TWITTER AND U.S. POLITICIANS:
STYLE AND SUBSTANCE[*]

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ABSTRACT. The current, nearly ubiquitous, use of Twitter by U.S. politicians makes important the question of how politicians capitalize on this social media platform in order to have their messages spread to other media both on- and off-line. This paper explores the role of style in helping U.S. politicians to achieve massive attention on Twitter through the use of case studies of two prominent national politicians: U.S. Senator Charles "Chuck" Grassley and U.S. President Donald J. Trump. These two politicians were selected for their success in getting their Tweets spread via other social media and picked up by more traditional media outlets. They are also known for their unique, distinctive styles, which may be part of the reason for the attention they have garnered.

The discussion of the style and substance of the Tweets of these two U.S. politicians is designed to be suggestive rather than conclusive. It is an exploration of the attention their Tweets have garnered and the analyses their Tweets have engendered as evidenced by recent research published online by data scientists and supported and illustrated by my own examples and observations regarding their individual styles.

This piece suggests the importance of style in the effective use of Twitter and other social media by politicians. Style is an aspect of Twitter use that deserves much more attention, from both researchers and practitioners.

Keywords: Twitter, style, U.S. politicians, social media.

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José Van Dijck (2013) makes the point in her book *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* that political causes use social media with the goal to "go viral across online and offline media in order to accumulate massive attention" (p. 87). If this is the case, then there can be little doubt that politicians use the social media site Twitter also with the hope of accumulating "massive attention." In fact, the 2008 election of Barack Obama in the U.S. is often, in part, attributed to his effective use of social media, particularly Twitter. And many politicians in the U.S. became Twitter users early in 2009 as a result. The current, nearly ubiquitous, use of Twitter by U.S. politicians makes important the question of how politicians can garner the "massive attention" discussed by Van Dijck.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of style in helping U.S. politicians to achieve massive attention on Twitter through the use of case studies of two prominent national politicians: Senator Charles "Chuck" Grassley and President Donald J. Trump. These two politicians were selected for their success in getting their Tweets spread via other social media and picked up by more traditional media outlets and for their distinctive styles and for their distinctive styles, which may be part of the reason for the attention they have garnered. It is important to note that in examining the success of their stylistic choices, I am in no way supporting the content of their Tweets.

The term *style*, in the context of this work, is used in the manner of Ben Yagoda, Professor of English and Journalism and former director of the journalism program at the University of Delaware, in his book *The Sound on the Page*. Yagoda (2004) distinguishes the clear, "transparent" style of journalists and textbooks (p. xx), where the goal is to impart information with little if any noticeable "voice"—or individual style-- from what we read for pleasure, the authors we return to again and again, those that we read not only because of *what* they write, but also, importantly, because of *how* they write it. We return to these authors, our favorite authors, because we enjoy how they write. And we have authors we abhor, also because of *how* they write. These individual styles Yagoda (2004) finds akin to an author's "fingerprint" (p. xvii). Like a detective, those who read carefully can recognize authors by their individual styles,

which are "unique and identifiable" based on vocabulary choices, turns of a phrase, preferred sentence structures, etc. (Yagoda, 2004, p. xvii). One does not have to like a style to be able to recognize it. Yagoda (2004) points out that substance or the content of authors' works can also help to identify them (p. xv). Authors tend to repeatedly return to certain topics, so "substance" is also part an author's stylistic fingerprint, and, hence, its use in the title of this piece.

The importance of written style for politicians on Twitter is made apparent by the former manager of Journalism and News for Twitter, Mark S. Luckie, who stated in a radio interview about politicians, government officials, and Twitter that "the best tweeters are those who tweet about their professional experiences in a personal way. At Twitter, we always encourage people to talk in their own voice, not just to put out press releases or links back to their [web]sites" (Clark, K., Kurtzleben, D., & Luckie, M.S, 2017). Luckie's call for the use one's "own voice" by politicians using Twitter is clearly a call for the use of what Yagoda (2004) would call one's individual style. Luckie emphasizes that it is important that the voice be authentic to the tweeter, not a persona created for Twitter.

This discussion of the style and substance of two U.S. politicians is designed to be suggestive rather than conclusive. It is an exploration of the attention and analyses their Tweets have garnered as evidenced by recent research published online by data scientists and supported and illustrated by my own examples and observations regarding their individual styles.

