



THE BOLLER REVIEW

#TLDR: Twitter Is Changing Everything

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ABSTRACT:

Twitter. What some view as just a social media site to see and share ratings with dogs; politicians and journalists are now finding it a requirement of their daily jobs. Politicians are using Twitter in an attempt to circumvent the gatekeeping that media has performed for generations while journalists are trying to keep up and verify all the news sent through it. No one has relied more on Twitter than President Donald J. Trump who uses his account to not only get around the gatekeeping function of the press, but to change the news cycle altogether.

#TLDR: Twitter is Changing Everything

@realDonaldTrump. This simple Twitter handle has dramatically impacted the news cycle and the policy of the White House. Journalists have long been the primary gatekeepers of information. However, technology and the prevalence of Twitter has allowed politicians to spread their messages directly to the people rather than have it filtered through editors and newsrooms. Social media and Twitter, in particular, has shifted the way that journalists cover politics. This thesis will examine how the role of gatekeeping has changed, and how one man, President Donald J. Trump, has used it to completely change the news cycle—in 280 characters or less.

News has been curated and delicately pruned for thousands of years, with evidence of reporting found as far back as 59 BCE in ancient Rome.¹ For centuries, journalists have reported, produced and presented the most important information to the public. While the medium has often evolved, from stone tablets, to print papers, to radio, to TV, to the internet and phone apps, journalists were primary gatekeepers of information until the digital disruption. Gatekeeping is defined as the “theory of how items are selected or rejected as they pass through the channels of society.”² But the onset of social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, allows people to bypass these channels and take their messages directly to the public. Few people have captured the influential potential of Twitter as well as President Trump. His direct appeal to his base, according to many political experts and even Trump himself, won him the White House.³ In this thesis, I will discuss how Trump has used his Twitter account to change the news cycle to what he believes is in his favor and address what this means for the gatekeeper role that journalists fulfill.

In order to have a more comprehensive examination of Trump’s ability to circumvent the gatekeepers, the literature review portion of this thesis addresses the historical role of gatekeeping, how it is evolving, the role of Twitter in politics, and the effect Trump’s tweets have on the news cycle. I’ve done this through a series of both scholarly articles and more current, in depth articles by industry professionals that study the phenomenon as it is happening.

There is a general consensus among scholars and journalists that internet disruption and the ease with which information can be disseminated through social media has diluted journalists’ gatekeeping role. Trump’s use of Twitter is an excellent example of this. His Tweets have dramatically changed the news cycle and prompted many news organizations to change their coverage strategy of Trump, and adapt the way they present the news in order to deal with the abundance of information.⁴

History of Gatekeeping

Psychologist Kurt Lewin first posited the idea of people being gatekeepers after World War II.⁵ He considered how food was distributed in an area and the channels it went through before reaching people. The “gate keeper” was the person buying or transporting the food. This person made the choice on whether or not to advance the food item. Communication scholar David Manning applied this theory to news. He referred to gatekeeping as “the process by which the vast array of potential news messages are winnowed, shaped and prodded into those few that are transmitted by the news media.”⁶ Gatekeeping is more than just a simple selection of what stories are in and what stories are out. It includes the shaping, timing, handling and dissemination of the story. Journalists decide not only what information is news, but how important it is, and how it should be presented. Manning found that the gatekeeping process was “highly subjective” based on the gatekeeper’s own experiences and attitudes.

A study by Lewis Dexter and David White followed a newspaper editor to study what stories he selected for the paper and why.⁷ They also considered the process to be “highly subjective.” The editor even admitted “I have a few prejudices built in or otherwise, and there is little I can do about them. I dislike Truman’s economics, daylight savings time and warm beer, but I go ahead using stories on them and other matters if I feel there is nothing more important to give space to.” His most common reason for saying no to a story was that he didn’t think the incident was worth being reported.

Some of what Dexter and White view as personal biases, however, are explained to actually be the routine, and often greatest, forces that influence gatekeeping. These routine forces are the “patterned, repeated practices and forms media workers use to do their jobs.”⁸ It’s where the cliché, “if it bleeds it leads” comes from or the idea that, “dog bites man” isn’t a story, but “man bites dog is.” The stories that have been consistent news stories for years continue to be news stories. It’s incorporated in the seven factors of newsworthiness journalism schools teach: impact, timeliness, proximity, human interest, conflict, the bizarre and celebrity.⁹

A journalist’s personal bias also influences gatekeeping. While many journalists claim to cloak themselves in objectivity, Cassidy found that an individual’s person and professional background, their attitude, values and beliefs can also be a factor when deciding what is newsworthy. This inherent personal lens is what leads many to argue that journalists are biased in one way or another. However, as mentioned before, Cassidy’s research found that the routine influences provided a much greater influence on the ultimate gatekeeping decision than an individual’s personal bias.

