

TWEETING WHILE LEADING:
PRESIDENT TRUMP'S TWITTER HABITS
FROM A WASHINGTON MEDIA PERSPECTIVE

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the two most important men in my life: my father and my fiancé. I love you both more than I can say.

To my father, Terry: thank you for always supporting my education from the time I was a little girl. During the writing of this thesis, I recalled how you spent so many late nights sitting at our kitchen counter with me when I was growing up doing school projects, checking over my homework, and helping me learn how to write papers when I had no idea how to do it on my own. I have reached this point in my schooling because of your dedication to helping me achieve my goals.

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ABSTRACT

This research is an in-depth study of how the current President of the United States is tweeting while leading our country and how that has impacted the traditional information gatekeeping role of the news media. By applying agenda setting theory as is central theoretical framework, this study examines how President Trump's penchant for tweeting has perhaps permanently changed the relationship between commander in chief, press, and the public. It finds that while presidents in the past have attempted to control the news cycle, the influential nature of his Twitter account allows President Trump to take the agenda setting reins in a way that no other politician has to date.

The findings from a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with professional journalists covering President Trump chronicle the challenges they face on a daily basis and how they are working smarter and harder in light of the president's "fake news" rhetoric. The research was conducted by an experienced journalist who understands the daily grind of the news coming out of the White House, having written for multiple newspapers, produced for four national television news networks, and covered three different presidential administrations over the course of a fifteen year career in news.

Along with benefiting our scholarly understanding, this research has the potential to help news professionals understand the impact President Trump's use of Twitter is having on their work, their newsrooms, and the future of their profession.

INTRODUCTION

The President of the United States sat down behind the Resolute Desk in the Oval Office, surrounded by his closest advisers. “Should we attack? What’s the likelihood of civilian casualties? What’s the level of risk to our forces?” he asked them. After being presented with various options, the President made the difficult choice to launch a massive air assault on jihadist camps where terrorists responsible for a recent, deadly attack on American soil were hiding out. After the decision had been made, the President retreated to the Situation Room to discuss how the strike would be carried out and to watch feeds of the bombings in real time. As this was happening, the communications office drafted a statement and alerted the White House press corps to gather in the briefing room for a breaking news press conference.

A short while later, the press secretary walked up to the podium and delivered the news live on television to the American people about the attack and then fielded questions from reporters. He assured them that an on-camera statement from the President would be coming the next day when the mission was complete and the impact was more clear. The wire services buzzed, the newspapers adjusted the next morning’s headlines, the cable networks entered wall-to-wall coverage, and news anchors interviewed foreign policy experts about what all of this might mean for America. When it was all over, the press office informed the reporters that there would be a news lid for the evening, guaranteeing no other information would be forthcoming. The news media went home to grab some sleep before the next day’s busy news cycle began, secure in their job being done for the day. The American people knew the latest and that more information would be delivered to them tomorrow.

Many in the media might refer to a chain of events like this as “the good old days.” Today in the era of social media with our current President, the sequence of events would go more like this: President Donald Trump hints at his plans and intentions for days on social media leading up to the attack, the press struggles to put together the puzzle pieces well after the event has occurred, the press secretary puts out a statement once the attack is carried out and refuses questions from the media, and the President follows up with an after hours tweet about the intent behind the military action, causing the press to frantically scramble to keep up. Instead of the media delivering the story to the American public and the rest of the world, the White House is telling the story, delivering its version of facts, and deciding where priorities lie and what issues are or are not important – or some might say, setting the agenda. President Trump does all this while expressing an extreme dissatisfaction on Twitter with how the news media do their jobs in a manner that ranges from vaguely targeted to shockingly insulting.

Almost every morning before Americans have had their coffee and perused the news on their smartphones while heading into work, the President of the United States is already using Twitter to tell them exactly what’s on his mind. President Donald Trump, the so-called “Tweeter in Chief,” rises in the early hours and despite his busy schedule, typically finds time to share whatever personal musings, insights, opinions, or information he can fit into blocks of up to 280 characters. By doing so, he is able to directly, candidly, and quickly address his over 50 million followers and often eliminates the traditional middleman role of the news media. Trump has a long history of unfiltered tweets, increased his use of the social media platform as a candidate, and now as president has continued to use the power of Twitter in a different way from any politician

who has preceded him. By doing so, he's manufactured some of the most defining moments of his presidency to date.

Despite the staggeringly high number of people who follow the @realDonaldTrump account or see news coverage about his tweets, Americans appear to have mixed feelings about Trump's Twitter habits. A July 2017 ABC News/Washington Post poll found that 67 percent of Americans disapprove of his use of Twitter and find "his tweeting habit a major irritant." Almost one third of Americans deemed the actual tweets "inappropriate" and "insulting" with much smaller numbers associating positive words with his tweeting practices. The poll goes on to note that the last time respondents felt so strongly about a president acting in a negative way and being a poor role model was when it was revealed President Bill Clinton had engaged in an affair with a White House intern. While we're clearly listening closely, it seems that many Americans don't like what the President is saying or, just as importantly, how he is saying it.

Despite these negative feelings, the President's tweets continue to dominate the news cycle and remain popular among his supporters, who have popularized the "Make America Great Again" hashtag #MAGA to express their support. Just one tweet can instantly change the leading story of a network news broadcast, alter newspaper headlines, or cause a flurry of social media activity. It has become a daily pattern that does not show any signs of receding for newsrooms across the country. The members of the media who are most affected by this development are political journalists in Washington whose daily job it is to chronicle, report, and analyze everything President Trump does.

While a surface level answer to understanding why Trump's tweets have the impact they have might be to quip, "Well, that's easy. He's the leader of the free world," it can

be argued that there is much more to these social media dispatches than that. President Obama regularly tweeted, but public reactions to his tweets and news coverage of them were completely different. They lacked an element of surprise and instead complimented an already carefully established White House communications narrative. With the exception of extreme breaking news situations, when past presidents have wanted to share news with the American public, they often attempted to convey the information to media outlets during the day to allow the media to get everything ready for their evening news broadcasts.

By contrast, President Trump's tweets come in a constant stream, often in the very early hours of the morning or even in the middle of the night. While we do live in a 24-hour information cycle, this is still unprecedented. Never before has the White House press corps arrived to their White House booths on a regular basis to find that the President has gotten a massive head start on sharing news with the American people. During his stint as CNN Editor-At-Large, Chris Cillizza stated that Trump "has used Twitter as a combination of a focus group and a blowtorch." He added that, "For Trump, each tweet and retweet represents a small victory for him over his many enemies...delivering exactly the message he wanted to send. And no one could stop him!" When it comes to two of the groups he perceives as his biggest enemies – media who don't praise him in their coverage and politicians who don't agree with him – Trump does deliver a message and a carefully crafted one at that. While your average regular Twitter user quickly types out a tweet to their small group of followers and hits send without thinking very much about what they're saying, the President's tweets can have an instant national and even international global impact. They are crafted to generate

attention and a response among his supporters and non-supporters alike.

While critics of this idea might be tempted to say, “Hey, it’s just Twitter” and deflate the importance of the President’s daily tweets to a bunch of harmless social media musings that don’t really mean much, others have noted that his comments should not be minimized and that the tweets may go so far as to distort our democracy and reality. Newsweek’s Zach Schonfeld writes that the tweets are “surprisingly complex nuggets of manipulation” that contribute to “a frightening new maelstrom of deception.” The end result, he worries, “is a presidency that aims to exert power over your perception of truth and falsehood.”

These days, we live in a world that is already filled with a heightened level of fear – terrorist attacks, mass shootings, natural disasters that cripple major cities, and even the threat of global nuclear war are all within the realm of possibility. It is important to understand how the leader of our country uses Twitter to create his own reality. This research will seek to shed light on what may happen to our democracy and the role of the news media in it in these very uncertain times.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since Kennedy and Nixon squared off in the first televised presidential debate in the 1960's, it has been apparent that modern media have the ability to powerfully shape how the public views politicians – both positively and negatively – even to the point of impacting the outcome of elections at local, state, and the national level. Communication theory holds agenda setting responsible for this effect. As Boyle (2001) defines it, agenda setting is “the ability of a media organization or institution to determine the important issues for debate or consideration.” Simply put, agenda setting theory in action can mean that the media have an enormous amount of power when it comes to the American public's perception of issues or individual people, such as elected officials. Researchers who study agenda setting, media, and politics find a near-certain “positive relationship in the tone toward candidates between media coverage and public opinion about the candidate” (Kim et al, p. 111). It seems that the public doesn't just think about the public figures the media covers in a general sense, but rather absorbs the tone and details of news coverage about an individual and forms their thoughts accordingly.

CONCEPTS OF AGENDA SETTING THEORY

The work of two journalism professors, Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw (1972), exploring the relationship between the public, media, and politicians formed the original empirical basis for agenda setting theory. Their initial efforts detail how our political reality can be shaped by the people who make up the news media, not just in terms of basic facts but rather how much importance news consumers should attach to those facts. Since that information may be some individuals' only contact with

politics, McCombs and Shaw note that mass media set the agenda by influencing the “salience of attitudes” (p. 177) toward issues, though they are careful to acknowledge the existence of extreme bias by some news media as a potentially contributing factor. At the time, looking at the 1968 presidential election campaign, McCombs and Shaw noted that they were not able to solidly prove the existence of agenda setting in their study, but instead laid out the conditions of agenda setting if it did in fact occur in the media landscape. Their work provided an outline of criteria of theoretical agenda setting rather than demonstrating it actually taking place.

This paved the way for future research on agenda setting theory. Virtually every article that explores the theory in depth makes at least some reference to McCombs and Shaw’s work in a foundational sense and seeks to build upon its concepts. Further research on agenda setting tells us that media focus on specific items in the news leads the public to be concerned about these items, which is known as first-level agenda setting. When the media tell us not only what to think about but how to think about it through attribute salience, we have entered into the realm of second-level agenda setting (Ragas & Kiousis, 2010). Further, the theory of intermedia agenda setting tells us media content shapes other media content (Roberts & McCombs, 1994; Ragas & Kiousis, 2010).

McCombs also identified a fourth stage of agenda setting research that looks at who sets the media agenda. It’s not simply “sheer exposure” to mass media that produces effect on attitudes and opinions of the public, however. Being exposed to “certain kinds of media content” (Kim & McCombs, 2007) is what has the ability to shape attitudes and opinions.

When it comes to media emphasis of a certain politician, it is often not just a general portrayal involved in the agenda setting process. Studies involving attribute

salience show us that media placing emphasis on certain attributes of candidates or elected officials, such as their personality or qualifications, influences public perception (Kiousis et al, 1999; Kim & McCombs, 2007). If a politician is found to be arrogant by the general public, that trait is mirrored in the media's portrayal of that attribute (or lack thereof) in a candidate. It is interesting to note however that these smaller examples of attribute salience do not appear to affect a candidate's overall salience (Kiousis et al, 1999).

Camaj (2014) argues that agenda setting and the knowledge the media impart about politics have great effects on political participation and democracy in general. Her study presents evidence that media agenda-setting's influence on broad civic attitudes is more important than its effects on specific attributes or opinions and that attributes emphasized in media content are crucial when it comes to the public's ability to judge and evaluate trust in political institutions. This tells us that agenda setting theory does more than affect the political attitudes of the general public, it affects the actions of the general public. There are actual observable behavioral outcomes. From the media we learn about "the efficacy and integrity of political institutions" (Camaj, p. 634) and their stances on key issues. Camaj finds that citizens exposed to political knowledge through the media are more likely to participate in politics in ways other than voting – whether it be attending a protest or getting involved in a political party or civic organization.

The Chicken or the Egg Conundrum The gist of the old riddle, "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?" surfaces in much of the research on agenda setting in political media. Where does public perception of information begin? Who is truly influencing whom? Are the media setting the agenda with politicians following suit? Or

are politicians dictating the agenda and news organizations are rushing to keep up? This is a complicated question that much of the literature on agenda setting and political media seeks to make sense of. Intermedia agenda setting also comes into play here. Do television stations take their cues for political news coverage from newspapers? How do all of these entities react to each other, and who is the first to set the agenda? “Identifying and analyzing these subtle relationships” (Ragas & Kiouisis, p. 578) means asking many questions and exploring different levels of interplay between media and politics.