Twitter, Style, and Politicians

Peer reviewed publications about politicians, style, and Twitter, are somewhat limited, given the relevantly recent adoption of Twitter by politicians and the length of time it takes to get peer reviewed works published. From what is available and relevant to this project, there is support for the notion that the differing Twitter styles of public officials can

lead to potentially differing outcomes. In an experimental study comparing university student reactions to two differing styles of Tweets from the imaginary head of an environmental organization, those with a style that was deemed "powerful" by the researchers, because of the direct and assertive discourse versus those that were deemed "powerless" because of their ambiguous or indirect style (Alvídrez & Rodríguez, 2016, p. 90). Researchers found that subjects were only likely to take action (e.g., attend a meeting or post positive comments about the organization) in response to the Tweets of a male with a "powerful" Twitter style (succinct with direct requests, e.g. "Enter the site and support our initiative.") as opposed to a male with a "powerless" style (e.g., use of hedge words, such as "very," or "kind of" and use of tag questions, e.g., "Isn't it?") (Alvídrez & Rodríguez, 2016, pp. 93-94).

In addition to differing Twitter styles potentially leading to differing reader responses, it has been learned that politicians' Twitter styles may vary depending on the relative prominence of their candidacies. A study of the use of Twitter in the last two months of the 2012 U.S. House of Representatives election identified differing approaches to using Twitter between 1) incumbents vs. challengers, and, most interesting to the topic of this paper, 2) major party vs. third-party (e.g., Independent or Green party) candidates (Evans, Cordova, & Sipole, 2014). This study focused on the number of followers, the frequency of Tweets, and the content of Tweets in their understanding of style. Incumbents had many more followers than their challengers, but they tweeted notably less (Evans et al., p. 459). And, as one might expect, third-party candidates had far fewer followers than the major party candidate average, but, interestingly, they tweeted much more frequently. They sent more attack tweets, more personal tweets, and more tweets in response to other Twitter users than the major party averages. In addition, they were more likely to tweet links to media stories about their campaigns, a form of self-promotion (Evans et al., 2014, pp. 457-458).

Research on the Twitter accounts of the two, leading party presidential candidates in the Spanish General Election of 2011, found that as has been assumed by journalists (Clark et al., 2017) and documented in

analyses (Lazer, Ognyanova, & Robinson, 2016; Robinson, 2016), few politicians, especially of the major parties, write their own tweets. Those Tweets that they do write themselves, they tend to sign with their initials, to distinguish them from those written by their staff. Medina and Muñoz (2014) conclude that this tendency to have staff designated to write Tweets interferes with a campaign's ability to show the candidate "as a person rather than as the spokesperson for the party platform" (Medina & Muñoz, 2014, p. 91), and is counter to what Twitter recommends, as noted earlier. So even with the best of intentions, campaigns that do not use Twitter to reveal their candidates "as individual citizens versus politicians" fail to use Twitter effectively (Medina & Muñoz, 2014, p. 101), essentially filtering the candidate's style when they filter the message (Clark et al., 2017).

Exceptions to what Medina and Muñoz (2014) call the "corporate style" of political Twitter use, which uses primarily "an official, impersonal type of discourse focused on political messages" and which does not allow for much interaction with other Twitter users (p. 99), are rare and worthy of discussion and analysis. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore two exceptions in U.S. politics at present with the goal of describing their unique styles that have made them so attractive to their followers and garnered much attention as a result. In the midst of presenting the styles of Senator Charles "Chuck" Grassley and President Donald J. Trump, I will refer frequently to analyses and descriptions of their Tweets that have recently been published online.

Grassley's Twitter Style

Charles "Chuck" Grassley is a Republican U.S. Senator from the state of Iowa. He started out in state government in 1958 and became a U.S. Senator in 1981. His years of seniority in the Senate have led to powerful positions on key committees, most notably chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee. He is also a farmer, in this state which is famous for and proud of its role as an important corn producer in the U.S.

Grassley was a fairly early adopter of Twitter among U.S. politicians, with his first Tweet occurring November 26, 2007. Grassley, at the time of this writing, has approximately 127,500 followers of his Twitter account. While that may not seem like many, one needs to consider it in context. Compared to the other Republican senators, he is fourth in Twitter followers among those who have not run for president ("Look up United States Senators", 2017). Also, the state of Iowa has a relatively small population and few urban areas. It is important to note, too, that the number of followers one has does not necessarily equate to massive attention to one's Tweets. For example, former U.S. President Barack Obama has the most followers of any politician in the U.S. right now, but even when he was president, one rarely read about any of his Tweets in the mainstream media. In other words, his Tweets did not receive massive attention.