These forces not only influence the gatekeeping decisions of journalists, but also their view on what their main job as reporters is, which in turn affects their gatekeeping decisions. Cassidy wrote on the four main roles of the media: interpretive and investigative, disseminator, adversarial and populist mobilizer. He then surveyed media members about these four roles. Respondents said the interpretive and investigative role relied on investigating government claims, analyzing and interpreting complex problems and discussing public policy in a timely manner; 63 percent of respondents said this was a very important role. The role of dissemination was defined as getting information quickly to the public and avoiding stories with unverifiable facts; 51 percent said this was very important. The adversarial role was defined as being constantly skeptical of government and business interests; 18 percent said this was very important. Lastly, the populist mobilizer role was defined as developing cultural interests and setting political agendas; only 6 percent of respondents said this was important.¹⁰ The clear majority view the analyzing and interpreting role as very important vs. the clear minority view of agenda setting shows the way in which journalist view their gatekeeping rule: to give the public the information needed to make a choice, but not to make the choice for them. Note that while journalists still do this in the digital age, they no longer have a near monopoly on spreading public information.¹¹

Evolution of Gatekeeping

The rise of technology brought many new words: selfie, Snapchat, sexting; the list goes on and on. This constant presence of technology in our daily lives has also redefined the term “citizen journalist.” The internet and social media allow “people without professional or formal training in journalism” to “use the tools of modern technology in order to create content that would otherwise not be revealed.”¹²

The term was popularized in the late 1990s as the internet allowed their audience to grow. While the term citizen journalists includes journalist, there are many differences between professional and citizen reporters that affect their gatekeeping decisions. Professional journalists are trained by their organization and more than 90 percent of full-time journalists have at least a bachelor’s degree—37.4 percent of whom were journalism majors.¹³ This academic and professional training influences their gatekeeping decisions about what is and isn’t news, informs them of guidelines they must follow regarding sourcing and often instills a sense of accountability to their media organization, their editors and their audience. Civilian journalists don’t have the same measures enforced on them. They often have received no formal training on news criteria, have no enforced guidelines on sourcing and don’t even have to use their real name online, providing a lack of accountability. A citizen journalist working alone through a personal website or social media account is not subject to go through the same fact checking process as most professional reporters.

The role of citizen journalists has led some to divide gatekeepers into primary and secondary gatekeepers.¹⁴ Primary gatekeepers are those who, by filtering information and publishing, decide what news is. Traditional and professional media are primary gatekeepers. Secondary gatekeepers are those who filter already available news content and offer it context and explain its social significance. These are the ordinary people who share, tweet and retweet information. This rise in secondary gatekeepers has led to a revolutionary sharing of gatekeeper power; which can be viewed as both positive and negative.

The dilution of the gatekeeping power over the years has caused many mixed reactions. As one author put it, "while gatekeeping is important for distinguishing the signal from the noise, one person's selection is another's censorship".¹⁵ The latter is the approach Trump often evokes with his cries of "fake news" and an unfair media, but more on that later.

The Rise of Twitter

The idea for Twitter first came to co-founder Jack Dorsey in 2006.¹⁶ He saw it then as a type of SMS messaging service that would let friends keep track of each other. The first tweet was written by Dorsey on March 21, 2006, 9:50 p.m. It read, "just setting up my twitter."

The 140 character limit was a result of this original plan to keep it as an SMS service. At the time, this was the limit on SMS messages. While Twitter would move instead to the web platform, it kept the character limit for creative and marketing reasons. (Twitter has since increased the character limit to 280. Twitter saw its first spike in users following the company's presentation at the 2007 South by Southwest conference with 60,000 tweets being sent per day.

The rise and popularity of Twitter would continue over the years and grew exponentially as the live tweeting of interesting events peaked the public's curiosity and brought new people into the Twitter-sphere. Events such as the United Airlines flight landing in the Hudson¹⁷ or actor Stephen Fry live tweeting his time stuck in an elevator¹⁸ brought national attention to the growing social media platform. As celebrities shared personal moments and breaking news witnesses shared crucial information, Twitter was adopted by the mainstream media as a communication and information tool. In the political realm especially, Twitter made a big splash during the 2008 Democratic National Convention when the DNC issued out press credentials to more than 120 state and local bloggers—a 400 percent increase from 2004.¹⁹

A *Guardian* survey found that in November of 2008 there were 40 articles that mentioned Twitter, and in the next month there were 84. By January of 2009, there were 206.²⁰ By October of 2017 Politicodeclared the Twitter thread, a series of tweets by the same person linked together, as "this year's ascendant form of argument."²¹ Today, pundits frequently start threads on topics, and citizens reply to politicians' tweets. Politicocredits Trump with the rise of the Twitter thread, noting that threads are "regularly deployed by anti-Trumpers on the political right and center but—mostly, let's not kid ourselves—the left."²² As of 2017 Twitter had 330 million active users sharing and spreading information.²³ Every second, on average, around 6,000 tweets are tweeted, which means that more than 350,000 tweets are sent per minute and 500 million tweets per day.²⁴

Presidential Twitter Precedent

While Trump has been nicknamed the "Tweeter-in-Chief," his predecessor Barack Obama was the first president to tweet and be given the title "first social-media president" by an *Atlantic* reporter.²⁵ His first tweet from @POTUS came in June of 2015 and held the message: "Hello, Twitter! It's Barack. Really! Six years in, they're finally giving me my own account."²⁶ In 30 minutes, the account gained more than 100,000 followers and garnered more than a million in the first five hours, a *Guinness Book World Record* at the time.²⁷ Over the roughly year and a half left in President Obama's term, the @POTUS account would gain more than 15 million followers and sent out 352 tweets, (for comparison, in his first six months in office, Trump tweeted 920 times.