Many studies that have attempted to answer this “who influences who?” question have not been definitive. Sweetser et al (2008) looked at the 2004 presidential election and whether or not candidate-controlled political ads and candidate blogs used for public relations purposes were able to influence the agendas of major TV news networks. Data supports the hypothesis that candidates did have influence on the media particularly with blogs. Advertisements, however, were not shown to match the media agenda.

Interestingly, later analysis showed that media set the candidates’ agenda and that intermedia agenda setting occurred, with the media transferring their agenda directly to candidates and their campaign blogs. It should be noted, however, that some scholars (Boyle, 2001; Roberts & McCombs, 1994; Kiouisis et al, 2009) do find evidence that candidate advertisements can influence the news agenda and that the salience of issues in promotional materials correlates with their salience in the news media. But overall it appears that the communications efforts of the media and politicians are so tightly interwoven that it is nearly impossible to determine who is providing the original or predominant influence on whom. Kim et al (2011) address this conundrum by determining that a more contemporary version of agenda setting is “agenda building,” a

give and take process between sources that want to get their information published and the press that is seeking out information from sources. Rather than one entity always influencing the other, there is the potential for a see-saw effect.

Style Versus Substance When it comes to the amount of attention people pay to mass political media and news, the public is quite varied (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The media at times must choose to focus on a political story's style or substance. One of the reasons that polling firms stay so busy during election seasons is that well before Election Day every four years in November, the public wants to know who is winning or losing the race to the White House. The media respond accordingly in a practice known as "horse race" reporting. Once a candidate is elected into office, his approval rating is the continuation of this trend. The predominance of horse race stories before voters head to the polls is a consistent finding in agenda setting literature. Particularly in television news, Boyle finds that "the horse race aspects of presidential campaigns now dominate over more issue-centered information" (Boyle, 2001, p. 27). For the majority of people, stories are more interesting and easy to digest that show candidates rising and falling in the rankings rather than hear about substantive policy issues, like their tax policy proposal or their plan to deal with entitlements. This is essentially a "style over substance" decision that the media make in their election coverage and is a concrete example of agenda setting in play.

It seems that most exceptions to this rule occur at times when there is a news event that creates great interest in a certain topic. For example, in the 2008 election between Republican Senator John McCain and Democratic Senator Barack Obama, "a global financial crisis topped the media and public agendas, and the campaign itself was

one of the most prominent issues around the world” (Kim et al, p. 111). The world wanted to hear what candidates were saying about the global economy, as one of them was going to be the next leader of the free world. This was also seen on a global level during the 2004 presidential campaign in Spain in which the March 2004 terror attacks in Madrid brought the issue of terrorism to the forefront of agenda setting (Kiousis & Shields, 2008). In situations such as this, the media and the politicians alike respond to the public’s interest and concern.

PRESIDENTS TAKING THE AGENDA SETTING REINS

While President Trump’s agenda setting efforts on Twitter are the basis of this research, it is important to note that he is far from the first President to attempt to set the agenda and bypass the media by speaking directly to the American people. After all, “no figure dominates the news like the President of the United States” (Johnson et al, p. 178). President Franklin Delano Roosevelt is remembered for using his fireside chats to broadcast his thoughts in his own voice in a new way that the American people had never experienced before, paving the way for future agenda setting efforts of presidents. We know that he was a “conscious stylist” and that “at the heart of his theory was an insistence on clarity and simplicity” (Aoki, p. 71) when communicating his message, particularly in challenging times.

Lang & Lang (1983) tell us that there is a demonstrated reciprocal relationship between the president, the press, and the public. Rozell (1989) confirms that a president’s ability to manage the press is viewed as an indicator of how well he can manage the country as a whole. Conversely, Johnson et al (2004) noted that by ignoring issues, the

president may be able to succeed in keeping them off of the public agenda. Johnson et al also cite three factors that affect presidential influence: the nature of the issue the president is addressing, presidential rhetoric, and presidential emphasis. Some presidents have been more successful at navigating the media and the public in these ways than others:

Scholars judge both Nixon and Reagan as successful rhetorical presidents who could communicate their goals to the public and effectively manipulate press coverage to their ends...On the other hand, researchers have classified Bush and Carter as antirhetorical presidents, those who could not put forth a successful vision to the press or the public and who therefore were judged by the press as leadership failures (Johnson et al, p. 181).

More recent administrations have continued to develop their own communication strategies and set the agenda. President George W. Bush rallied the American public in the lead up to the war in Iraq and made the argument that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction in the form of second-level agenda setting (Rex, 2011) through means such as his 2002 State of the Union address (Shipman, 2007). President Barack Obama's tenure is rife with agenda-building efforts surrounding his signature healthcare reform legislation known as Obamacare. Kiouisis et al (2013) found modest evidence that the salience of information put out by the administration on the subject of healthcare could be "positively associated with the salience of issues in news content" (p. 660). It should also be noted that while presidents throughout history have used the latest technology to their advantage, more recent presidencies like Bush and Obama have had the benefit of using social media to speak to the American people in ways that their predecessors did not.

SOCIAL MEDIA'S ROLE IN POLITICAL MEDIA

Never have the media played a greater role in our lives than they do now with the popularity of social media. In recent presidential administrations, the 24-hour news cycle and the Internet have increased the volume of material available to news consumers and influenced them to a greater degree.

Still, there are differing opinions on the nature and extent of social media's impact on traditional media coverage of politics. Some scholars find that use of the new tools simply creates a "normalization" of technology in the political process (Singer, 2005; Guo & Vargo, 2015; Vargo et al 2014) in which traditional political functions like mobilizing supporters or raising money are being carried out rather than entirely new activities. Others believe it is more of a burgeoning electronic democracy (Ragas & Kioussis, 2010; Woolley et al, 2010; Kioussis et al, 2015) where social media content created and spread by ordinary citizens has an increasing power that has significantly and permanently altered the political news landscape. News organizations and politicians also benefit from the public's use of social media when it comes to seeking to set the agenda. In the social media age, moment-by-moment data is no longer a luxury difficult to come by. The future promise of studying citizen reaction to candidates and agenda setting is strong and could be employed in the future to everything "from tracking response latency, to measuring real-time reactions to a major policy speech or media coverage of an unfolding crisis" (Boydston et al, p. 340).

POLITICAL JOURNALISTS AS GATEKEEPERS

When it comes to agenda setting, the main aspect that has changed with the advent of social media is the question of who is spreading information, otherwise known

as the gatekeeping role. From Facebook to Twitter to blogs, there is now a way for journalists and non-journalists alike to reach huge audiences with the click of a mouse. Some journalists have embraced this role, incorporating tools like social media accounts and blogs to keep their gatekeeping status (Singer, 2005). Some studies such as Singer's indicate that the professional norms of journalists are challenged when they use new technology in their work such as political journalists who incorporate blogs into their work and become "j-bloggers."

There are pros and cons. Blogs or use of social media may offer heightened transparency, accountability, and connection to communities for journalists. Other journalists may find that it is harder to provide unbiased news coverage on blogging and social media platforms that focuses strictly on facts and does not delve into the realm of commentary. Singer (2005) studied 20 reputable political blogs and found that most journalists have molded their blogs to fit traditional norms and practices and that while the blogging medium encourages participatory communication, the role of journalist as gatekeeper and information provider solidly stands. This study also finds that columnists are more likely than reporters to share opinion on their political blogs and that this distinction remains intact.

There is also evidence that the gatekeeper role of the news media as agenda setters has expanded, not contracted or even maintained the status quo, with the public's access to social media. A few years ago, research was published on the new concept of "issue ownership networks." Guo & Vargo (2015) studied a large set of data including 70 million tweets pulled from Twitter during the 2012 presidential election between incumbent President Barack Obama and former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney.

The study found that “the news media could determine the public’s identification of a political candidate with not just individual issues but also entire networks of issues” (pp. 557-558). While agenda setting is done in more complicated ways than ever before with the construction of “message networks,” the traditional news media are still found to set the agenda with the public. Rather than just connecting a politician with one issue, it is possible for the media to present them in such a way that he or she becomes associated with a cluster of issues that then become linked to each other in the mind of the news consumer in a “bridging” effect. In another study of Twitter data from the same election cycle, Vargo et al (2014) found that “the ways in which the news media associated different election issues to discuss Obama and Romney corresponded well with how the candidate supporters talked about the two political candidates” (p. 310).

TWITTER AND POLITICIANS

Just as journalists have taken advantage of the benefits that the Internet and social media provide, politicians have jumped on the bandwagon as well, using the Internet as a convenient and wide-reaching public relations tool that can directly affect agenda setting. Political public relations efforts seek to establish the salience of a politician’s “political priorities in media coverage, public opinion, and policymaking” (Kiousis et al, 2015). It used to be that a politician would have to put out a press release, statement, or video through the media, but this is no longer the case. While the media do get information from them in this way, it is more noteworthy that officials can now bypass the media entirely and set the agenda on their own through online campaigning (Tramell, 2006).

There is evidence, however, of the media continuing to have more power with

agenda setting than political campaigns and governmental organizations when the public is presented with both options equally. Ragas and Kiouisis (2010) looked at political activist organization MoveOn.org's "Obama in 30 Seconds" online ad contest held during the spring 2008 political primary. Citizens were asked to submit ads in support of then-candidate Barack Obama. The study found that the ads submitted to the contests by citizen activists were more strongly related to partisan media coverage than advertising material from MoveOn.org or the official Obama campaign. The study does not address other sources of partisan or non-partisan news media and how issue and attribute salience transferred from them, a fact that its authors acknowledge while noting that replications are needed before definitive conclusions can be made. Still, the study shows that we should not consider the media to be irrelevant in this age when politicians can engage in agenda setting without their assistance.

Then there is the issue of political affiliation, agenda setting, and how social media tie in. In Guo & Vargo's study of 70 million tweets about the 2012 presidential election, big data analytics and semantic network analysis were used to analyze issue ownership networks regarding Obama and Romney in the Twitter accounts of approximately five and a half million unique users. To determine if users were liberal or conservative, their profiles were scoured for a list of keywords. In the end, their research was able to identify 19,509 liberals and 26,494 conservatives (Guo & Vargo, p. 565). While the researchers felt the reliability of the sample they had was strong, their 2.6 million tweets only represented a small sample of the original. Simply because their social media profiles were not detailed enough for keywords to determine if the vast majority of the users were conservative or liberal, their tweets were not included in the

study. In another Twitter study of the same election by Vargo et al, the limitations of pulling segments of Obama and Romney supporters are clearly laid out:

We did this largely out of necessity because, as we mentioned earlier, Twitter users rarely divulge their political affiliation explicitly on Twitter. We draw the conclusion that these supporters are not representative of a typical voter, an “average” Republican or Democrat. Future research should combine Big Data analytics and traditional survey method to identify average Republican or Democratic voters (p. 311).

Some studies even find that their results lack evidence of a strong agenda-building impact from social media on the political news gatekeepers. Kioussis et al (2015) lists this finding as a limitation and suggests the need to further study the connection between what is posted on social media and how the traditional media and agenda setting is impacted by it. Studies on agenda-setting reviewed here do not seem to evaluate which political party or partisan media broadcasting the views of a political party is more effective at setting the agenda. This is significant as party distinction is a facet that has become increasingly important. Some studies suggest that partisans tend to pay more attention to news media and are likely to bring with them prior beliefs and attitudes “matter more than at the first level of agenda setting” (Camaj & Weaver, p. 1458) when it comes to media messages. Essentially, what someone believes before the media ever reaches them about a politician or an attribute may trump the news they receive later on.