Grassley's Tweets have been variously described by journalists who cover the U.S. Congress and others as "minimalist poetry" and "haiku-like" (Weber, 2013), a form of "code-meshing", a mix of formal and informal language (Young, Barrett, Young-Rivera, & Lovejoy, 2014, p. 81), "colorful and personal," and written by a "Twitter genius" (Izadhi, 2013). Heffernan (2012) describes him as a "virtuoso" on Twitter. As a result of his unique style, Grassley has gathered something like a cult following, especially among journalists, which is the ideal group to have follow a politician if the goal is "to go viral across only and offline media" (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 87).

The most obvious stylistic features of Grassley's Tweets include the:

- Use of SMS abbreviations,
- Use of non-standard abbreviations (often leaving out vowels),
- Unmarked ellipses (missing words and phrases),
- Grammar errors,
- Lack of punctuation, and
- Words in all capital letters.

These simple stylistic features do not require individual elaboration, however, the way he uses several or all of these features in a Tweet creates a unique and identifiable style. I will provide three examples here:

Example 1

 "Seen dead deer on way church. They didn't hit my car Unsafe if u drive in area where deer congregate Iowa needs longer season to kill more" (18 Nov 2012).

Before discussing the style, I will provide my best translation (or elaboration) of Example 1 and some context for understanding it. I read Example 1 as follows: "I saw some dead deer on the way to church. They didn't hit my car. It is unsafe if you drive in an area where deer congregate. Iowa needs a longer deer hunting season to kill more deer." This Tweet describes a rather typical occurrence in the rural Midwest of the U.S. Deer get killed by motorists along highways and their carcasses are often litter the roadside. As deer have no natural predators in these states, the state government designates a deer hunting season in the fall when licensed gun owners may hunt for deer in specific areas to help cull the herd of wild deer and prevent overpopulation.

In Example 1, readers can find a number of the stylistic features listed above: a grammatical error: "seen," the use of the SMS abbreviation "u," a lack of punctuation, and many unmarked ellipses (missing words), including missing articles, prepositions, verbs, and pronouns. Although there is much left out of this Tweet, Iowans are familiar with the issues Grassley raises and, to them, this Tweet would be quite understandable. It reflects a sentiment that might be regularly shared among neighbors in the state.

Two additional noteworthy characteristics of Grassley's Twitter style are his indirect method of attack and his use of metaphorical language. For examples of these, see Examples 2 and 3.

Example 2

"Whoever monitors twitter at WH for President Trump read my previous 2tweets and hv this businessman understand TRANSPARENCY=ACCOUNTABILITY" (11 Feb 2017).

Like Example 1, Example 2 also requires a fair amount of interpretation on the part of the reader to understand. As he references in the Tweet, this Tweet was part of a series of Tweets that Grassley sent in response to a book that he was reading. He calls upon someone at the White House ("WH") to inform President Trump ("this businessman") that transparency equals (or is a form of) accountability.

In Example 2, one notices that Grassley specifically avoids using any of Trump's Twitter account handles (@realDonaldTrump or @POTUS). In fact, he does not directly address his concerns to Trump at all. Rather he indirectly calls upon "whoever monitors Twitter for the White House" to read his Tweets. In addition to this indirect method of attack, one also can find in Example 2 Grassley's use of unmarked ellipses, non-standard abbreviations, lack of punctuation, and the use of all capital letters.

In Example 3, Grassley is again indirect in his attack, this time on then U.S. President Obama. This attack is still indirect because he does not include Obama's Twitter handle in his message, however, unlike in his Tweet to Trump in Example 2, Grassley does directly address Obama by name.

Example 3

"Pres Obama while u sightseeing in Paris u said 'time to delivr on healthcare' When you are a "hammer" u think everything is NAIL I'm no NAIL" (7 Jun 2009).

In Example 3, Grassley also uses "hammer" and "nail" metaphorically, language use that caught the attention of Composition Studies scholar Vershawn Ashanti Young, who found this example indicative of a type of code-meshing found in African American communities in which African American dialect is combined with other dialects the writer knows, calling upon all the linguistic resources available to the writer to create a unique style (Young et al., p. 81).

As noted earlier, the topics that writers repeatedly return to can also serve to identify their writing and may be considered part of their unique style. For Senator Grassley, regular topics include both the personal and the professional. Whenever he is home from the nation's capital, Washington, D.C., he is busy touring the state of Iowa, visiting with

his constituents. He records these visits on his Twitter account, often linking it to Instagram, so that followers can see pictures of themselves and their friends with the Senator. When in Washington, D.C., Grassley documents meetings in the Senate and expresses opinions on policy matters. He advertises important interviews with the mainstream media. He also does quite a bit tweeting that one would classify as personal. He tweets regularly about deer problems, the sports scores of his alma mater, the University of Northern Iowa, complains about what is on television, especially the History Channel's failure to have enough history content, and comments on places that he has stopped to eat as he tours the 99 counties in Iowa.