Though the official presidential account started in 2015, Obama was an early adopter of utilizing the power of the social media platform. During the 2008 presidential election, Obama's campaign worked with a Facebook executive to craft a social media strategy that would not only appeal to potential voters ideologically, but also get them to donate. The successful strategy resulted in record setting small donations which was a large factor in his victory. Over the course of the campaign, the Obama team's Twitter strategy evolved. At the start of the campaign, in 2007, Obama was tweeting roughly once a week, this was upped to once a day once the primary season officially began in 2008, and then continued to increase in frequency at the close to election day.²⁸ The voice of the tweets also changed through the campaign, starting more free and casual and changing to become more formulaic and official as Obama gained national status.

The tweets focused on getting votes and promoting upcoming campaign stops or events. Of the tweets sent out during the campaign, 38 percent were announcing upcoming events, 8 percent were related to Obama's "get out and vote" efforts, and 6 percent were name dropping supporters who had national celebrity status.²⁹ This campaign effort led one author to write that Twitter gave Obama the, "freedom to deliver a crafted, unfiltered message."³⁰ Once in office, Obama used Twitter to increase awareness of upcoming events and legislation, or to offer messages of celebration and condolence. The @BarackObama Twitter account was the number one followed world leader account of 2016 and @POTUS account was number six on the list.³¹ According to a study from Twiplomacy, "The U.S. President does not tweet every day, but every tweet is carefully crafted and comes across as hand-written by Barack Obama himself."³²

This doesn't mean the messages didn't make news or affect policy. His tweet "¿Que bolá Cuba?" –Cuban slang, meaning: "What's up, Cuba?" was posted as the president arrived in Havana for the first time since 1928 and set the tone for the upcoming meetings and talks.³³ Twitter was also crucial for Obama's work in rolling out the Affordable Care Act and other policy initiatives by hosting several #AskPOTUS events where people tweeted questions that Obama answered live.

The @BarackObama account has more than 96 million followers, compared to more than 41 million for @realDonaldTrump. Obama, both from his personal account and the @POTUS account, has tweeted out six of the ten most liked tweets in history.³⁴ This includes the number one most liked tweet in which Obama quoted a Nelson Mandela quote about racism following the protest and violence in Charlottesville.

Other Politicians Sign On

However it wasn't just Obama and his liberal minded followers who were finding the value in using Twitter for political power. The Tea Party movement, which rose as a backlash against Obama and his agenda, owes much of its success to Twitter. Its supporters were spread out across the country and not always known to each other. Michael Patrick Leahy, an architect of the Tea Party Movement, realized the power of Twitter's connective nature when he started #TCOT, (Top Conservatives on Twitter. What started as a way to vent partisan anger over Obama's victory, McCain's moderate campaign and the auto-industry bailout soon spread. When Leahy started the #TCOT and list in November of 2008 it had 30 members. By February 2009 it was a 3,500 plus group hosting the weekly conferences calls that created The Tea Party.³⁵ The #TCOT community had guidelines called the 4 C's of the #TCOT community: conservatism, collaboration, constructive dialogue and community. This hashtag brought organizers together to host Tea Party demonstrations and led to the creation of The TCOT Report, a fast breaking news site described as "Drudge Meets Twitter."³⁶ The Tea Party movement would continue to grow, seeing demonstrations of thousands of people, candidates running in elections across the nation and playing a part in the exit of then-House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio.

In 2009 even the mainstream Republican politicians were catching on to the power of Twitter. John McCain, often mocked during the 2008 campaign for his lack of technological savvy, transitioned into tweeting multiple times a day to pressure his colleagues on certain issues and inform people of updates on his schedule. During his first month on Twitter, he tweeted about his displeasure over the amount of money being spent on projects he considered "pork bill spending." He would frequently send out the top 10 "porkiest" projects in 10 separate text-only tweets, (a far cry from the gif ridden threads of today's political communication).

According to McCain's spokeswoman, in 2009 they had the most followers of any congressman. Even former speaker Newt Gingrich said "using Twitter to bypass traditional media and directly reach voters is definitely a good thing."³⁷ Politicians then took the next near decade fine-tuning their use of the social media tool. As more and more users signed up, their audiences grew and politicians were able to rally support for their agendas and campaigns.

It wasn't just politicians in the traditional sense however. Political activists for various organizations and causes capitalized on the unifying power of Twitter. Black Lives Matter organizer Johnetta Elzie said Twitter was "integral" to organizing protests and discourse. Elzie said that "we sort of take away the middleman there, and a simple retweet can boost a message to almost 500,000 people, and that's big. We became our own media."³⁸ This underscores how Twitter has completely changed the role of gatekeeping for journalists. Politicians are no longer dependent on journalists to spread their message. As one author put it, "technology is transforming citizens from passive consumers of news produced by professionals into active participants who can assemble their own journalism."³⁹

These new roles are constantly adapting to the various players to use them as both media and politicians compete for attention, and quite literally, followers. No one was ready however for a whole new kind of TweetStorm.