Politicians have proved adept at reaching constituents before the media does, circumventing the press’ role as gatekeeper and dictating the message on Twitter on their own. In March 2015, after the New York Times broke the news of an email scandal involving former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, she shared her first reaction on Twitter, tweeting “I want the public to see my email. I asked State to release them. They said they will review them for release as soon as possible.” That tweet garnered over

eight thousand retweets and over ten thousand likes, helping her words to reach a large audience and control her own message – and the speed of it -- in a way that a press conference broadcast on television and radio would not have allowed her to.

Back in 2013, following the 2012 election cycle, Chris Cillizza said that with Twitter and political news, “the changes, which are still in process, are profound -- in the way that politicians interact (or don't) with reporters, the life cycle of news cycles and how the general public gets (or doesn't) its information.” He was especially correct in noting that, “There's no question that political Twitter reinforces a sort of groupthink.” Cillizza also points out that when it comes to political news, “what Twitter has done is exponentially increase the number of small things you need to watch.” Much of these predictions rang true in 2016. There are many facets of the most recent campaign (think Marco Rubio’s cowboy boots or John Kasich eating pizza with a fork) that likely wouldn’t have become part of the public consciousness if it weren’t for Twitter allowing people to hear about them quickly and share the moments on their own feeds in high volume. Simply put, it seems that Twitter has a strong influence on setting the political news cycle. The question is, how much control over that news cycle remains with political journalists as gatekeepers and how much has transferred to candidates and elected officials?

TWITTER, TRUMP, AND NEWSROOMS

When it came to candidate and then party nominee Donald Trump, getting attention had never been an issue. As a reality TV star, Trump knew the benefits of promotion and self-branding, crafting an image for decades “that has always been about self-absorption. The core brand message: Hey, look at me!” (Dumenco, p. 22). The

Trump persona later “shattered the traditional horse-race rules of election coverage by making himself and his whole campaign the story” (Hearn, p. 656). Twitter was the predominant mechanism Trump used to gain the attention of the American people, create narratives that voters could follow, and frame information in specific ways to gain leverage over his perceived opponents – the proclaimed “fake news” media and politicians who weren’t solidly parked in his camp.

The Trump Twitter phenomenon was documented early and often in his candidacy. Virginia Heffernan of Politico dubbed Trump “the Twitter candidate” and noted that, “Donald Trump, the crowned social-media virtuoso of the 2016 campaign cycle, is floridly available, grabbing the Internet’s lapels every few hours. With its sheen of raw improv and generous tolerance for subliteracy, Twitter has become Trump’s natural home.” There were many times when his tweets were his campaign’s sole communication to the media and the public on a given day. He also used Twitter in controversial ways, including attacking his rivals and others who do not agree with him in ways that many critics have found offensive and unbecoming of a presidential candidate.

Many of Trump’s followers, on the other hand, have found his candor refreshing and have supported him more for it. After Trump finished in second place behind Texas Senator Ted Cruz in the Iowa caucuses, he aired his grievances not on TV but on Twitter, writing, “The State of Iowa should disqualify Ted Cruz from the most recent election on the basis that he cheated- a total fraud!” Trump exchanging blows with each of his rivals via Twitter became a recurring theme in the 2016 election cycle. It’s for this reason and others that Gillian Branstetter of the Daily Dot dubbed Twitter “a new battlefield of the

campaign” and noted that “For better or worse, Twitter can be the ultimate campaign bumper sticker.” And it’s just as casual as a bumper sticker, sometimes with typos and misspellings, which is something that Politico suggests the public finds refreshing and adds to the “unscripted” moments that American public craves. “Trump’s errors pass for style,” Heffernan’s analysis notes.

Politicians using Twitter does not come without costs and complications, however. Twitter is a record of what you’ve said in the past and some candidates have seen their past tweets come back to bite them if they said something offensive, incorrect, or different on a policy than their current position. Just as Trump has enjoyed popularity on Twitter, his campaign saw that one mistake, even a typo as small as one character, can cause an uproar and lead to significant media attention. In the lead up to the Indiana primary, Trump sought and won the endorsement of retired Indiana University basketball coach Bobby Knight. The problem? The Washington Examiner noted that Trump boasted about the coach’s support on May 2, the day before the primary, but referred to him as “Bobby Night,” misspelling the beloved coach’s last name. The tweet was quickly deleted and reposted with the correct spelling a short while later. It’s difficult to know whether the error was because Trump did not know the correct spelling or fumbled while typing on his phone. The media and his Twitter followers jumped on the mistake immediately.

POLITICO reports that during an April 2016 campaign rally in Rhode Island, Trump discussed his Twitter habits, quipping, “Don’t worry, I’ll give it up after I’m president. We won’t tweet anymore. I don’t know. Not presidential.” As we all know now, that definitely didn’t happen. In his first longform post-election interview, Trump

told 60 Minutes that when it came to Twitter, “I’m going to be very restrained, if I use it at all, I’m going to be very restrained.” At the same time, he credited the social media platform for being the reason he won the election, saying, “I find it tremendous... It’s a modern form of communication. There should be nothing we should be ashamed of.”

When it comes to using the communication tool to deal with the media’s coverage of him, Trump told Lesley Stahl that a “bad story” or “an inaccurate story” could be dealt with through Twitter. “I have a method of fighting back,” he told her.

While politicians must face the consequences both good and bad when they chose to tweet, the stakes are much higher when a candidate becomes president. When he took office, President Trump elected to continue tweeting from his previous Twitter account under the handle @realDonaldTrump instead of transitioning over to the handle used by President Barack Obama, @POTUS, an acronym for President of the United States. It has been customary in many cases for high level government officials to assume the handle of the person who held their position before them, such as White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders using the Twitter handle @PressSec. This led to a question from many in the press and the general public: were the tweets considered official presidential statements? If they were official presidential statements, were all tweets considered a matter of public record, meaning they could not be altered or deleted and must be archived?

The Presidential Records Act (PRA) of 1978 sheds light on some of this. It was enacted following the scandals involving President Richard Nixon. The PRA governs the official records of both presidents and vice presidents, changing “legal ownership of the official records of the President from private to public” and setting strict rules for records

created during a president's time in office and ensuring that the records are transferred over to the National Archives when a president leaves office. In 2014, the law was amended to modernize the definition of federal records to include electronic records, effectively meaning that a tweet from a president is considered public record. Despite the White House initially dismissing the tweets and saying that they were not policy statements and did not serve as any kind of an official vehicle for addressing the American people, the administration eventually changed its tune. In June 2017, then White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer was asked during the daily press briefing how the tweets should be characterized and responded, "The President is the President of the United States, so they're considered official statements by the President of the United States." In November 2017, lawyers for the Department of Justice told a federal judge that the government treats the tweets from President Trump as official statements regardless of their content.

President Trump has not always played by the rules when it comes to tweets being a matter of presidential record, creating an "anything goes" expectation for his Twitter habits. After less than 24 hours in office, Trump shared his enthusiasm for leading in a tweet that included a spelling error, writing, "I am honored to serve you, the great American People, as your 45th President of the United States!" The tweet was quickly deleted and replaced with an identical one correcting the spelling to "honored," but not before the public and the media took notice and screenshotted the erroneous tweet, preserving it on the internet.

Over a year into his presidency, Trump's current Twitter persona allows him to be "somehow appealing to his supporters, and increasingly alarming to many others"

(Guthey, p.667). Insults are the name of the game in much of Trump's Twitter habits. "Make America Great Again" or the hashtag #MAGA is used by Trump, his staff, and his supporters as the overarching theme for his rhetorical vision. In the case of Trump's tweets that demonstrate his disdain for the media, "fake news" and "dishonest media" are common phrases that create a sustaining rhetorical vision that Trump is right and the media are wrong and should not be trusted. When Trump wants to express disdain for other political leaders on Twitter, common symbols are often false or misleading claims of the person being unable to do their job or nicknames that demean the figure such as "Lyin Chuck" Schumer or "Crooked Hillary" Clinton.

Try as recipients of Trump's Twitter wrath may to express their defense or point out logical or factual holes in his statements, it often proves to be a useless cause. Where Trump's Twitter account was scrutinized for errors during his campaign, it now serves as a record of his statements and he's similarly scrutinized for instances where he contradicts himself, changes his mind from previous statements, or when whatever he is saying in a tweet doesn't line up with information being given out by his aides, press secretary, or cabinet members. The result for journalists is often a head spinning, confusing web of information to sort through and attempt to confirm, only to have it change once again.

As a medium, tweeting can serve as a way to mobilize political action (Parmelee & Bichard, p. 12). Trump relies on his social media supporters not only to support him and share his message, but "he also unleashes 'tweetstorms' that encourage supporters to extend his narratives and create new stories about what is happening in social media" (Wells et al, p. 670). Wells et al (2016) studied Trump's tweets and retweets in relation to

volume of news stories about a particular topic and found that his followers vocal support through retweets and comments is “a significant positive predictor of news stories and blog posts” (p. 672).

Research published the month after Donald Trump became President found that “social media platforms were increasingly used as direct sources of news, bypassing the editorial media” (Enli, p. 50) and that this social media trend began in 2008 with the election cycle including then-candidate Barack Obama. Enli notes that there is a strand of research involving media and politics which deals with voter interaction and seeks to determine to what extent the most recent election created increased interaction between the politicians and voters, as well as the effect social media had when it came to professionalism in the campaigns of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Enli concludes that social media accounts of politicians have the power to have an agenda setting impact, he explores the notion of controlling the message when it comes to news, and he uses distinct methods to analyze tweets. As far as controlling the message, Enli tells us that:

Historically, every new media technology seems to have brought with it a set of expectations related to the revival of democracy and the empowerment of the people in relation to the power elites (Barber, 1998; Benkler, 2006; Brecht, 1983 [1930]). These idealistic expectations have often led to disappointment, as new media revert to the reinforcement of existing power hierarchies. (Enli, p. 54).

Enli also cites the many ways in which Trump and his campaign gave more control to the American public and involved them in discourse, including through the use of retweets, 78 percent of which were from ordinary users (p. 54). The conclusion from this would be while Trump was taking control of the message himself, pulling it away from the voice of the news media, he was simultaneously attempting to cede control to a

certain extent and take the risk of letting average Americans speak through retweets on his page. Enli makes the strong argument that the use of this strategy allowed Trump to earn Americans' trust as a reliable source of information as his retweeting them frames his image as an authentic outsider as opposed to a controlled politician. Enli noted that Trump used a "more amateurish yet authentic style in social media" (p. 50), which made his words all the more believable, particularly when contrasted with the more professional social media language used by his democratic opponent Hillary Clinton. Trump was also more likely than Clinton to engage with voters by retweeting or directly posting their content. Enli found that about a quarter of Trump's tweets during the general election campaign were retweets and that 78 percent of those tweets were written by ordinary users, not notable public figures (p. 54). The Clinton campaign was much more guarded.

Trump is of course anything but guarded. Shock is another one of the tactics that Trump uses to get attention on Twitter. Nothing is ever off limits and he appears to pay little heed to the consequences of his words on a national or even global scale. Others have looked at Trump and tried to understand what makes him tick when it comes to his Twitter use. In his introduction to a book on Trump's Twitter habits, psychologist John Gartner argues that Trump displays dangerous, narcissistic behavior with his "gratuitous nastiness" and that "manic dark energy drives him to vaunt himself and denigrate his fellow human beings relentlessly: all day, all night, every day, and every night" (Montgomery, p. xi) with Twitter being the president's main arena for this kind of behavior.

Every new technology or social media platform has the potential to impact the way journalists do their work, but Twitter seems to have had a more than average impact. From crowdsourcing information to seeking out sources and images in a breaking news situation, Twitter's platform has drastically changed the way the daily news cycle operates. Parmelee (2013) studied political journalists at US newspapers during the 2012 campaign and found that:

Twitter use has caused substantial changes to daily reporting practices, in part because Twitter is considered more consequential for their job than any other form of social media, including Facebook ... however, participants do not use Twitter in ways that suggest a major shift in traditional journalistic norms, such as objectivity and gatekeeping. (Parmelee, p. 291).

Thus, it seems that while political journalists may be using Twitter to do their jobs, it isn't changing the basis of what they're trying to achieve with their stories or the high standards that they hold their reporting to. Parmelee also found that many political journalists surveyed use Twitter as a type of awareness system to help them know what is going on at multiple places at once. In that way and many others, it is theoretically assisting the media in doing their job better.