In sum, his style, is a bit odd by the standards of typical political Tweets, but completely unique, and easily identifiable. He effectively combines the professional and the personal with an "old school and earnest" appeal that leads Elahe Izadi, formerly a journalist for the *National Journal* now of the *Washington Post,* to write that "if you aren't following him, you aren't using Twitter correctly" (Izadi, 2013). Grassley's Tweets show that he takes his position as representative of the people of Iowa seriously and that, although he has great seniority and power in Washington, D.C., he is a humble Iowa farmer, just like his constituents. His personal life (as he presents it on Twitter) revolves around what it does for many Midwesterners: sports, television, deer, and dinner. Midwesterners are often thought of as taciturn compared to those from other parts of the country (for example, New York City). Virginia Heffernan (2012) described him as "pithy" on a telephone interview with her, so the 140-character format seems to fit him and his constituency well.

Trump's Twitter Style

U.S. President Donald J. Trump owns the real estate business he inherited from his father and was a television celebrity for over a decade as the star of the show *The Apprentice* from 2004-2015. Although he made brief forays into politics in the past, his first public office is the U.S. Presidency, for which he was inaugurated January 20, 2017. He is 71 years

old, and as of this writing, he has nearly 33 million followers on Twitter. For comparison's sake, former U.S. President Barack Obama has over 91 million followers. Trump, like Grassley, was a fairly early adopter of Twitter, with his first Tweet on May 4, 2009.

The most notable characteristics of Trump's Twitter style are:

- Adjective-noun combinations (e.g., "crooked Hillary," "Fake News"),
- Taglines (one word or short phrase at end of Tweets, such as "Sad"),
- Extensive use of all capital letters and exclamation points,
- Self-referential (heavy use of "I" and "me"),
- Limited vocabulary (e.g., "Great," "big," "new"),
- A preponderance of negative messages, including
- Attack messages.

Two analyses of Trump's Tweets during the 2016 pre-election period that have been published online support these observations. Crockett (2016) compared 2000 of Trump's Tweets and 2000 of Hillary Clinton's Tweets from the six months before the November 8, 2016 election using the Python Sentiment Analysis with Natural Language Toolkit. His analysis found that Trump's Tweets were much more self-referential and negative than Hillary Clinton's, with 60% of the sentiments he expressed classified as negative as opposed to only 20% of Hillary Clinton's. Crockett (2016) also found that Trump had a limited vocabulary of positive words compared to Clinton, with "great" being by far his most common positive word, followed by "new" and "big."

An analysis reported in Lazer, Ognyanova, and Robinson (2016) and Robinson (2016) compares 762 Tweets sent from the Twitter handle @realDonaldTrump from an Android phone (in Trump's possession) to 628 Tweets sent on the same Twitter account from an iPhone IP address (presumably controlled by his staff). The analysts employed the National Research Council of Canada's Word-Emotion Association Lexicon for this comparison. They found that there were stylistic differences between the Tweets. The differences they discovered tend to confirm that there were at least two different people authoring the messages sent from the @realDonaldTrump Twitter handle. These results support the claim that Trump himself—an Android phone user at the time-- is more likely to be

negative than his iPhone impersonator (staff member). They also support that he is highly self-referential and regularly uses adjective-noun combinations and taglines (Lazer et al, 2016; Robinson, 2016).

Illustrations of all these stylistic characteristics can be found in Examples 4 and 5 below, which are quite typical of Trump's Tweets.

Example 4

"The failing @nytimes has been wrong about me from the very beginning. Said I would lose the primaries, the general election. FAKE NEWS!" (Jan 28, 2017).

In Example 4, one can find many of the classic markers of a Trump Tweet: the adjective noun phrases, e.g., "failing @nytimes" and "FAKE NEWS," and the tagline "FAKE NEWS!", which also includes the words completely capitalized and the sentence concluding with an exclamation point. In addition, the negative sentiment, the use of Twitter to attack a perceived opponent, and the reference to himself are also typical.

Example 5, below, provides another Trump Tweet, where again the typical characteristics of his style are apparent.

Example 5

"Despite what you have heard from the FAKE NEWS, I had a GREAT meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Nevertheless, Germany owes…." (Mar 18, 2017).