Trump's Twitter

At the beginning of the Trump presidency, CBS News sent out a bureau wide email for every Trump tweet, but because of the prolific tweeting, this was scaled back within a few months to exclude "traditional" presidential tweets, such as the in-house videos of foreign leaders visiting or different domestic initiative celebrations. Politico Playbook curates Trump's tweets in its "On the President's Mind this Morning" section in its daily briefing. *New York Times* White House correspondents have shifts to make sure his feed is monitored, and one concerned citizen even wrote a program to collect every single Trump tweet in the Trump Twitter Archive website.⁴⁰

Trump acknowledges the power of his Twitter account. In March of 2017, he said that his tweets are what won him the election because he was able to go around the "dishonest" media in order to get his message out. "When I can reach, whether it's 90 million or 100 million or 80 million, however many people it may turn out to be, when you add everything up—and then of course it gets disseminated from there, when I can reach that many people, Twitter is a wonderful thing for me, because I get the word out," Trump said. He added that, "if I don't do that, I won't get my word out. Because when I tell—when I say things, the press doesn't cover it accurately. They cover it very inaccurately. Much of the press."⁴¹

In July of 2017, he declared his Twitter account isn't presidential—it's modern day presidential. He again emphasized that it was his way to get the truth out, tweeting, "The FAKE & FRAUDULENT NEWS MEDIA is working hard to convince Republicans and others I should not use social media—but remember, I won the 2016 election with interviews, speeches and social media. I had to beat #FakeNews, and did. We will continue to WIN!"⁴² When Trump's revolutionary new way of using Twitter was brought up in subsequent interviews over the past months, due to his tendency to get in "Twitter fights" with people ranging from Republican Sens. Bob Corker and Jeff Flake to Democrat Rep. Frederica Wilson, Trump defended his use of Twitter by talking about its successful reach, influence and honesty of thought.

Trump has two twitter accounts, @realDonaldTrump and @POTUS. However @POTUS mostly retweets @realDonaldTrump, so this research will focus on his personal account. The @realDonaldTrump account has more than 49 million followers and more than 37,000 tweets as of March 15, 2018. Trump's account is the 21st most popular in the world, right between Jennifer Lopez and Bill Gates.⁴³ He is on more than 78,000 Twitter lists and his follower growth is on the rise by 4.6 percent.⁴⁴

According to Twitter Counter, a site that monitors the analytics of various Twitter accounts, in January of 2018 Trump tweeted five times a day to his more than 47 million followers and counting with a 2.5 percent follower growth trend.⁴⁵ This is a significant decrease from his average of nine times a day, using data from the September 29 to October 29.⁴⁶

From January to July of 2017, there were only two days in which he didn't Tweet, April 15 and June 8. Trump is a morning tweeter, with the time between 7 a.m. and 8 a.m. EST being the most popular; about 41 percent of his tweets are posted between 5 a.m. and 9 a.m. EST.⁴⁷

From politics, to pop culture, to sports to entertainment—nothing is off limits. The New York Times put together a running list of, "The 382 People, Places and Things Donald Trump has insulted on Twitter."⁴⁸ The list ranges from Amazon to NATO to Jeff Zucker and everything in between. Some of the most popular topics include: the media, often criticizing the "mainstream media" or referring to "fake news," with 113 tweets between January and July of 2017, Russia, mostly referring to the meddling investigation with 99 tweets, while the economy or healthcare are tied with 98 tweets.⁴⁹

Critics often review what Trump tweeted before he was elected to see if his stance has dramatically changed. For example, when an NBC reporter tweeted out that Secretary of State Rex Tillerson didn't just call Trump a moron, he called him a "fucking moron," people pointed out that in October of 2014 Trump had tweeted out a cartoon of the founders writing the constitution with Thomas Jefferson saying, "I keep thinking we should include something in the Constitution in case the people elect a fucking moron."⁵⁰ Critics of his position on healthcare noted that July of 2017 Trump tweeted, "Let Obamacare fail.. I'm not going to own it,"⁵¹ but in November of 2013 he tweeted, "Leadership: Whatever happens, you're responsible. If it doesn't happen, you're responsible."⁵² Also, in July he tweeted complaining about the filibuster rule saying, "The Senate must go to a 51 vote majority instead of current 60 votes. Even parts of full Repeal need 60. 8 Dems control Senate. Crazy!"⁵³ but in November of 2013, he was more of a fan of the filibuster tweeting that, "Thomas Jefferson wrote the Senate filibuster rule. Harry Reid & Obama killed it yesterday. Rule was in effect for over 200 years."⁵⁴

Impact of Trump's Tweets on News Cycle

While the rise in technology has caused an expansion of who can spread the news, it has also changed how often the news is spread. In the past, it was simply when the papers were printed, a morning and evening edition. Then radio hit the airwaves with news updates, followed by TV and then cable news TV allowing for 24 hour news updates. Smartphones and internet allowed that 24 hours news cycle to reach people anywhere. As one scholar put it, there has been a rise of news in "public spaces" making it a "permanent and immediate backdrop to what is happening in the world."⁵⁵

