels, particularly in social media, which are a meta-trend in postindustrial societies and also known as “mediations”<sup>5</sup>

Just as the development of digital technologies has wrought changes in the ways in which we understand, think, and experience the world around us, it has also influenced the way in which content is produced in the Internet-mediated environment, and in which this content is consumed.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Manuel Kastels, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 94–95.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Friedrich Krotz, “Media Connectivity: Concepts, Conditions and Consequences,” in *Connectivity, Networks, and Flows. Conceptualizing Contemporary Communications*, ed. Andreas Hepp, Friedrich Krotz, Shaun Moores, Shaun Winter, and Carsten Cresskill (New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2008), 13–33.

Consumers are becoming active, connected, and open to change, in contrast to their predecessors, who were passive, isolated and static.<sup>6</sup> With the development of technologies and the expansion of the scope of communication, social media, through which communication occurs exclusively via a screen and courtesy of the Internet, are becoming a vital means of daily social interaction. Society has become increasingly interconnected and complex due to expanded usage of social media and its importance.

It follows that social media have had a progressively intense influence on the creation of public opinion. This was among the factors that led politicians to choose these channels to express their political ideas, stances, and reflections. The ways in which social media are used influence the creation of an altered image of the world around us. The custom-made environment of information which reaches the user serves to diminish the chances for a more comprehensive understanding. Rendered complacent by the thorough personalization of their devices ('smart' phones in 80 percent of cases) with regard to personal needs, interests, search history, and reactions to previously viewed information, users do not examine the accuracy of the information that reaches them through social media. The collected data about users and their behavior on the internet has a direct impact on the filtering of information which will reach each user on social media. Therefore, users almost unreservedly and without examination accept social-media information about the world around them. This has opened up a transparent yet manipulative space for political actors, who have included social media in their communication strategies.

With the expansion of mass media due to the development of information technology, communication which takes place via Internet-mediated media is taking on an increasingly important social role. These media shape our identity, affect human relationships, and create social reality. In a wider social context, these media, encouraged by the all-round availability of the Internet, greatly influence the formation of our aesthetic, ethical, and political stances, to the extent that they virtually direct, through suggestion, how we think and how we act.

## **2. Political communication strategies in the United States from the mid-20th century to the present**

Looking at political campaigns in America from the middle of the last century through last year, we might notice that the development of technology greatly determined the importance of certain media channels in the struggle for political domination. It's no secret that each of the candidates for president of the United States have had almost flawlessly planned media campaigns, but it is nonetheless instructive to note their choices in communication channels, and their use of these channels' technological potential and internal characteristics as advantages.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York, London: New York University Press, 2006).

The emergence of television as a medium and the development of a new form of political representation – the TV duel – brought Kennedy a victory over Nixon in 1960. The power that Kennedy exhibited in the duel was shown by Obama in 2008 in his very well-designed presence on Internet-mediated media channels, especially on the then increasingly popular Facebook social media platform. Most Internet users form their opinions about politicians on social media, which research indicates they perceive as the only completely ‘independent’ media: that which can be trusted without reservation, and where the users themselves can form the opinions of others.<sup>7</sup> This concept gave Obama a significant advantage over his opponent, McCain, who completely ignored the power of communication mediated by the Internet.

Technologies developed further, influencing the very structure of media channels and user behavior, with Donald Trump choosing Twitter as the social platform for his campaign. The accelerated nature of the cultural-social sphere, reflected in the hastening of time and the compression of space, greatly influenced the shortening of form in communication, while the need for more frequent interaction in the digital space, the increase in the volume of information reaching users through social media, and the limited human capacity for storing this information, reduced the time frame in which information is generated and received. These factors, together with framing, brought Trump political supremacy in the presidential election. The era of Trump is an obvious example of the use of new forms of media to ensure political supremacy.