Yet many of these same reporters who use Twitter to follow political news all day long were convinced Clinton was going to win in 2016. Hindsight is 20/20 but there is a strong argument to be made that in retrospect, the Twitter-using-media should have seen Trump's presidential election victory coming, in part due to the viral nature of many of his tweets. Trump's penchant for successful self-promotion and branding has long been a winning strategy for him. In seeking to understand the post-election question "How in the world did he win?" asked by much of the country and particularly by the media in the

aftermath of his election, journalist Brooke Gladstone harkens back to a quote from Trump's 1987 book *The Art of the Deal* that showed he was already well versed in setting the agenda through media:

The final key to the way I promote is bravado. I play to people's fantasies. People may not always think big themselves, but they can still get very excited by those who do. That's why a little hyperbole never hurts. People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. (Gladstone, p. 28).

In other words, perhaps Trump knew something that the folks sitting in newsrooms across the country didn't. Past studies have shown that being exposed to "certain kinds of media content" (Kim & McCombs, 2007) is what has the ability to shape attitudes and opinions, therein setting the agenda. Twitter's constant rotation of new material is in large part responsible for creating an environment that allows news to be disseminated all over the world to huge audiences with the click of a button. While every reputable news organization has at least one Twitter account that they use for this exact purpose, Twitter accounts such as President Trump's contribute to the diminishing role in the digital age of the mainstream media as gatekeeper of information.

Lee & Xu (2018) found strong evidence of public agenda setting by Trump on Twitter. While their study examined three months of tweets during the 2016 general election campaign, their findings do translate to his presidency as he has continued the same narrative themes in his tweets. Their research found that many of the issues Trump focused on in his tweets, particularly media bias, received significantly more favorites and retweets than others. They did not find the same for candidate Hillary Clinton, suggesting that there is something different about Trump's tweets about media bias when it comes to public agenda setting. In their conclusion, the researchers found that:

In theory, it is possible that candidates set the public agenda through social media even without successful media agenda building. Kellyanne Conway, Donald Trump's senior aide during the campaign, said in an interview that Trump "saw an opportunity to communicate right to people by cutting through the noise of the silence through the social media platforms", which implied his public agenda setting effort...In other words, they want to build the media agenda through their Twitter activities (Lee & Xu, p. 202-203).

Another new study in this area is Brian Ott's look at Trump in the age of Twitter, a case study on public discourse using a framework of media ecology which shows that "Twitter privileges discourse that is simple, impulsive, and uncivil" (Ott, p. 59). Ott explores a "post-truth, post-news, President Trump, Twitter-world" (p. 59) in his study in a negative way, going so far as to assert that the platform "infects public discourse like a social cancer" (p. 60). Ott's post-election conclusions about the media may factor into our proposed area of study. He tells us that, "the U.S. news media consistently treated Trump's Twitter feed, as well as many others', as news" which "signals the complete de-evolution of the news media" (Ott, p. 65).

While one might assume this means the media only views Trump's Twitter account as a nuisance that they'd rather be rid of, some journalists have spoken out noting that there has been something for them to gain from the president's constant tweeting. Bruce (2017) notes that "the drama may be good for business" (p. 1) and cites comments by New York Times executive editor Dean Baquet who said the paper's circulation rises every time Trump tweets about it. A 2017 editorial in *Broadcasting & Cable* argues that the media are pleased that Trump tweets because it offers them unfiltered access to what's going on in his head:

Those Twitter posts have been a veritable gold mine of revelations about the man, and have provided endless fodder for filling a 24/7 news hole.

Yes, his incessant, often-petulant reactions to negative press with endless cries of ‘fake news’ and theories of conspiracies are deeply troubling. But, under siege, the media has fought back with a determination to fact-check and truth-check him at every turn. (p. 65).

Even as the media have pushed back and attempted to insert truths into the national dialogue, Trump has benefitted from their publicity in the way of the old “there’s no such thing as bad press” adage. When it came to journalists during the campaign pointing out Trump’s lack of necessary qualifications to be the commander in chief, “to journalists’ surprise, the conflagration of Trump turned out to be not only resistant to the bright light of publicity but burned all the hotter for it” (Wells et al, pg. 670). Others cite evidence that bad press may have been a good thing for Trump. It appears that “for Trump’s publics, critique in the news was a badge of honor” due to decades of falling public confidence in the press and the conservative right’s regard of most of the mainstream press as leftwing and biased (Wells et al, p. 670). Others argue that the content of what the media wrote didn’t matter at all, saying that, “it is doubtful that his mainstream media coverage influenced his electoral success – except by reinforcing these voters’ notions about press bias and fueling Trump’s rise” (Lawrence & Boydston, p. 152).

One thing the media did not miss was the then-candidate and now president’s attacks on them. “Fake News” has become all at once an in-your-face punch line for jokes and a punch in the gut for journalists working harder than ever to keep up with the current 24/7 news cycle, ironically made even busier with Trump’s penchant for after hours and early morning tweeting. Marshall (2017) states that the president’s labeling of the media as dishonest is a mechanism by which “a president engaged in the

manipulation of human belief” and despite whatever he calls it, “fake news, alternative facts, whatever – it is propaganda, a way to be comfortable with a lie or a falsehood” (p. 9). Hale-Spencer (2017) writes about being accosted in a grocery store by a man shouting at her about “fake news” and desperately attempting to explain the difference between an editorial and a news story so that he’d understand why his attack – gleaned from the president’s rationale – had no merit. Hunhoff (2017) surveyed 12 weekly newspaper editors and publishers in 11 different states and found “some that have seen a negative ‘Trump effect’ on their newspapers” directly tied to “the ways President Donald Trump has been describing the media in response to unfavorable news reports” (Hunhoff, p. 3). Between the President’s attacks and claims about the media and the manner in which the media must fight to maintain their reputation and race to keep up with him, one could easily argue that the relationship between a president and the press has never been so contentious.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

After a review of the theoretical framework of agenda setting theory and previous literature related to this topic, this study will ask and seek to answer the following four research questions:

RQ1: How is President Trump setting the agenda and dictating the news cycle with his tweeting?

RQ2: Why and how do political journalists in Washington cover the President’s tweets to the extent that they do?

RQ3: How is the President’s ability to set the agenda by tweeting affecting

Washington journalists and the media industry at large?

RQ4: How do the President's attacks on the media including "fake news" claims affect Washington journalists and their careers?

METHODOLOGY

INTERVIEW METHOD

To better understand why our current president's tweets are different and why they have the impact that they have on the news cycle and Washington journalists, this research uses a semi-structured interview method to talk to eight Washington political journalists. Interviews were conducted in the spring and summer months of 2018 at quiet, public spots such as coffee shops chosen by the interview subjects. Workplaces were avoided to prevent distraction. There was also a concern that participants would not feel that they could speak freely within earshot of their coworkers or supervisors, particularly when it came to sharing thoughts about the innerworkings of their own news organization when it comes to President Trump's tweets.

This study used individual, in-depth interviews which researchers believe have the ability to uncover "hidden feelings or attitudes and beliefs of which a respondent may not be aware or that are only simply in his or her consciousness" (Berger, p. 55). Each interview lasted approximately one hour, with some variation depending on how long each participant was available to speak and how detailed they elected to be in their answers. When breaking news occurred that concerned the White House beat, efforts were made to reschedule interviews for a time when participants could be as focused as possible on their answers instead of their professional obligations. While there is never a news free day covering the White House, the intent of this was to find a fairly calm time to benefit both the participant and the conclusions of this research.

Participants were recruited online and were sent emails explaining the goals of the study, the minimal potential risks to them, and what would be required of them for

participation. Before an offer of participation was made via email, they were screened for varying ages, locations, races, genders, and political affiliations in order to establish some variety in the answers and a more complete look at the cross section of Washington journalists in this report's conclusions. Because of how central social media and news are to the study, it was also important that interviewees are Washington journalists covering the Trump administration who are also regular social media users and are familiar with the President's Twitter account and the nature of his tweeting. Advance notice of whether or not they included their tweets in their own news product was not required. They were also not required to follow him from their own Twitter accounts, since his account is public and can be viewed by anyone online.

Interviews were recorded with an iPhone with the verbal permission of each interview subject both in advance of the meeting and with a second verbal confirmation on site at each interview. Each participant was assured that the recordings were for transcription purposes only and that the recordings would be kept safe. In order to respect general ethical considerations that deal with an individual's right to privacy and protection from harm (Fontana & Frey, 1994), identities of individual interview subjects within the organizations are being kept anonymous in this research. In the recruitment process, journalists were told that they would remain anonymous in the study and this was reiterated again at the beginning of each interview, along with an assurance that the only people who would have access to interview session recordings would be those involved in analyzing the research.

Overall, it was assessed in advance that the potential for risk or harm to the participants was very low. Each participant was asked for their consent, provided with a

printed copy of a consent document to understand their rights as a participant, and was asked if they fully understood what the research study is about. Any questions were answered by the researcher before any questioning began. Most participants were curious to hear more about the nature of the study and what its goal was.

For the purpose of identifying them throughout this study, interviewees will be referred to as “Journalist One,” “Journalist Two,” and so forth. Basic characterizing details about the background of each interview participant can be found in a table located in the appendix of this study. None of these general descriptions threatens to reveal the identity of participants, and they are provided to demonstrate the wide variety of journalists included. Few details about the people who were interviewed are shared in this report for numerous reasons, including the fact that many of the news organizations involved do not have a large staff in roles that cover the president and happenings at the White House. The small staff means that it would be easy in many cases to figure out the identity of a participant.

Although their answers will discuss their specific duties at their organizations and the job functions they carry out, further elaboration on their role in their newsrooms will not be included. There were at times instances where participants discussed their employer or one of their coworkers by name. There were other instances where participants inadvertently shared other details that might identify them, such as a story they had worked on or a trip they had taken with the president. This research has attempted to omit any of these specific details that a reader of this report could use to identify a participant. While it was determined that this level of anonymity was necessary to protect the professional reputation and employment status of the journalists

interviewed, at times specific answers were omitted from the report's findings or paraphrased to convey the same ideas for this reason.

It is noteworthy that though this study will not reveal any of the names or employers of interview subjects due to the promise made to all participants, half of the subjects said they felt so strongly about the President's tweets and their effect on journalists that they would be more than happy to go on the record for their comments. Some said that everything they were saying was something they would have no hesitations about saying to their boss, White House officials, or even right to the president himself. Each of them was not asked if they would be willing to go on the record but raised the subject themselves. In each case it was an offer they made completely on their own. It was decided that to keep all participants on an even playing field, none of the identities would be revealed even though a portion of the participants were very willing and eager to speak on the record. It was felt that only naming some participants and not others would skew the data and be unfair to those voices that chose not to reveal themselves, giving more credence to the interviewees being named over those who chose to keep their names under wraps.

A semi-structured interview method was selected for flexibility. Past studies seeking to understand more about journalism by talking to journalists have seen success with a semi-structured interview format. In studying the influence of new technologies – including social media platforms – on journalism practices in Romania, Sotu (2015) found that using semi-structured interview as a method allowed for: “implications for the work of journalists or newsroom activities, to highlight the changes in the organizational culture and the professional identity of the journalists, to understand the challenges it

brings to the values, roles and routines of media professionals.” (Sotu, p. 28). Such findings are similar to what this research seeks to uncover when it comes to President Trump’s impact on the work of Washington political journalists. Other studies (Fulton & McIntyre, 2013) interviewing journalists about journalism have had similar success when it comes to using a semi-structured interview method to dig below the surface of their initial questions and find emerging, unexpected patterns in answers provided by respondents when lines of questioning may stray from where they were originally intended to go.