For many politicians, this rise in a constant news cycle has caused many headaches, with Obama even complaining about how the attention of Washington has "only grown shorter with the 24-hour news cycle."⁵⁶

However, Trump has used the immediacy of Twitter to bend the news cycle to his will—all the way to the White House. One study found that retweets of Trump's posts positively predicted news coverage, and that when media coverage of Trump was low, he would use a "tweetstorm" to get himself back in the media.⁵⁷ He operated under the motto that there was no bad press, no matter what the story was. In just the first nine months of his campaign it's estimated he received \$2 billion in "free media" from various news organizations.⁵⁸

Former press secretary Sean Spicer acknowledged the power of Trump's tweets "whatever he tweets, he is going to drive the news."⁵⁹ Spicer added, in January of 2017, that Trump's Twitter feed is where he looks first in the morning for an idea of what the news cycle will hold.

Another former Trump aide, Corey Lewandowski called Trump, "the Ernest Hemingway of Twitter."⁶⁰ Arguing that Trump's tweets are so widespread and shared that he was able to take down his opponents in part because of the popularity of the insulting nicknames he used. For example, "Little Marco," "Crooked Hillary," and "Lyin' Ted" were used in tweets that were shared and retweeted thousands of times. These nicknames and Trump were then given play in the media as journalists reported on the use of the nicknames.

The predictable pattern of Trump's tweets effect on the world is easily discernable, thanks to the frequency with which they occur. The life cycle of a Trump tweet starts with the first responders.⁶¹ These are the people who reply to the tweet by mocking it, supporting it, or fact checking it. Then there are those who screenshot the tweet and provide their own commentary on the subject. They get the buzz going around the tweet which often gets the topic to start trending, thus pulling in the media. This starts the next cycle, as journalists write different stories about the tweet and the topic that it mentioned. This coverage then leads to the phase of political pundits talking about the tweet and what its effects are. Then comes "the distractors," the people who say that Trump is just tweeting to get people to focus on this new topic instead of something else he has done or not done. This is followed by "the backlash" phase where people tweet about how they want people to stop paying attention to his tweet. Then comes the final phase of the quiet period as the tweet leaves the news cycle—until the president tweets again.

David Uberti declared "Donald Trump Killed the News Cycle." He argued that, "self-contained storylines that once would have risen and fallen in distinct waves of public attention have given way to information overload and frequent confusion."⁶² He noted this is the first time that one Twitter account consistently makes national news. To the point, as mentioned above, where multiple new organization have designated Trump Twitter watchers to keep up with the president's words.⁶³

Uberti adds that in addition to changing how news is gathered, Trump's Twitter also changes how news is presented. Due to the influx of newsworthy events that Trump and his twitter feed provide, news coverage is expanding.⁶⁴ From *The Washington Post* hiring new reporters to *Politico's Playbook* adding a "power lunch" edition, there is much more news to be consumed. However, Uberti argues that this increase in coverage has resulted in many news consumers feeling overwhelmed. This has prompted condensed coverage for the overwhelmed consumer, such as *The Skimm*, CBS's "Eye Opener" and the *The Week's* "10 Things to Know Today." overwhelmed.

The New York Times has updated its strategy for covering the White House because of Trump's tweets. "We've gone from a 24 hour news cycle to a one hour news cycle in Trump's head where the first 15 minutes can address one thing and the next 15 minutes covering something completely different," reporter Glenn Thrush said. "We've gone from news cycle to mood cycle."⁶⁵ *The New York Times* has an editor on "tweet patrol" everyday starting at 6 a.m. and working in shifts to keep it covered until midnight.⁶⁶ Washington Editor Elisabeth Bumiller said "We look at the tweets the way we look at White House press releases. Some we ignore, some we realize are news."⁶⁷

Case Studies

The actions of a president are often constantly followed by the media. The White House Correspondents Association has been around since 1914, and now there are around 250 people keeping a daily watch on the administration and its activities.⁶⁸ Activities range from executive orders, meetings, and roundtables to golf trips, Easter Egg Rolls and Christmas parties. They also now include the president's digital actions. In November of 2017, the Department of Justice announced its policy of treating Trump's tweets as official statements from the president.⁶⁹ Like any other official presidential statement, Trump's tweets carry meaning and power. Their influence can dramatically affect the news cycle; as can be seen in the three upcoming case studies.

Methodology

In order to determine the effects that specific Trump tweets have on the news cycle, this paper conducts an analysis of primarily CNN news transcripts. CNN was chosen because the format of its 24/7 news coverage allowed the shifts in the news cycle to be shown on an hourly basis. Once Trump tweeted something, the transcripts of each news program show the mere hours it took until Trump's tweet was discussed. CNN's decision to also make every minute of their on air coverage available via public transcript was also a deciding factor in its use. However CNN was not the only source analyzed; when applicable based on timing, the transcripts of the three networks' (CBS, NBC, ABC) evening and Sunday political talk shows were also analyzed to determine the effect each Trump tweet had in the news cycle and how longer the coverage was.

The basic analysis method for each tweet was to start by establishing a baseline: what was in the news before the tweet and was this a topic that was favorable or not favorable for the president. This baseline was established by looking at the headlines on Google News as well as the before mentioned CNN transcripts. Next step was the tweet—making sure to note both the subject and the timing of the Tweet.