## 2.1 Why Twitter as the social media platform?

Twitter, as a channel of communication mediated by the Internet, is to a large extent a paradigm of the change which technology has wrought on communication codes. The means by which information is framed on Twitter is rooted in the theoretical basics of framing. This short form of communication, suited to expressing attitudes that reach the electorate virtually in real time, clearly produced significant results in engendering Trump’s political superiority. What Trump lacked in policy, he gained in authenticity with the voters. Twitter allows political parties and individual politicians to bypass the press to speak directly with voters.<sup>8</sup> The way that Twitter shapes and engages the political sphere of American society is one of the most noteworthy features of this social media platform. The rising impact of social media prompted the majority of prominent politicians to employ Twitter within their everyday politics and life. If we take a look at the 2016 United States presidential election, all 17 candidates utilized Twitter in their campaigns, two of which had Twitter feeds with the largest number of followers: current U.S. President Donald Trump was followed by 30 million accounts (Trump, 2017), and Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton had a Twitter

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Soumitra Dutta, Matthew Fraser, “Barack Obama and the Facebook Election,” *Usnews*, <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2008/11/19/barack-obama-and-the-facebook-election>, acc. January 3, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Bente Kalsnes, “The Social Media Paradox Explained: Comparing Political Parties’ Facebook Strategy Versus Practice,” *Social Media Society* 2, 2 (2016): 1–11.

account with 15 million followers (Clinton, 2017). Having so many followers on their Twitter accounts, and the ability to use them to communicate publicly without any type of constraints with potential voters and journalists, enabled politicians on Twitter to influence the way the public perceives them. For individual candidates to stand out in crowded spaces, such as Twitter, it is important they effectively engage with their audiences.<sup>9</sup>

Candidate Trump distinguished himself with surprising successes during the Republican Party primaries, and his communication style appeared to overcome any shortcomings with his questionable political platforms.<sup>10</sup> It was clear to Trump, as to Bernie Sanders, that controversy creates news, and that attention was all that was worth trading in 2016. With this behavior, which brought him controversy and undivided attention, he made the media – even those who were against him – write about him, to the tune of nearly two-billion dollars' worth of unpaid media presence ('earned media'), according to a mediaQuant (SMG Delta) assessment.<sup>11</sup>

As far back as the 2008 elections, which Obama had won, it had been clear that digital media could bring candidates a presidential win. While Hillary Clinton devoted most of her budget to television, Trump invested twice as much money as his rival in promotion through digital media. Research showed that his behavior on social media brought him 'earned media' in traditional media, which enabled him to 'win' two different target groups for the price of one. According to Brad Pascal, Trump's director of digital communications, "Twitter and Facebook are the reasons we won the election."<sup>12</sup> What is important to emphasize, too, is that Pascal was fully aware of which channel he used for what: Twitter was exclusively for Trump, whose statements gave him a large portion of the aforementioned value of free media space, while his team used Facebook to raise funds, in this way collecting the bulk of his on-line fund-raising figure of \$250 million.

The real power that lays within Twitter, and that which determined politicians would use it heavily within their campaigns, is the ability to control public perception through their Twitter accounts by connecting with the public, opponents and journalists in real time, and thus to impact news coverage. This claim was confirmed for the instance by the New York Times, which found Twitter to be the number one source of breaking news on Election Day 2016.<sup>13</sup> Although this sphere is still to be researched,

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Bryan Anderson, "Tweeter-in-Chief: A Content Analysis of President Trump's Tweeting Habits," *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications* 8, 2 (2017): 36–47.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Sara Ahmadian, Sare Azarshahi and Delroy L. Paulhus, "Explaining Donald Trump via communication style: Grandiosity, informality, and dynamism," *Personality and Individual Differences* 107 (2017): 49–53.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Nicholas Confessore, Karen Yourish, "\$2 Billion Worth of Free Media for Donald Trump," *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/16/upshot/measuring-donald-trumps-mammoth-advantage-in-free-media.html>, acc. January 3, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Issie Lapowsky, "Here's how Facebook *actually* won Trump the presidency," *Wired* <https://www.wired.com/2016/11/facebook-won-trump-election-not-just-fake-news/>, acc. December 26, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Mike Isaac, Sydney Ember, "For Election Day Influence, Twitter Ruled Social Media," *New York Times* <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/09/technology/for-election-day-chatter-twitter-ruled-social-media.html>, acc. May 18, 2018.

some studies clearly define the interactions between politicians and the media that have the potential to influence members of the public, and thus political elections and government policy. Based on the results from this case study done by Annika Kay Larson from Washington University, focused on how political social media accounts can impact their press coverage, it was discovered that in the case of Trump's Twitter account newspaper coverage was more than highly impacted.<sup>14</sup>

### *Politics of scandal*

According to Manuel Castells, there exists an interplay between communication and power relationships in the technological context that characterizes the network society. He believes that the media have become the social space where the power is decided. He points to the direct link between politics, media politics, the politics of scandal, and the political legitimacy crisis in a global perspective.