In a study published just this year on the relationship between Yahoo News, television news, and digital news to determine the competitive relationship between the three in the same way that this proposed study is examining a competitive news relationship, intensive interviews were used. One interesting thing these researchers did was that “when conducting interviews, this study would first let the interviewees to freely talk about what they were satisfied with from the three news media” (Li, p. 265) before probing further. If there was a category that more than one respondent mentioned, it was then considered a topic for evaluation, allowing respondents to guide the study instead of following any of the researcher’s preconceived notions about what the research should be uncovering.

Using this interview method requires carefully selecting the questions to be asked, including when and how they will be asked of participants. The semi-structured interview requires planning with some room for flexibility. Many studies using the interview method find that coming up with question categories in advance helps to organize the interview and provide a sufficient level of structure. In a study published in *Science*

Communication, Condit et al examined how news headlines about genetics with deterministic headlines influenced readers. After being shown news content just as our study plans to do, participants were asked to answer questions about the content they had seen. These questions came from the following categories: questions about article content, questions about their preferred social politics regarding genetics, questions about the stance of the news item's author and whether or not it was discriminatory, and questions about their own attitudes about determinism and discrimination in this area of science being covered in the news (Condit et al, p. 385). These closed questions were then followed by more open-ended questions allowing for participants to share more detail about their thoughts and the motivations for their answers. Using a category method such as this helped to keep our interview process focused and keep some level of continuity from one participant to the next while still allowing new patterns and themes to develop in the research.

QUESTIONS AND TWEETS

An identical list of questions was asked of all respondents, allowing for follow-up questions to answers that require further examination or explanation. The aim of questions was to collect “quantifiable facts that can be used to generalize about human behavior” (Brennen, p. 28). In each instance, an attempt was also made to listen as respondents elaborate on their thoughts. Understanding responses, probing responses, and phatic responses (Berger, p. 61) were all ways to encourage interviewees to share more and continue. Evaluative responses were avoided at risk of participants feeling like they did not give the “right” answer or that they were being asked to have a different opinion than the one they naturally have.

Upon arrival at each interview session, the journalists were told they would be asked a series of questions about tweets and media coverage generally before being shown tweets. The interview would require them to consider a number of facets of Trump's tweets, including their overall effect, how they personally cover them at their media organizations and in their own reporting, whether all of the tweets are newsworthy, and if they feel the tweets dominate current news coverage. They were also shown a series of four tweets and asked for their thoughts about the president's harsh criticism of the media in these and other tweets, such as accusing a news organization of slanted "fake news" coverage or attacking specific journalists for their reporting about him.

The first round of questioning for each participant included the following sample questions, asked in the same order with each participant for the sake of consistency of thought with follow up questions interspersed throughout whenever it was deemed necessary or beneficial to the research:

1. Please explain the day-to-day functions of your job at your news organization. Do you regularly interact with the President Trump's Twitter account in your daily work?
2. Does your news organization have a policy about covering his statements on Twitter?
3. How do you make a decision about which tweets to include in your news coverage?
4. Do you believe that every tweet is considered newsworthy because he is the president or is there something different about what Trump is sharing on Twitter? How does this compare to statements shared by past presidents?
5. Do you believe that political journalists in Washington, yourself included, give the tweets the appropriate amount of attention or have they focused too much on them?
6. How do you think your role as a journalist at your news organization has changed in the advent of the so-called Tweeter in Chief?
7. How do you think the journalism industry as a whole has changed because of Trump's tweets? Why are these changes important to the news business?

Additional questions were also included as part of this interview portion to ask a respondent to elaborate on a point, share more detail, or to clarify their feelings on the given topics. These additional questions, including the number of them that were asked by the researcher, varied from interview to interview.

Following these initial questions, participants were shown the following four tweets from President Trump's Twitter account under the handle @realDonaldTrump. The tweets were printed on individual sheets of paper and provided to participants one at a time. Because of character length, one of the tweets was a two-part tweet and was printing on two sheets of paper, both given to the participant at the same time. Each of the tweets deals with President Trump talking about media coverage, a media organization, or a specific journalist and were chosen to reflect a wide sample of the president's comments about the media on Twitter. Dates when the tweets were posted as well as the number of likes and retweets they received, while not emphasized or highlighted to participants as being important, were not omitted from the papers, and participants were free to observe that data and comment on it on their own if they wished. Any replies to the tweets from other Twitter users were not visible on the sheets of paper to prevent participants from being swayed by the opinions of other Twitter users about each of the tweets.

The four tweets shown to participants were shown in the same order each time and included the following:

TWEET ONE



Donald J. Trump ✓
@realDonaldTrump

Follow

The failing @nytimes has been wrong about me from the very beginning. Said I would lose the primaries, then the general election. FAKE NEWS!

5:04 AM - 28 Jan 2017

19,199 Retweets 102,909 Likes



TWEET TWO



Donald J. Trump ✓
@realDonaldTrump

Follow

.@CNN is in a total meltdown with their FAKE NEWS because their ratings are tanking since election and their credibility will soon be gone!

6:22 AM - 12 Jan 2017

32,481 Retweets 119,243 Likes



TWEET THREE



Donald J. Trump ✓
@realDonaldTrump

Follow

The new Fake News narrative is that there is CHAOS in the White House. Wrong! People will always come & go, and I want strong dialogue before making a final decision. I still have some people that I want to change (always seeking perfection). There is no Chaos, only great Energy!

4:55 AM - 6 Mar 2018

21,569 Retweets 94,689 Likes



TWEET FOUR – PART ONE



Donald J. Trump ✓
@realDonaldTrump

Follow

I heard poorly rated @Morning_Joe speaks badly of me (don't watch anymore). Then how come low I.Q. Crazy Mika, along with Psycho Joe, came..

5:52 AM - 29 Jun 2017

19,840 Retweets 77,034 Likes

TWEET FOUR – PART TWO



Donald J. Trump ✓
@realDonaldTrump

Follow

...to Mar-a-Lago 3 nights in a row around New Year's Eve, and insisted on joining me. She was bleeding badly from a face-lift. I said no!

5:58 AM - 29 Jun 2017

18,727 Retweets 73,597 Likes

After reading these tweets, the journalists were told that they were free to share their immediate reactions to each tweet and discuss whatever they were thinking about it. They were also prompted to consider whether or not a tweet was newsworthy, if they would cover it, what it said about the relationship between President Trump and the press, and how it might shape the way the American public views journalists and the work that they do. Prompts that were read to them included the following questions, with follow-up questions interspersed throughout whenever it was deemed necessary or beneficial to the research:

1. What are some of the themes that you see repeating in these tweets about the media?
2. How do you personally cover tweets like these or how does your organization handle them?

3. As a journalist, how does reading tweets like this about the media make you feel about President Trump? Does that influence your coverage at all?
4. Do you believe tweets that have these characteristics receive an appropriate amount of news coverage?
5. What impression do these tweets give the American public about journalists and how does that affect journalism?
6. Are there any other Trump tweets about fake news and the media that come to mind for you? Why do you believe they are memorable or important?

At the end of each interview before concluding the sessions, participants were asked if there was anything that the questions did not cover on the topic at hand that they felt was important. The aim of this was to identify any important gaps in the application of the subject matter into the interview format and to touch on any interesting and important points that may have been inadvertently missed by the researcher. If those points were deemed important to relevant to the research, follow up questions were asked about them.

DATA ANALYSIS

Interview recordings were transcribed by the researcher and yielded about 75 pages of single-spaced 12-point text. The full transcripts are not included with this research because in each case, the level of specific detail, personal career anecdotes, and other various recollections clearly point to the specific person interviewed, jeopardizing their anonymity.

Following transcription of each of the eight interviews, this research went through the process of coding all the data and winnowing down what is important to highlight by “focusing in on some of the data and disregarding other parts of it” (Creswell p. 195). The lens of agenda setting theory was present throughout the data analysis process. The

overall themes that emerged serve as the strongest answers to the research questions present in this study. These are categorized and presented through summation and narrative passages that seek to explore answers to the research questions.

FINDINGS

TRUMP SETTING THE AGENDA

Heading into the interview process, there was a strong basis of evidence showing that President Trump is using his tweets to set the news agenda in a manner that benefits him and his administration. As has been established, this is something that past presidents have done. The greater purpose of this study was to determine what's different this time and what the various effects have been on the journalists interviewed. In every interview for this study, the journalists agreed that massive changes have taken place as a result of the President's penchant for tweeting. There was not a single interviewee who felt strongly that the impact of President Trump tweeting has been minimal or has not impacted the media to a large degree. These findings will detail those changes and their effect on Washington journalism.

When it comes to the official nature of the tweets, 8 out of 8 journalists surveyed said that they considered the president's tweets to be official White House statements and agree that they need to be taken seriously. Half of the journalists noted that at times it can be challenging to take the President seriously when his tweets become silly or mean in nature with harsh jabs and nicknames for other elected officials. Journalist One, an engagement editor for the website of a major newspaper, noted that Trump's Twitter use is "very up to his whim," that "he bluffs a lot and likes to make fun a lot." Whether serious or not, Journalist Four said, ignoring the tweets is just not an option in today's competitive media landscape where news consumers have an overwhelming amount of choices. While some consumers might complain about the coverage of the tweets at times, he said, they still want to know what the president is saying and will seek that information out from a media organization that is covering the tweets. If a news

organization chooses to ignore the tweets, it could potentially be at their peril, as they'd risk being the odd man out.

Journalist Three, the Washington correspondent for a radio broadcasting company, noted that he believes we should be careful not to be overly critical of President Trump seeking to find new and unusual ways to connect with his constituents, citing former President Bill Clinton playing the saxophone on late night television or former President Barack Obama appearing on comedian Zac Galifinakis' pseudo-talk show "Between Two Ferns" or calling into sports radio programs as previous examples of presidents stepping outside the box to connect with the American people. While he acknowledges Twitter may have more of a widespread immediacy to it and is a platform that allows for consistent, repeated communication, he says a president trying to circumvent the media and control the message on his own is generally not new. His decades of experience covering the White House puts the behavior of the current president in perspective in a way that not all of the respondents in this study were able to do due to a shorter amount of time spent covering the executive branch.

When it comes to his ability to dictate what they are covering, Trump's ability to manipulate the news cycle to his liking was a common theme that arose during interviews. Journalist Four surmised, "there are moments when I think we are all being led by the nose," citing as an example the "completely manufactured issue" of NFL players kneeling during the national anthem, which he felt strongly was to distract both the media and the public away from progress being made by Robert Mueller and his probe into possible Russian collusion in the 2016 election. Journalist Two, the senior political correspondent for a large news website, attributes this "look here, not there" skill to

Trump's career before his tenure in the White House:

“Trump is not a politician in the truest sense. He is a news programmer. Right? Like he knows how to program the news and he does it effectively.”

The notion of Trump manipulating both audiences and journalists themselves, distracting them from what's truly important, was raised by a number of journalists. Journalist Two notes that the media has a role and a responsibility to set the agenda and cover what's important to the American people “to try to help the American people make sense of the world” but that instead, Trump has managed to use his tweets and other statements to distract the media from doing anything positive. In that respect, the senior political correspondent says, we're simply playing into Trump's hands and his master plan to keep the country talking about what he wants to talk about on any given day to the detriment of both hardworking journalists and the American public. This, he surmizes, means that “his agenda is to protect and enhance his own reputation,” noting that he believes that is the difference between Trump and previous presidents such as Barack Obama.

Another facet to consider is the impact of Trump's tweet on news audiences internationally. Journalist Four, the chief correspondent for an international broadcaster, said his clients all over the world are watching the Twitter account closely to see how the president's policy statements on the platform may impact them. While certain stories may not appeal to some of his clients, the president's words can instantly have the impact of setting the news agenda in other parts of the world, oftentimes eclipsing what the country's own leaders are saying on any given issue. He cited examples of Trump calling out a foreign leader, announcing a trip to another country, or making news on Twitter the impacts other countries economically. It seems that with Twitter, Trump is able to

demand attention internationally as well as domestically.