This then led to another analysis of the CNN transcripts to see what effect Trump had on the news of the day—a type of turning point. The transcript of each show was read to see if Trump's tweet was being discussed. Once it was an on air-topic, the first coverage of the tweet is explained followed by examining how extensive the coverage was throughout the rest of the day. The analysis of transcripts included the following day's coverage as well to determine how long the tweet was a main story in the news cycle.

By determining how much coverage, including not only that the story was covered but also the place it was given in the various rundowns, the efficiency of Trump's manipulating the news cycle is demonstrated.

Obama Wire Tap

In the first week of March in 2017, Trump had just delivered a speech to a joint session of Congress, his stand in for the State of the Union, and the administration was pleased with the response the speech was getting. Following its delivery, Trump tweeted out simply, "THANK YOU!" The baseline of news coverage was largely positive reactions to the speech.

However then news cycle baseline shifted to the Russia investigation and Attorney General Jeff Sessions with the following stories:

- FBI director James Comey confirms during his testimony to the House Intelligence Committee, that the FBI was actively investigating if Trump's campaign had colluded with the Russians.
- The Washington Post article reveals that Sessions had not disclosed two meetings with Russian envois while under oath.⁷⁰
- Sessions recuses himself from the Russia investigation and Trump was spending political capital defending his attorney general.

By the time Saturday rolls around, the lead stories on CNN's Newsroom program for the 5 a.m. hour were:

- "Russia Controversy Engulfs White House"
- "Trump Delays Reworked Travel Ban"
- "U.S. Officials Defend Controversial Yemen Raid"⁶⁶

In comes Trump to shake up the news cycle though. At 6:35 EST, Trump tweeted out: "Terrible! Just found out that Obama had my "wires tapped" in Trump Tower just before the victory. Nothing found. This is McCarthyism!"⁷¹ This is followed up a few minutes later with "Is it legal for a sitting President to be "wire tapping" a race for president prior to an election? Turned down by court earlier. A NEW LOW!"⁷² and "I'd bet a good lawyer could make a great case out of the fact that President Obama was tapping my phones in October, just prior to Election!"⁷³ A little after 7 a.m. he tweeted, "How low has President Obama gone to tapp my phones during the very sacred election process. This is Nixon/Watergate. Bad (or sick) guy!"⁷⁴

CNN's 7 a.m. lead story is still Russia and Sessions' plans to amend his testimony that upcoming Monday.⁷⁵ There is no mention of wire tapping anywhere in the 7 a.m. hour.

- By the 8 a.m. hour however: the tweets were in the lead of the show with CNN correspondent Ryan Nobles reading out the series of tweets on air.⁷⁶
- This is followed up with the disclaimer that "the White House has not provided any context or proof to back up the president's claims" and that the reporter will be back later with more information. to back up the president's claims" and that the reporter will be back later with more information.
- By the 10 a.m. hour of CNN this story is full blown and the lead of the show is, "President Trump Claims Obama Administration Wire tapped Trump Tower during Presidential Campaign."⁷⁷

Neither the White House nor an official spokesperson for Obama had commented at that time, but that doesn't stop the story. A former Obama spokesperson and then current spokesperson for the National Security Council tweeted back at Trump that, "No president can order a wiretap. Those restrictions were put in place to protect citizens from people like you," which CNN correspondent Athena Jones read on air.

Throughout the day this story dominated news coverage with developments including, "Obama Denies Trump Wiretapping Accusations," "Former U.S. Justice Officials Deny Wiretapping," and "Did 'Breitbart' Story Influence Trump on Wiretaps?" By 8 p.m. that night, the lead story: "Trump Accuses Obama of Wiretapping Him, Offers No Proof."⁷⁸

An analysis of the three broadcast networks' Sunday political talk shows for March 5, 2017 show that all addressed the wiretapping claim in the lead into their broadcasts, even though no evidence had been provided to support the claim. This is crucial because the lack of evidence to support the claim, yet the continued coverage of the subject shows just how influential Trump's tweets are. Something many people believe that Trump is acutely aware of.

- CBS's John Dickerson put it this way: "President Trump found himself once again on the defensive against damaging leaks and intensified the focus on the Russia story, launching an unsubstantiated claim on Twitter that the former president had wiretapped his campaign headquarters to investigate Trump's Russia ties."⁷⁹
- NBC's Chuck Todd was even more blunt in his analysis: "And President Trump's tweet claiming President Obama tapped his phones. Can the White House provide evidence? Or is the president just trying to get people to stop talking about Russia?"⁸⁰

But it wouldn't be the last time Trump used this tactic.

Transgender Troops

Fast forward to late July in 2107. The stories that dominated the news cycle were:

Trump pressuring the GOP to end Obamacare—which had still not been repealed.