For Castells, one of the most important areas of media politics is the politics of scandal, which Trump used in unbridled fashion in his Twitter campaign. With the development of mass media and the use of Internet-mediated media channels, the scandals which have always been an integral part of political life have taken on incalculable social and political power. In defining the place that scandals have in political life in countries around the world, Castells identifies several trends: media transformation, political transformation, and the specificity of media politics. Castells sees two basic consequences of the politics of scandal: that an increasing number of major political changes around the world are directly linked to a scandal's consequences and that, as a result of the prevalence of scandals in politics, there is distrust and dissatisfaction among citizens when it comes to current political institutions.<sup>15</sup> It could be said that these consequences were used by Trump in his Twitter campaign, during which he based his presence and activity on scandal in order to attract attention and engage users on topics that were important to him.

Using Twitter to spread his propaganda in a very specific "scandalous" way and thus attract media and public attention, Trump succeeded in enlarging the number of followers on his Twitter account. According to research findings, scandals that he created by posting on Twitter such as proposing mass deportation of Mexican immigrants, calling for banning Muslims from entering the U. S. and saying that Hillary Clinton 'got schlonged' by President Obama in 2008, Donald Trump had emerged as the most controversial candidate in the 2016 presidential race. Yet, for all the predictions of his fall from grace, accordingly to all the major polls, Trump was leading the presidential race by a large margin.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Annika Kay Larson, "Donald Trump's Twitter and His Influence on the Media: A Study of How Political Social Media Accounts Impact Press Coverage," *University of Washington*, <http://www.com.washington.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Larson-Honors-Thesis-Final.pdf>, acc. May 18, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Manuel Kastels, *Moć komunikacija*, trans. Tijana Spasić, Đorđe Trajković (Beograd: Clio, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Yu Wang, Jiebo Luo, Richard Niemi and Yuncheng Li, "To Follow or Not to Follow: Analyzing the Growth Patterns of the Trumpists on Twitter," eprint arXiv:1603.08174, (March 2019), <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1603.08174.pdf>.

### *Statistics*

Statistics played a key role in the selection of Twitter as the most suitable channel for disseminating information and topics of importance, and for ensuring uninterrupted communication with potential voters. At the time, this social media platform was actively used by 255 million people who published one billion tweets every two days. Four hundred million people visited Twitter seeking information. Eighty five percent of all world leaders had their own personal accounts. One hundred percent of all U.S. senators had personal profiles on Twitter and were active users. Eighty percent of users accessed Twitter via their mobile phones, making this channel suitable for placing information that would motivate users to engage, real-time, in conversation.<sup>17</sup>

Which media channels we use is significantly determined by the socio-political contexts that shape our use of the media. Knowing that four hundred million people had elected to use Twitter as a means of daily information, Trump used precisely this channel in his political campaign to shape a context that would support acceptance of his political activities by as many members of the voting body as possible.

With its goal of securing Twitter's attention and gaining the power to influence the public mind in Internet-mediated communication on Twitter, Trump's performance can be viewed through an analysis of Castells' power relationship. As pointed out by Castells, "Power is based on the control of communication and information."<sup>18</sup> He also adds, "Why, how, and by whom power relationships are constructed and exercised through the management of communication processes, and how these power relationships can be altered by social actors aiming for social change by influencing the public mind."<sup>19</sup> In his opinion, the process of formation and exercise of power relationships is "decisively transformed in the new organizational and technological context derived from the rise of global digital networks of communication as the fundamental symbol-processing system of our time."<sup>20</sup>