FINDING THE NEWS NUGGETS

When it comes to incorporating tweets into their own news coverage, each of the journalists surveyed said that they do not cover every tweet that President puts out. Seven out of eight journalists interviewed said that they do not consider all of the president's tweets to be newsworthy just based on the nature of his holding the position that he does and that despite being the leader of the country, a large portion of his tweets do not contain news value. Five of the eight journalists said that they follow the president's @realDonaldTrump Twitter account from their own Twitter account used for professional use, while the other three journalists said that they don't follow the president directly on their own and prefer to hear about his tweets "organically" through other news coverage or through retweets if they're important enough to cover. One of those two journalists, Journalist Two, confessed, "I have intentionally never followed him" and that he views "generally most of the things he says as devoid of meaning in many ways," calling the tweets "bluster" and "posturing." The second, Journalist Three, said that he felt a follow was akin to an endorsement and so being that President Trump has a public Twitter account, he preferred to be able to look it up each time he felt it was necessary to see what Trump was saying. The last was Journalist Eight, a White House Correspondent for a large news website. She said seeing so many tweet alerts pop up on her phone constantly was "overwhelming" and "stressful," but that she sometimes went back and forth on her decision about following him. She was conflicted about the way to best manage her digital interactions with President Trump.

The criteria each said they use for determining what tweets to cover and which to

ignore were different but contained commonalities. Repetition was the main factor each of the eight raised. A tweet becomes much less newsworthy if it contains information the president has shared before, each interviewee agreed. Many said that they completely ignored tweets that were repetitious and that this has increased throughout his presidency. Journalist Seven, a White House reporter for a wire service, said that at this point in covering this administration, she chooses to prioritize which tweets deserve coverage the most:

“I think in the beginning because his tweeting was so unusual for a president, I think we were doing pretty much every tweet that he did. But then after a while, you know, he repeats some things. Some things are not as shocking on the news value scale as other tweets.”

Journalist Five, the newsroom managing producer for a national nightly TV newscast, said that “his tweets frequently rehash old ground” and that many of them can be ignored unless they contain new information. He compared it to a campaign stump speech which a candidate repeats over and over again and where journalists must listen to find the one item or topic in the speech that is new or different to include in their reporting. Journalist Three joked that if journalists felt that “every tweet is gold,” they’d never get anything else done and that as President Trump’s presidency progresses, he has become increasingly selective about which tweets he covers and which he leaves by the wayside. Attacks on the media and claims of “fake news” were the strongest example of repetition in tweets, according to most interviews, with one quipping that the tweets have become so repetitious “that I don’t think it’s worth me parroting what he says.” Others noted that Trump’s tweets about the Russia collusion probe have also become repetitive and have reached a point where it’s not common for them to contain new information that their audiences need to know about.

Some, however, raised the concept of using the tweets for both “keeping a record” or using them to point out shifts or progressions in the President’s policy priorities or perspectives and to at times even point out where the president has contradicted his aides or himself. In these instances, the change is what is considered newsworthy. Journalist One noted, “Some of those tweets that you might think are very innocuous or very harmless... sometimes they do a story just to keep a record of it.”

“Context is key,” Journalist Three stated. He cites an example of being in the room twice with the president when he spoke about gun control in the wake of a mass shooting at a high school in Florida. In one case, the president clearly said that he did not wish to ban assault rifles. In the other situation, in a room with members of Congress, the president contradicted himself on the issue. Journalist Three noted that in this situation, the change is the news:

“In this case we have a president who shifts with the wind and whatever people happen to be in front of him. You have to remind the listener, the viewer, the reader, of what he has previously said, done, and tweeted and why this is different and is he really going to stick with this this time.”

It’s challenging to understand what goes through a president’s mind in these moments, whether it’s making policy or changing his mind on previous policy decisions. Journalist Eight called the tweets “a window into his mind and what he might do next,” saying she tries to examine them for clues as to what future days may bring for her in the newsroom. Journalist Seven, who covers the White House exclusively, said that Trump’s use of Twitter represents a positive development in this area. She noted that never before have journalists been able to get a glimpse into the innerworkings of Trump’s mind. This is something that journalists in the past weren’t able to do with the same level of immediacy or frequency as they’re able to do with Trump and Twitter. Still, she noted,

the tweets often leave her with questions that the White House is unable to answer because they contain a lack of information or context needed to make sense of the president's words. When she attempts to get more context from the White House press staff, she's often left scrambling to figure out what the news in a tweet may or may not be because they seem to lack an understanding of the tweet or were caught off guard by it being written. She laughed, thinking back on the number of times the White House has told her a tweet speaks for itself without providing her with any additional information or clarification:

“When you ask ‘what does this mean?’ they never know. They never have an answer for you. And sometimes you have to go chase down context because if he says something wrong and you've got to correct him or put the context in. And it's very time consuming when you could be working on something more significant, more interesting.”

This level of confusion regarding the tweets, even among the communications staffers closest to the president, was a theme raised by multiple journalists during interviews. While acknowledging that President Trump's team “has a very difficult job on their hands,” Journalist Eight said that often her questions about tweets are dodged or answered in incomplete or vague ways with what the staffer thinks might be the best answer and “neither of those are helpful.”

The most important, newsworthy tweets were deemed the ones where the president announced personnel or policy decisions. Context played a role here because often there was more to an announcement in a tweet than meets the eye. Three journalists interviewed brought up the president's tweet about banning transgendered men and women from serving in the military and how it took the Pentagon and military officials by surprise. In this case, the context that the president was in essence going rogue and

making policy decisions without those that would be implementing the policy being aware of it was a large part of the story.

COVERAGE LEVELS

Interviewees differed on whether the level of coverage of the president's tweets being provided is the right amount or not. "It is overblown," Journalist One stated, noting that if he puts himself in the shoes of a news consumer, he understands why they're tired of hearing about the tweets so much. Journalist Five stated that journalists have no choice but to pay attention to and report on the tweets at their news organizations because when it comes to Trump and Twitter, "You ignore it at your peril." Others agreed that coverage could be scaled back, noting that the frenzied level of coverage of tweets by the media was at times obsessive and alarmist in nature.

One interviewee, Journalist Two, was at the far end of the coverage spectrum, arguing strongly that the tweets aren't really worthy of receiving any coverage. He harkened back to Trump's time as a candidate and his penchant for being, as an American statistician dubbed him, a "perpetual attention machine." Feeling that Trump's tweets were lacking in quality of ideas, he suggests the media avoid them whenever possible or at the very least scale way back in their coverage, saying:

"It's PR. And it's rarely related to substance or the kind of discourse that I think we should have in politics...I would prefer that the media just sort of minimize his tweets and the things he says. I wouldn't say don't cover it, but I think that the media plays into his hand by giving so much attention to his public statements on Twitter and elsewhere."

Journalist Seven concurred that the media are at times playing into Trump's hands with the high level of coverage of his tweets, theorizing that the tweets are often the product of a man who simply likes to get attention. A solution to this, according to Journalist Eight,

could be grouping tweets into “thematic stories” covering specific issues, rather than jumping to attention every single time President Trump tweets.

The idea of responsibility to readers was an important factor in coverage levels. Just because readers might get sick of hearing about the tweets did not mean that journalists surveyed were going to stop covering them, but rather to be more thoughtful in their coverage methods. Journalist One noted, “We do serve our readers but also have a journalistic mission. Which is to provide and keep record of history as it is happening” and that there are ways to “keep the alarmism low but at the same time we continue our mission.”

In some respects, journalists surveyed said that the audience’s focus on the tweets impacts how and to what extent they cover them. Journalist One noted that, “Whenever the president tweets something it’s kind of a big deal for us because it shifts public attention a little bit to that tweet” and it is more difficult for journalists to cover other news. The pressure for the eyes and ears of their viewers is real, and those interviewed said at times, they’re aware that the President’s tweets are helping their ratings or other audience metrics.

The majority of the journalists noted that the medium should not impact their coverage levels. Journalist One also noted that, “Just because it’s Twitter you can’t be dismissive of the medium... sometimes myself and my colleagues fall victim to it and we forget that it is Twitter and it is meant to be reactionary and in the moment.” Journalist Four said that he didn’t understand a debate that took place in Washington that occurred when Trump became a candidate and then president. Many in the media argued that journalists could stop paying attention to the Twitter account:

“He’s President of the United States. And whatever he says at any point, however he chooses to say it, is news. And I just don’t think that you can come to the conclusion that because we don’t particularly care for the tool of communication he is using or you know, we don’t really know how to interpret what he is saying, therefore we should just ignore that particular form of communication. So I think there’s no choice.”

CHANGES IN THE NEWSROOM

Many journalists surveyed discussed how the President’s Twitter habits have impacted day-to-day life in the newsroom, as well as their life outside of work. Ask the the journalists how their life has changed since Trump assumed the office of the presidency and they laugh, smile, and sigh. Covering the president has always been a challenging, fast-paced, and demanding beat. But now more than ever, these journalists say they’re working during their off-hours, finding themselves with little free time to relax and recharge, and even at times sacrificing commitments to their families and friends. Journalist Seven said:

“We are all overworked. We are all sleeping less. We are all living in this perpetual state of exhaustion. I just came off a week straight of twelve, fourteen hour days.”

Certain times of day and, as a result, certain newsroom shifts have been impacted more than others. The President’s habit for tweeting first thing when he wakes up in the early morning hours means that many journalists interviewed are starting their work days earlier. Half of journalists interviewed made a connection between this pattern and the President’s habit of watching cable news programs in the morning such as Fox & Friends on Fox News Channel and Morning Joe on MSNBC. Journalist One said his staff often begins their days earlier and Journalist Two painted a picture of employees on news desks “bracing themselves for what was going to happen in the morning.” Journalist Seven said her organization’s booth in the White House basement underneath the press

office opens hours earlier than it used to. Journalist Five, a newsroom managing producer, said that his newsroom doesn't ever stop monitoring the president's Twitter account because "you've got to have someone watching it closely enough that you know about it almost instantly because the whole day can change in a nanosecond." Journalist Six, a television producer for a cable news network, agreed, citing times when an entire rundown of a show has been thrown out at the last second before air because the president tweets something. She notes that while this is always something that can happen in the news business, Trump's penchant for tweeting in an unpredictable manner means that large scale, last-minute changes have become a more common occurrence. While her show's staff does their best, she does believe that at times their final on-air product is compromised in the process of scrambling to put together an entirely new show.

Journalist One cited new positions at their organization which require employees to be on call all the time. This engagement editor said that employees must understand that the news comes first, employees must be flexible to when breaking news happens, and that it's the job of editors such as himself to discern when an employee is overworked and needs to take a day off from the fast-paced cycle. He also said the "crazy hours" staffers are now working creates more of a family bond, meaning that when the organizations or individual staffers are criticized by the president, they feel defensive and band together. Being on call and coming into the newsroom unexpectedly for early mornings, late nights, weekends, and holidays means spending a lot more time with each other and bonds of loyalty develop.

The constant nature of the tweets is one that many of the journalists struggled

with. Journalist One said that employees are expected to be very flexible with their hours and that even when their shifts are over and they head home, they will often be expected to be back to work later on via phone or laptop because “we know something is coming. At some point.” He cited a situation when he was out to dinner with friends and left the gathering to write stories, or occasions when he was enjoying cocktails with friends on what would normally be off-work hours and was placed in a situation where he had to assign stories to other employees when he wasn’t in the right frame of mind to write a story himself.

The lack of what is known as a “lid” is something that many of the journalists cited as a contributing factor to the around the clock news cycle. A “lid” is traditionally called by the president’s communications office when news is done for the day and nothing else will happen, unless an event occurs that is out of their control. Traditionally it was shared by the day’s assigned press pool with the rest of the Washington press corps via email and announced on an overhead speaker in the White House’s press workspace. Tweeting, Journalist Four said, means that there’s no longer ever a point at which the day ends:

“Other presidents have attempted to dominate the news cycle and have attempted to set the agenda. But they’ve packed it in at seven o’clock at night and they’ve gone up to the family quarters and they’ve had a nice, quiet dinner and they haven’t been all alone watching Fox News Channel, raging at cable, and then at eleven o’clock at night or six o’clock in the morning, hitting Twitter.”