- The ongoing Russia investigation.
- Jared Kushner disclosed previously unmentioned meetings with Russians during the 2016 campaign, in relation to a Senate Intelligence Committee meeting. While Kushner's statement included that he did not collude and that all his actions were proper, his announcement of the meetings contradicted previous denials from Trump.⁸¹ Trump again used his media capital to defend a member of his team and himself against the Russian investigation.⁸²

Then comes the morning of July 26, 2017 and another analysis of the day's news coverage from the CNN transcript archives.⁸³ CNN's morning program *New Day* is focused on the healthcare battle and the Russia investigation with headlines including:

- "Senate Rejects Proposal To Repeal And Replace Obamacare"
- "Trump Intensifies Attacks on Sessions"
- "Manafort Subpoena Dropped"⁸⁴

Then a little before 8 a.m. EST, Trump tweeted out: "After consultation with my Generals and military experts, please be advised that the United States Government will not accept or allow..." Then, almost 10 minutes later this is followed up with: "...Transgender individuals to serve in any capacity in the U.S. Military. Our military must be focused on decisive and overwhelming..." and "...Victory and cannot be burdened with the tremendous medical costs and disruption that transgender in the military would entail. Thank you."⁸⁵

By the 9 a.m. hour of its *Newsroom* program, "Trump Bans Transgender Service Members,"⁸⁶ was the lead story.

- A CNN correspondent reads out the tweets on air—this time during a round table of pundits who offer their commentary and analysis of the subject.
- Throughout the day the tweet on transgender troops evolves, taking more and more of the news cycle
- Lead story for CNN's primetime *Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees* is: "In Three Tweets, Trump Bans Transgender People from Military; Heads of Military Branches Caught Off Guard by Transgender Ban."⁸⁷

The tweet also was the top story on all three networks nightly news programs as analysis and reaction reporting filled the A block on all shows. The same is not true for Sunday morning shows, as it didn't make the lead in any of the three network shows, likely due to timing since the wiretap came on a Saturday while the transgender troops came on a Wednesday. (Also by Friday, Trump had announced the firing of his the chief of staff Reince Priebus via tweet.) Trump's transgender troops ban was again a lead story for the early morning programs on CNN the next day, up until then-White House Communications Director Anthony Scaramucci started tweeting about leakers and tagging Reince Priebus. Trump had once again shifted the news cycle for 24 hours.

NFL Protests

Trump's strategy had adapted by late September in 2017. This time while Trump's team wasn't specifically dominating the news cycle headlines, the Russia investigation was still front and center. This time, the news was the Facebook announcement that it would be turning over Russian-linked ads to Congress. More than 3,000 ads would be given to the House and Senate Intelligence Committees as part of their investigations into the Kremlin's interference in the 2016 election.

On Friday evening, Trump gave a speech in Alabama at what was billed as a campaign rally for Alabama senate candidate Luther Strange. Trump wondered aloud at the rally if he had made a mistake or not in supporting Strange in a speech that wandered from how special Alabama is, to threatening North Korea, to calling the Russia investigation a hoax. Then Trump tried out a new line on his base: "Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now. Out. He's fired. He's fired!'"

While the line was met with applause, the news reaction was less substantial.

- The New York Times article covering the speech had the headline: "At Alabama Rally, Trump Toggles Between Republican Loyalists."
- The Washington Post: "'I love Alabama—it's special': At rally for Sen. Luther Strange, Trump vents frustrations in rambling speech."
- Wall Street Journal: "Trump Campaigns in Tight Senate Race in Alabama."

There was of course some pick up Friday night of his speech comments from various sports websites and news organizations such as Fox and Huffington Post, but it was not the dominant narrative for that night.

An analysis of CNN transcripts from Saturday September 23, (when Trump would first tweet about NFL players kneeling in protest during the national anthem) shows Trump's speech comments as the fourth or fifth story in the lineup during the morning programs.⁸⁸ They instead focused on North Korea missile tests and the health care plan faltering. Cue Trump's Twitter. At 1:11 p.m. EST Trump tweeted out: "If a player wants the privilege of making millions of dollars in the NFL or other leagues, he or she should not be allowed to disrespect..."⁸⁹ "...our Great American Flag (or Country) and should stand for the National Anthem. If not, YOU'RE FIRED. Find something else to do!"⁹⁰

CNN Responds:

- In the 2 p.m. hour broadcast on CNN, Trump's tweets are brought up. But the timing of them is questioned as the CNN correspondent doing a story on North Korean officials at the UN leads his report off by saying: "Well you couldn't help notice that while President Trump was tweeting that players in the National Football League who don't stand for the national anthem should be fired. At the same time, the Foreign Minister of North Korea was issuing this very sharp, blunt, angry, diatribe against him."⁹¹
- CNN would continue to cover the story of the tweets combined with Trump's comments from the speech along with the growing reaction from various officials.
- NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell had part of his statement read on air along with several NFL players.

Following coverage of Goodell's statement Trump tweeted out at 5:25 p.m. EST that: "Roger Goodell of NFL just put out a statement trying to justify the total disrespect certain players show to our country. Tell them to stand!"⁹² This story would continue to evolve and dominate the news coverage of the day, culminating in CNN's prime time 8 p.m. hour leading with: "NFL, Athletes Blast Trump for Anthem Protest Comments."⁹³

The following morning all three network's Sunday political talk shows mention the showdown in their lead ins.

- NBC's Meet the Press started with Todd stating in his lead in, "This Sunday, race, free speech, and patriotism. President Trump takes on NFL players who take a knee during the national anthem."⁹⁴
- All three networks also included the growing tension in North Korea and the scramble around an Affordable Care Act repeal—two sore spots for the president.