### **3. Impact on the public mind**

In the same book, Castells states that the framing of the public mind is mainly carried out through communication, mediated by media processes through which society as a whole can be reached. He identifies three main processes in the media-user relationship: setting the agenda, priming, and framing. Castells bases his conclusions on the fact that media shape our attitudes, priorities, and value systems, as well as our views of the world. The establishment of an agenda assumes that media, through presentation and selection of content, direct the attention of the audience-at-large toward

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Nielsen Social Media Report 2016 [www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/reports/2017/2016-nielsen-social-media-report.html](http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/reports/2017/2016-nielsen-social-media-report.html), acc. January 2, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Kastels, *Moć komunikacije*, 26.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

themes or a mass of information which they consider particularly important during any given period. Priming occurs when the content of certain information informs users that they should use certain topics as a measure of the effectiveness of a particular political figure, the government, or the opposition. Framing is the process of selecting particular aspects of some events or topics and highlighting them in relation to others, in order to emphasize a certain interpretation, evaluation, and/ or solution.<sup>21</sup>

### 3.1 Framing

Given that voters' conscience is shaped by their experiences, political advertising and political campaigns seek to link specific images with specific experiences in order to activate or deactivate metaphors which are most likely to motivate support for a particular political actor.<sup>22</sup>

All information that arrives to the user via social media is conditioned by previous framing, based on the interest and behavior of the users in this media environment, and on the selected and predefined parameters of the audience which receives, and from which we receive, messages of communication. In this way, every impression that reaches the subject, containing information about the world around us, differs from an impression via which a different user might acquaint themselves with the same phenomenon. In the language of social networks, this is called "custom-made information".

On an online network which inherently regulates (and frames) information with its rules regarding the number of characters (no more than 140), Donald Trump's campaign applied its own framing, which the theory defines as a way of formulating political discourse in certain topics. The use of today's media in communications campaigns undoubtedly influenced the framing.<sup>23</sup> The frame shapes the way posters want users to perceive a particular topic. It is the selection of certain aspects of the topic, and their emphasis, in order to point users to a certain way of thinking, or of consuming information. Frames which are contained within tweets and other internet-mediated artifacts can influence interpretation and the audience's perception. Conscious and dedicated use of frames – whether through direct releases and statements or through, in this particular case, Twitter posts – was an integral part of Trump's strategic communication in the election campaign. Through informal canvassing of Trump's tweets prior to elections patterns, his tweeting habits could be easily noticed. Trump frequently used the term "fake news" on Twitter to describe unfavorable media coverage and thus to delegitimize the press. That revealed a pattern of attacks on news organizations and individual reporters. Through Twitter, Trump has

<sup>21</sup> Kastels, *Moć komunikacije*, 233.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Dalibor Petrović, "Moć je u mrežama," in *Moć komunikacije*, ed. Manuel Kastels (Beograd: Clio, 2014), 613–29.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Dietram A. Scheufele, "Framing as a theory of media effects," *Journal of Communication* 49, 1 (1999): 103–22.



found a platform to circumvent the press and speak directly to his supporters while simultaneously aiming to discredit legitimate reporting.<sup>24</sup>

According to Hallahan, “decisions regarding framing are perhaps the most important strategic decisions one can make.”<sup>25</sup> Framing is particularly important when it comes to giving information on certain situations, risks, shaping supporting arguments, questions and stories. The goals of strategic framing are to telegraph meaning and to focus audience attention on particular portions of a message or aspects of a topic in order to gain a favorable response. “Framing is a critical element in constructing social reality because it helps shape the perceptions and provides context for processing information.”<sup>26</sup> As in the case of setting the agenda, here the influence of several factors is possible. Hänggli and Kriesi emphasized three framing choices which politicians make in order to gain a strategic advantage during a campaign: “substance emphasis” (candidates decide which frames they wish to emphasize during the campaign); “opponent emphasis” (which of their opponent’s frames they want to emphasize, in particular those where they can achieve a comparative advantage), and “content emphasis” (how much they will emphasize the rivalry in the campaign). Their research shows that candidates emphasize only one or two frames of their own, and that they pay more attention to frames of their opponents which are accentuated in media monitoring.<sup>27</sup>

### 3.2 Framing through Twitter

Knowing the opportunities and benefits that Internet-mediated communication channels could bring to a campaign, Trump created a communication strategy that, with an accentuated presence on Twitter, framed information distributed to the widest audience of users of this platform, and future voters.