Technology has been both beneficial and detrimental to these journalists covering Trump. On the one hand, it gives them the ability to write their stories anytime at any place, even typing up something quickly on a cell phone. On the other hand, modern technology means that journalists are reachable anywhere at anytime. Most said that the

first thing they do each morning upon waking up is reach for their phones to see what the president may have tweeted overnight and how it will impact the course of their workday. Many of those same journalists said they'd set up alerts on their phones or text messages to be told immediately via a push notification when the president tweeted. Journalist Four noted that the "unavoidable decision" was "something that I very much hoped to never have to do" but that eventually he acquiesced. The same journalist, who serves international broadcasters, said that he routinely gets up at three in the morning to check his phone "because you never know."

MANAGING THE AUDIENCE RELATIONSHIP

Seven of eight journalists surveyed identified an important split in their audience: Trump supporters versus non-Trump supporters. This ideological divide essentially creates two completely different audiences that they must consider when putting out content. The Trump supporters give more credence to his tweets and take them very seriously. The non-Trump supporters, on the other hand, look at the tweets through a more critical lens and view them as evidence of why Trump should not be president. Very few people they serve, the journalists said, fall into a middle column of being apathetic towards the president and his tweets.

Journalist One, an engagement editor, has a specific job function where he deals directly with his organization's audience quite a bit and often in depth. This engagement editor noted that the demographic of their audience is something his newsroom and those that manage it must keep in mind, particularly when it comes to the viewers they are serving who are Trump supporters. These people, he says, believe what President Trump is sharing in his tweets, elaborating:

“Our audience is very unique in that it spans across the nation and specifically the Midwest of America where there are a lot of Trump supporters. So we’ve got to be mindful of what we say about those tweets and how we cover those tweets because we don’t want to alienate or we don’t want to seem like we are being biased against the president... As somebody who works with the readers and is in constant communication with them, they buy it. They really do buy it.”

He noted that these viewers are often unhappy with coverage where the press is fairly reporting on the tweets, but the reporting does not reflect positively on Trump. Through his work as an engagement editor, he has come to understand how some in his audience demographic feel extremely passionate about what type of coverage they are giving the president. This can hurt the audience relationship and potentially impact readership or viewership, but he believes journalists should not be deterred by this prospect.

Journalist One recalls telling a Trump supporter reader who complained about his publication’s coverage, “Sorry my dear, but it is what it is. Facts are facts. You’re seeing it in a bad way because it is a bad thing.” Readers like this, he believes, would rather see his news organization be more deferential to the president in their reporting. He said that in order to report the news in a truthful light, his organization is aware that they risk losing parts of their audience to “right wing news outlets that attempt to appease their audiences by pandering to what they believe to be true.” Journalists in these situations have never pleased everyone and will never please everyone even as our country has become increasingly politically divided, he admitted, “and that’s fine.”

Other journalists also stated that this is an area where the press should not back down just to preserve viewers or readers. Journalist Five agreed it’s not the role of journalists to change their reporting on tweets because portions of their audience won’t be happy with the coverage. He stated that it’s not the job of his industry to “protect

Trump from himself” when his tweets become outrageous or contain inflammatory statements or to play down what Trump said because his words will make portions of the American public angry. “He means to outrage some people, so you let him say what he wishes to say,” he added.

At times, the audience relationship turns personal. Journalist Three cites a squabble with a wife of a family member over the holidays over Trump’s decision to strictly limit the number of people invited to the White House Christmas party, an invitation normally extended to the entire White House press corps. “Well, I’m glad he is showing you people,” the woman told him. He cited this person as a perfect example of the portion of our audience that will believe Trump’s attacks on the media, even if they are not based in fact. He expressed sadness but not surprise that even a member of his own family could not put aside his animosity towards the press at a celebratory holiday gathering.

Trust and Bias The concept of media bias is not a new phenomenon. For as long as communication has been spread among the public in our country, there have been accusations of slanted information. This, Journalist Two said, is what Trump is capitalizing on with his anti-media sentiments and that claims of news bias is “a continuation of a problem that has been percolating for decades” and that the tweets are simply “amplifying and increasing it.”

The effects of the claims on Washington journalists interviewed vary. Journalist Three told stories of Twitter trolls harassing him on the platform when he does stories about the president. He says the attacks come from both sides. The conservative trolls believe he is biased and being unfair to the president. The liberal trolls insist that he and

other members of the media are to blame for Trump being elected with their slanted coverage and over a year into his presidency are still expressing their grievances.

Journalist Four tells a story about putting together a focus group for a brand new news program for an overseas broadcaster. Across the board, regardless of whether they were a Trump supporter or not, every single person in the focus group wanted to know more about who produced the sample program they were watching, where it was coming from, and how they could be sure it wasn't "biased propaganda." In all his years of conducting similar focus groups, he said, never has he seen an audience so concerned about whether or not they could trust the content they were seeing and considering whether or not it was biased.

Journalist One said he feels strongly that audiences are losing trust in Washington journalists because of Trump's "fake news" comments and we need to figure out how to gain their trust back. Journalist Five said that while he doesn't believe Trump has actually diminished interest in watching actual news coverage, the important takeaway may be that he's changing and influencing how audiences perceive that news coverage. When it comes to who exactly they're losing trust in, Journalist One raised the concept of brand loyalty, saying that he sees the same readers who insist they don't trust the media as a whole simultaneously express their admiration for their news outlet of choice. "It's like people may hate Congress but they love their Congressman," he surmised. So while some may say they hate media, they may remain brand loyal to where they like to get their news.

Journalist Five said our audience loses trust in us in part because of the way we react to President Trump's tweets. Due to the nature of Twitter and today's fast-paced

news cycle, the immediate communication by the president requires an instant reaction from the media. In this situation where the media are on guard and ready to pounce the second the president tweets, we may be more apt to make editorial decisions that lead to a loss of trust. “The faster we react, the greater the likelihood is that you will make a mistake,” he said, citing experiences from his own newsroom. These mistakes only serve to reinforce Trump’s claims of fake news and media bias.

FAKE NEWS CLAIMS

“Fake news” is a claim with which every Washington journalist, regardless of their job function, has become intimately familiar with. It’s simultaneously an attack they’re confronted with on a daily basis and a joke at every Washington cocktail party. Sometimes the joking nature becomes less funny and journalists note they have at times felt threatened, harassed or frightened at the anger that many in the public now feel about what they perceive to be the prevalence of so-called “fake news.” Many noted that while there have traditionally always been adamant critics of the press, the level of hostility that the idea of “fake news” brings about is something new. Journalist Seven shared a story of covering President Trump’s appearance at a holiday picnic. “Three guys were standing there” waiting behind barriers solely for the purpose of shouting “fake news” at the press as they were led outside to cover the event. While she’s grown used to animosity towards the press over the years, she was surprised to see it taking place this time at a bipartisan event celebrating America’s birthday. “You never would have gotten that four years ago or five years ago,” she said, shaking her head.

In each of the eight interviews, the part of the interview where they were asked about the President’s attacks on the media through the selected tweets brought a shift in

body language and tone of respondents. Some felt a need to defend themselves and their fellow journalists. Others rolled their eyes and laughed in a demonstration of how ridiculous they felt the “fake news” claims were. One called it “his moniker” and another “his presidential calling card.” A third said it was “a red flag” whenever the president throws around the term. A handful of others went from happily conversational to somber when discussing what the attacks on journalism by the president meant for their industry and its effect on American democracy. All agreed that in almost every instance, the president’s claims of “fake news” were not accurate and were intended to defend himself or to discredit reporting that he felt portrayed him in a critical light.

Journalist Two credits Trump’s need to “rail against an enemy” to his desire to maintain an outsider status. The “drain the swamp” stance that Trump assumed during the campaign became a challenge for him once he was elected to the highest office in that very swamp. The enemy he chose to rail against, according to the political correspondent, is the mainstream media as a whole, hence the “fake news” and other anti-media battle cries:

“As soon as we knew he was going to be president, at that point he is the establishment. Right? He is the president. But as someone who ran as an anti-establishment person, the only way to stay outside the establishment even though you are the establishment is to find somebody or something or some group to demonize. To tell your supporters, ‘Even though I’m the establishment, I’m still not the problem. These other people are the problem.’”

But do “fake news” claims ever have merit? Perhaps not in the generalized sense that Trump means it, though some of the journalists said that there may be times where Trump is pointing to a real problem. Journalist One noted that sometimes some news sites, his own included, need to do better work:

“It starts with every news organization with every individual calling out their own colleagues. Bias does come through, and news organizations need to do a better job of that.”

Journalist Five cited examples where news outlets had in fact made mistakes, giving Trump’s fake news claims a small level of credence on those particular days when it came to the organizations that had erred. While he doesn’t consider the term accurate even in those situations, “on a day like that, he’s got something to stick it to, you know?”

Still, Journalist Seven said, even when the fake news claims have some merit, she finds the attacks on journalists “disappointing” and “disheartening.” She said the journalists she knows work hard and aren’t perfect, given that they’re human and all humans make mistakes. She noted that particularly in cases where a journalist who makes a mistake attempts to correct the record quickly and thoroughly, the fake news claims aren’t warranted.

Journalist Four said that the narrative of fake news has lasting power and that we’ll be seeing it continue well beyond Trump’s presidency. He said that may not be a bad thing, noting that viewers today are constantly bombarded with information from a staggeringly high number of news brands, and that “some of them are genuinely fake news organizations bankrolled by the Kremlin.” Fake news claims pushing audiences to be more alert, know where their news is coming from, and exercising a greater degree of responsibility for the news they are consuming would not be a bad thing in his opinion.

The same journalist also cited the danger of the fake news narrative becoming a global topic of conversation. He believes that Trump’s use of fake news claims has spread and “given the green light to a range of international leaders to advance the same argument about news coverage they don’t like,” many of them in countries where

journalists and the public don't enjoy the benefits of a free press. The fake news narrative in that way has become another tool for oppressing negative opinions. Russian President Vladimir Putin or Syrian President Bashar Al Assad are "unsavory types" who will talk about fake news and "blame the news media for their woes."

FAKE NEWS TWEETS

As for reactions to the tweets dealing with "fake news," there were several patterns that emerged from the journalists' responses, as well as a number of areas in which they differed. Six of the eight journalists took note of the time stamp on the tweets and said that the date impacted their responses. Some of the tweets they considered newsworthy when they were published were not tweets that they would consider newsworthy now, based on the repetition factor previously established. All eight journalists gave answers that stated they believe Trump is attacking the media with these tweets and that his intent is to diminish the American public's perception of journalists for a variety of reasons: to get attention, to distract viewers from other happenings such as the Russia collusion investigation, or simply to discredit the media and prevent any unfavorable coverage of his presidency from having merit.

Tweet One The first tweet about the "failing" New York Times being guilty of putting out "fake news" was "an attack on democracy," according to Journalist One. He said the media was the target of the president feeling cornered by the news coverage he was receiving and that in attacking the New York Times, he chose to take aim at a large, high profile target:

"It is somebody who I see against the wall and lashing out at whatever, wherever you can find fault first... This to me, it's a sad thing to see from the president, you know? It is disheartening is what it is."

Many of the journalists found the lack of specifics in this tweet's content noticeable. Journalist Two dubbed it "mostly nonsense," "yelling," and "him trying to be a demagogue." A number of the other journalists said that they may have thought the tweet was newsworthy at the time but due to the generalized nature of the tweet, they'd be unlikely to cover it now. One commented that covering it would be like getting in the middle of "great spats between the president and another news organization" that she simply preferred to stay out of. On the use of "fake news," three of the journalists said that the way the president uses the terms in tweets such as this discounts any meaning that the term might have had prior to his excessive use of it. Journalist Five noted, "Just because he says something is fake, doesn't mean that it is fake. So at some point it goes in one ear and out the other."

The idea was raised in multiple interviews that there may be ways that the president may be inadvertently helping journalists with these tweets instead of harming them as he perhaps intends to do. Journalist Four commented that tweets like this one have "encouraged a whole new generation of readers to sign up for digital and print circulation." Lastly, when it comes to these readers, Journalist Seven said the most interesting thing about this tweet is what the public reading it cannot see. While trashing the New York Times, she says, "Trump is inviting (New York Times reporters) Maggie Haberman and Peter Baker into the Oval Office to talk to him." In this way, she notes, Trump is attempting to play both sides to his advantage even if it means his words and his behind-closed-doors actions do not match up.