The president tweeted on the subject—five more times over the course of Sunday. He starting with: "If NFL fans refuse to go to games until players stop disrespecting our Flag & Country, you will see change take place fast. Fire or suspend!"⁹⁵ Then followed up by, "NFL attendance and ratings are WAY DOWN. Boring games yes, but many stay away because they love our country. League should back U.S."⁹⁶ Then came a few more on the importance of the National Anthem and the sacrifice Americans had made to protect it. The final tweet on the subject for that came at 5:25 p.m. Sunday night, "Sports fans should never condone players that do not stand proud for their National Anthem or their Country. NFL should change policy!"⁹⁷

Trump's continuing tweets once again influenced the news cycle:

- The lead story for the 6 and 7 a.m. hours on CNN's New Day program was: "National Anthem Protests Grow in Rebuke of Trump."⁹⁸
- Through CNN's coverage on Monday, the national anthem protest coverage leads hour after hour, while North Korea and healthcare struggles are now pushed lower in the rundown for each show. Headlines including, "Trump Versus NFL Players," "Pentagon Reacts to NFL Fight" and "Kelly Not Pleased with NFL Comments," keeps the story in the news cycle.

Trump then chimes in via Twitter on Monday night at 5:26 p.m. EST to proclaim: ".@CNN is #FakeNews. Just reported COS (John Kelly) was opposed to my stance on NFL players disrespecting FLAG, ANTHEM, COUNTRY. Total lie!"⁹⁹ and then another tweet on the subject slightly thereafter. As for continued coverage, both the CBS Evening News and ABC World News tonight had the story as their first of the night Monday evening. NBC did not, however anchor Lester Holt was in Puerto Rico to anchor the broadcast and their hurricane coverage led for the first seven minutes of the newscast. Trump would once again tweet on this topic the following day, Tuesday, Sept. 26, 2017, as well as several more times throughout the year in both October and November—causing reactions and headlines each time that disrupted the news cycle.

Implications

In his habits, his rhetoric and even his policy, Trump is an enigma in the previously established *modus operandi* of a politician. Trump manipulates them with Twitter. Other politicians have historically used Twitter as a means of communicating directly with their constituency; to garner grass roots support for an issue, promote certain agendas, or vocalize outrage at specific topics. In other terms, they used it to work around the media. To not allow their message to be changed or edited in any way by editors and reporters. While Trump uses Twitter as a way to directly address his base, it's actually used far more as a tool of manipulation—not communication. He's firing up his base, for sure, but only as a side effect of his news cycle change. His prolific practice of tweeting something incendiary when news coverage is less than flattering demonstrates his awareness of the clout his tweets hold and that sometimes he misses the mark.

Take his transgender tweet; when it proved to only shift the news cycle a fraction of what he wanted, soon being out done by Saccramuci's Twitter, he proceeded to tweet against Jeff Sessions and then ultimately fire Reince Priebus via Twitter. Those two stories shifted the news cycle much farther than the original transgender troops tweet.

When he saw his NFL tweet getting more play and more pick up as a greater number of people responded, he kept adding fuel to the media fire. He prolonged that story for days and then came back to it multiple times because he knew it would successfully stir up enough reaction to keep the news cycle focused.

The case studies in this paper are just a snapshot of the overall manipulative nature of Trump's tweets. His consistent reliance on this behavior and tendency for unprovoked inscendary comments paint the picture on a large scale of the president's manipulative strategy for preventing negative media coverage on topics, specially the Russia investigation and legislative failures that he'd wants out of the news cycle.

Conclusion

It is clear to many people in the academic, journalistic and news consumer realms that this is an unprecedented time for news. The role of the internet to spread information and the dramatic rise of citizen journalists have completely redefined the role of gatekeeper for journalists. No longer does someone need the full financial and technological means of a traditional publisher in order to get the word out to other people—they just need signal and a smartphone.

This freedom of access has already brought about influential change. As Bob Schieffer said, "when the printing press came about there were several years of religious warfare and dramatic ideological fights while society adapted to the spread of information before the renaissance came about and equilibrium was achieved again." He added that the advancement of the internet will follow the same path but that the world is currently only in the first trimester of this adventure.¹⁰⁰

As more and more people continue to gain access to the internet, Twitter continues to be an influential tool for politicians and newsmakers alike. Former President Barack Obama's mastery of Twitter, both through his personal account and the first presidential account, allowed him to reach millions of people. This access allowed him to spread his messages, motivate voters and interact with constituents on a personal, and conversational level. Like Franklin D. Roosevelt or John F. Kennedy before him, Obama was able to use the technological advances of his time in order to serve his political agenda.

Trump has also molded and shaped the idea of Presidential Twitter by offering an unconventional amount of access to a president's thoughts and commentary on a wide range of issues. This frequency of tweets and the often controversial content of them had led many news organizations to adapt their news coverage to include the Twitter feed. Through the use of designated Twitter watchers, specialized sections for reporting on said tweets and the immediacy of online articles Trump's tweets have led to a large scale alteration of the news cycle as many known it before.

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