Twitter is perceived as the social platform on which information can be gleaned most quickly. The media increasingly uses this platform to disseminate their stories and reports. This opportunity, too, was seized by Donald Trump. Today, the media is virtually obliged to create news specific to Twitter, and for several reasons. Twitter is uniquely adept at maintaining a consistent and sustainable communication rate, which is an advantage over competing social media and even over traditional ways of delivering news. It is very convenient for the rapid dissemination of ‘breaking news’, even in the absence of the media (this is particularly obvious in instances of terrorist attacks, explosions, natural disasters, etc.). The number of readers of printed news has declined, as has trust in media agencies, while online readership has increased.

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Bryan Anderson, “Tweeter-in-Chief: A Content Analysis of President Trump’s Tweeting Habits,” *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications* 8, 2 (2017): 36–47.

<sup>25</sup> Kirk Hallahan, “Seven models of framing: Implications for public relations,” *Journal of Public Relations Research* 11, 3 (1999): 205–42.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Regula Hänggli, and Hanspeter Kriesi “Frame construction and frame promotion (strategic framing choices),” *American Behavioral Scientist* 56, 3 (2012): 260–78.

On Twitter, news is framed with an emphasis on conflicts and economic impact, because users show greatest interest in tracking disasters and economic and political events.<sup>28</sup> Capturing information in 140 characters per post has enabled quick and effective communication, as well as the interaction of users with content posted specifically to them. On Twitter, groups of likeminded and dedicated users are created, tracking topics for at least a year and posting several times a day. Twitter users are affluent, ready to converse, and use this social media platform to connect with information and people of interest in real time. It is perceived as a relevant space which is alive, public, and whose purpose is (and far more so than other social media channels) conversation. The seriousness and relevance of contacts on this platform is underscored by the public figures – politicians and other influential people – who appear personally in larger numbers than on other platforms.

Twitter in recent years have become sort of a link between social and traditional media, due to very briefness which allows tweets to be widely scattered. Tweets are not supposed to be created only for supporters, since they are also likely to reach by followers of the opponents, undecided voters who follow multiple candidates, and even major news networks.<sup>29</sup> Similar to character limits on Twitter, politicians have limited time and attention in media. “Twitter is therefore a sound-bite medium for the sound-bite media age.”<sup>30</sup>

During his presidential campaign, Trump used to call Twitter “a powerful thing,” a “modern method of communication,” and had millions of people to start following him on this social platform. Although he stated for CNN that he either wouldn’t use Twitter at all as president or would use it very little (CNN, 2016), in meantime during the presidency his Twitter account draws up to 2 million new followers every month, he posts average about six tweets per day.<sup>31</sup> Donald Trump used all these advantages of Twitter in his election campaign, as well as in his first months as president of the United States, and he serves as a perfect case study considering his well-established and well-publicized Twitter presence. Trump’s interactions with journalists, whether negative or positive, could provide evidence of politicians directly influencing their own media coverage through social media. This role model is followed by numerous politicians around the globe, that were motivated to strongly utilize this social media platform in getting more attention and publicity.

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Nielsen Social Media Report 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Bethany A. Conway, Kate Kenski and Di Wang, “Twitter Use by Presidential Primary Candidates During the 2012 Campaign,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, 11 (2013): 1596–610.

<sup>30</sup> Justin H. Gross and Kaylee T. Johnson, “Twitter Taunts and Tirades: Negative Campaigning in the Age of Trump,” *Political Science and Politics* 49, 4 (2016): 748–54.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Bryan Anderson, “Tweeter-in-Chief: A Content Analysis of President Trump’s Tweeting Habits,” *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications* 8, 2 (2017): 36–47.

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Article received: March 25, 2018

Article accepted: April 10, 2018

Preliminary report – Short Communications