In Example 5 one again sees examples of the adjective-noun combination, of words in all capital letters, of self-reference and a negative, attack message (about Germany).

In addition to the highly identifiable features of Trump's style mentioned above, the typical content of Trump's Tweets can also serve as part of Trump's stylistic fingerprint. As recommended by Twitter, he combines personal and professional topics in his Tweets. His content is often self-promotional, which is not unusual for politicians running for office. But Trump takes it further Hillary Clinton (Crockett, 2016) and most major party candidates in similar situations (Evans et al, 2014). In the tweets analyzed by Crockett (2016), Trump used the phrase "I will be interviewed" almost as much as his campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again", his most commonly used phrase.

And, Trump's Tweets are often media-focused. Cockett's (2016) analysis found that nine of the top ten accounts that Trump tweeted to were media outlets whereas Hillary Clinton tweeted the most to other politicians. On the traditional political topic of policy issues, Trump's focused on only four major areas: immigration, economy/jobs, terrorism, and guns whereas Hillary Clinton discussed also health, education, housing, veterans' affairs, and foreign policy (Crockett, 2016). Trump also tweets about his family, defending and praising his children, and he is openly controversial and personal in his attack Tweets.

In sum, Trump, like Grassley, has a unique and authentic Twitter style. And also like Grassley, he combines the personal and the professional. But Trump's style is closer to what has been called a celebrity Twitter style than Grassley's in that it is more self-referential, promotional, and, especially, controversial (Clark, et al., 2017). This similarity is not surprising, considering that Trump started tweeting as a television celebrity, not as a politician. As Kurtzleben, a National Public Radio political analyst stated during a radio interview, "Trump's Twitter…account is an extension of his real-life personality. He breaks norms on Twitter and he breaks norms in real life" (Clark et al., 2017).

Discussion

Most politicians send Tweets that have been "sanitized" by their staff (Clark et al., 2017), even when they try to be more informal and transparent (Medina & Muñoz, 2014). However, U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley and U.S. President Donald J. Trump have Twitter feeds that are stylistically different because they lack any sense of a "filter" (Clark et al., 2017) on their Tweets. They appear to write their own Tweets, which leads to strong, individual styles and strong responses from others on Twitter. As Kurzleben notes, "People love him [Trump] because he's authentic" (Clark et al., 2017). Similarly, Izadi (2013) and Heffernan (2014) attribute Grassley's success on Twitter to *his* authentic style.

Trump's style, in particular, is most unusual for a politician, perhaps because he started his Twitter account while a celebrity, not a politician. His use of a celebrity style, which has much in common with the style of third party candidates as described by Evans et al. (2014), has taken politicians, the media, and the general public by surprise. Because Twitter users seem to respond differently to different styles (Alvídrez & Rodríguez, 2016), style is an aspect of Twitter, and social media use in general, that deserves much more attention, from both researchers and practitioners.

This discussion of the Twitter styles of U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley and U.S. President Donald J. Trump is, as mentioned earlier, intended only to be preliminary and exploratory. It is not in any way generalizable. However, it is suggestive to those interested in how Twitter and other social media are used, and its effective use for politicians. There is plenty to study with regard to the myriad differences between a traditional campaign on Twitter (for example, Hillary Clinton's) and a less traditional use of Twitter by a politician (e.g., Donald Trump). Furthermore, the question of the competing interests and tensions between successful Twitter strategies and the traditional desires of campaign staff to provide a filter between the candidate and the public needs exploration. The question of the relationship between political and celebrity Twitter styles is also raised in this work. In short, the topic of Twitter, style, and politicians is ripe for further study.

Conclusion

Ben Yagoda (2004) concurs with George-Louis Leclerc, Compte de Buffon's maxim that "*le style c'est l'homme même*" (p. xvii). Similarly, Twitter supports the notion that one's Twitter style should reveal one's true self (Clark et al., 2017). Although Grassley and Trump have very different styles: one is a celebrity, an outsider in the political realm; and the other is a homegrown, Midwesterner who works hard for his constituents and hasn't forgotten where he came from despite his powerful positions in Washington, D.C., both are successful in the getting their Tweets spread

beyond Twitter to "accumulate massive attention" (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 87). Their Twitter styles illustrate the former Twitter executive, Mark S. Luckie's point that "the more organic your tweet is, the more likely people are to respond to it" (Clark et al., 2017). Having and using a Twitter account is not a guarantee of successful use. *How* one Tweets is what is important. As Yagoda (2004) succinctly puts it: "Style matters" (p. xvii).

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