Tweet Two The same journalists who felt Tweet One was "nonsense" repeated their thoughts with this next tweet, an attack on CNN's ratings and credibility with an

accusation of “fake news.” Yet this second tweet also caused multiple journalists to bring up the issue of how these tweets are perceived by Trump’s supporters and those who do not support him. Multiple journalists noted that in this way, the tweet is “very transparent” and aimed towards his supporters who “just like, buy it.”

Journalist Two felt strongly that this tweet, like many others, was not meant to reach everyone but rather was crafted to encourage Trump supporters and bolster the anti-media sentiments the president has fostered in them:

“These kind of comments from the president, they might be gratifying to his hardcore supporters because they reinforce their passionate feelings about who the common enemy is.”

Tweet Three The third tweet moves into territory where the news media is attacked in a more general sense instead of an individual journalist or news organization. In this case, President Trump is asserting that stories in the news about chaos at the White House as a result of his personnel decisions are wrong. He also includes an explanation for what he believes is actually taking place. The overarching theme of comments about this tweet was that the president was using it to attempt to change a news story into a narrative of his own choosing that reflected the staffing of his administration – and in essence, himself – in a more positive light. In this way, they said, the media should realize that they’re doing excellent reporting, the reports have struck a nerve, and the tweet is a sign that the media is getting the story right. Journalist Three stated:

“The impact on me of that tweet as a journalist is simply to say, ‘So they were really on to something in the paper today.’ It underscores the point that whatever article he was griping about is on to something.”

Journalist One said that Trump wanted to portray that he was shifting his staff on purpose in order to seek perfection and that while “we’re still going to do our job and report on

the musical chairs you have going on,” that doesn’t necessarily mean the president is wrong here.

Tweets Four – Part One and Two This series of tweets, an attack on the ratings of an MSNBC show and comments denigrating the appearance of one of the show’s hosts, Mika Brzezinski, received the strongest reaction by far from the journalists. They attributed their strong feelings to the fact that in this case, the tweet was an attack on an individual journalist as opposed to a large media organization. They also cited the personal nature of the attack and the fact that it attacked a member of the media’s appearance instead of her work as a journalist. Almost all listed the ways in which the president’s language denigrates the stature of his office and place as leader of the country, but said that they would cover it in their reporting on the White House because it was so out of character for a president to say such things. “It’s something I wish I never had to read,” one admitted. Another called it “below the dignity – and I’m hardly the first one to say this – of any president.” Journalist One called the tweet “tacky” and “reprehensible” coming from a man “with as much clout and power as he has.” Journalist Two agreed, noting that the level the president stooped to was what made the tweet newsworthy, adding:

“It is a textbook case for why he is not qualified to be president. It demonstrates a level of vicious, meanspiritedness that is – that kind of sentiment should never be voices by a public figure, much less the president.”

Others agreed the “over the top” nature of the tweet makes it newsworthy. Journalist Three felt it was important to note that this is hardly the first president to single out a specific journalist and poke fun at them in a personal matter. He used the example of

President Harry Truman going on camera and making fun of the broadcast style of an NBC radio news anchor.

This series of tweets also was an example for interviewees of why they believe attacks on the media may at times become dangerous to the individual journalists being attacked. Journalist One said that at his organization, a tweet like this would be considered grounds for the company to provide security to the journalist who Trump tweeted about in this manner. That in itself, he said, is the terrifying takeaway:

“Do you know how dangerous it is to have the leader of a nation singling out one person and inviting all of that animosity towards that person? That is a dangerous thing.”

As far as how tweets such as this one are perceived by international audiences, Journalist Four said that the global clients he serves find tweets like this completely astounding. Combine that with the fact that many of the global audiences are made up of people who aren't familiar with being attacked and you're left with countries looking at America confused as to why the president is acting this way:

“The international audience just think, well for the most part, think that he is just the most bizarre human being to ever occupy the office of the presidency... I can't go out to a dinner party in (redacted country where Journalist Four is doing work) anymore because the only thing they want to talk about is Donald Trump and how on earth can America have done this.”

Three male journalists and all three female journalists brought up the sexist subtext of the tweet, particularly that it focused on the journalist's appearance instead of her intellect or work. Many cited Trump's public feud with then-Fox News Channel anchor Megyn Kelly, saying these comments on the journalist “represented yet another attack on successful women.” That continuing narrative of behavior that many thought Trump would discontinue after taking office is where the substance of the tweet was for

Journalist Six:

“We all all thought that this kind of stuff would go away and it didn’t. That was I think what combined to make it much more newsworthy than it would have been.”

PUSHING BACK

When it comes to Twitter attacks by the president on journalists, news organizations, and media credibility, the journalists interviewed said that they are pushing back in ways that they have never pushed back on a president before. This, they say, is causing them to work harder, work smarter, and try every day to do the best reporting that they can do. Journalist Three said that Trump is setting the news agenda with his tweets and we have to push back and “be careful of not letting him totally call the tune no matter how out of left field or how outrageous or wrong a tweet may be.” Journalist One said he believes journalists fail if they let the “fake news” comments affect their mental health, their careers, and their service to the American people in a negative manner and that if they do, they “buy into the narrative of Trump”:

“The more he says we are fake, the more we try to prove him wrong and be factual. I think we are seeing some of the best journalism come out since he started his presidency... When it’s a fight and we just go back and forth, nobody wins in that. When he just attacks us and we use it to make our work better, that’s when the American people win. That’s when our audience wins. Because it is pushing us to do better work.”

Others cited a “certain amount of reactivity” coming from the media to “fake news” tweets. Journalist Six called it a “kneejerk desire to defend your own work” in light of Trump’s barrage of comments against the media. She noted that because of these tweets, more journalists are speaking out on Twitter to fact check stories or to engage with their audience. In this way, Trump is pushing journalists to use Twitter as a way to clarify or correct the record.

Another change resulting from these tweets could be changes to the current media business model, some said. Journalist Two said that the business model of media currently puts profit over public service, citing that as one of the reasons the media have lost the trust of the American people. The journalist suggests the tweets may push us to fix the problem and “then maybe it could push us to do something better.”

At the end of a long day, Journalist Seven said, the tweets embolden and not discourage her. That choice is a conscious one for her and others interviewed. It would be easy to give in to the attacks, to feel depressed and demeaned by them. Instead, Journalist Seven asserts:

“It’s just sort of empowering in a way because it does make you want to redouble your efforts and try to do your job even better. Make sure you have your facts correct before you put them on the wire or broadcast them on the air. And to sort of work harder to be the best journalist that you can be.”

CONCLUSIONS

This research finds that when it comes to the effects of President Trump's use of Twitter, he has in many ways managed to usurp the media's traditional role as gatekeeper of news and information to the American public. The journalists surveyed cite the many ways that he's able to achieve this, whether it's tweeting to change the topics that people are paying attention to in the news or attempting to discredit the media entirely. While some would like the media to stop reacting to the tweets or at least be more selective in the ones that they include in their news content, the journalists are realistic that they have no choice but to cover the tweets at least to some extent. As far as the relationship between the press and the president, where we stand seems to be accepted as a new normal.

The design of this study presented a few limitations. First, while every attempt was made to use a representative sample of journalists in Washington, D.C. of different genders, ages, experience levels, and job functions, the sample size for this survey at just eight participants was small when you consider the vast number of journalists covering the happenings at the White House. While patterns have emerged from their interviews and some conclusions can be made, a larger sample would strengthen the findings on the effects of Trump and his agenda setting role via Twitter. Secondly, the sample size of the tweets was small at just five tweets total for journalists to react to. They represent just a fraction of the President's tweets about news organizations, journalists, and specific news reports. The president is constantly talking about news coverage of current events in his tweets. While this study chose to focus on media-specific tweets, additional studies that examine the president talking about news coverage of other subjects could help to

understand the impact of the tweets. It is lastly important to note that the interviews were all conducted over the course of a few weeks time, a fraction of the happenings over the course of a presidential term. Much has happened even in the few short months between when the interviews were conducted and the writing of this research was completed. The relationship between the president and the press is one that seems to change day by day and the president's tweeting reflects that shifting dynamic.

While this research cannot prove President Trump's snatching of the agenda setting reins cannot be factually proven without a doubt and is open to interpretation, the journalists interviewed for this study overwhelmingly believe that Trump has come between them and their audiences with his use of the social media platform and this research's findings are drawn from their thoughts. These happenings, they say, are further segmenting news audiences into pro and anti-Trump camps in an already divided political climate in our country. They don't know what the effects on our country and our democracy will be, but they believe that there will be longterm impacts nationally and perhaps internationally.

The Washington journalists spoken to for this research are not taking that fact sitting down. In fact, the President's negative tweets about media organizations and individual journalists have pushed the Washington journalists surveyed to work smarter and harder. Their news organizations are adapting, they're working longer hours, they're checking their work more carefully before publishing, and they're finding ways to show their audience that they are putting out quality content. They're exhausted, yes. They're overwhelmed with a news cycle they say is dictated by President Trump that barely pauses enough for them to catch their breath. At times they are neglecting their families

and other personal obligations. But they're emboldened and working both smarter and harder to defend and bolster the reputation of the news media with the work that they're doing day in and day out, believing that it serves a purpose greater than themselves. They are resilient and determined not to give up, no matter how many times they hear accusations of "fake news."

The findings of this study are consistent with my own experience as a Washington journalist covering Donald Trump both during the campaign and during his time as president. I too check my phone when I wake up in the middle of the night to see if the president has decided to tweet something. I too am exhausted by the never ending cycle of news coming out of the Trump administration and find it all hard to keep up with at times. I too have completely redone a meticulously researched and fact-checked story an hour before my deadline when President Trump's comments change the entire news narrative of the day. I too have stood stoically at campaign rallies as people have shouted, jeered, and even thrown things at me after President Trump has whipped the crowd into a "fake news" frenzy. I too have felt a need to defend my work and the work of my colleagues against those who agree with the president's assertions about a corrupt and phony media. And I too am undeterred by the challenges that all of this presents for our profession going forward.

Covering President Trump has been a difficult and demanding task, but it's also challenged me to be a far better journalist than I was before he took office. My own work provided a lens through which I was able to intuitively understand the experiences of journalists interviewed in this study and appreciate what it feels like to hear "fake news" rhetoric spreading across the country. While I made a concerted effort to let the

journalists interviewed share their thoughts with me without jumping in to share my own similar experiences, there were a number of times during the interviews where I deeply empathized with what my interviewees were sharing with me. My follow up questions during the semi-structured interviews did often reflect my own experiences.

This study offers potential areas for future research. Additional studies might follow how coverage of the tweets changes throughout the remainder of President Trump's first term and even further should he be elected to a second term in office and as a result, how his relationship with the press changes. President Trump continues to tweet on a daily basis and new policies and narratives are constantly emerging from his tweets. Secondly, the triangular relationship between the White House, the media, and the American people characterized in this study is missing the actual voice of the American people. This study includes examples of what journalists have heard from their readers and viewers about the president's tweets, but not the actual thoughts directly from the American people to get their firsthand account of President Trump taking the agenda setting reins. They may feel differently about the relationship between press, president, and public than journalists realize. Future research might explore what American news consumers are thinking, perhaps by putting news content and the president's tweets reacting to the coverage side by side for comparison. Lastly, while future presidents and other high-level elected officials are unlikely to give up using Twitter, future studies might follow how their use of the platform and comments about the media are different from or the same as President Trump's. The impact he has had on rhetoric and tone towards the press and news coverage may influence others. Twitter is here to stay and so are its effects on presidential administrations, the media, and the public who watches it all unfold in their

newspapers, on their television sets, and on their computer screens.

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APPENDIX

DESCRIPTION OF INTERVIEW SUBJECTS

Interview Subject	Gender	Role	Type of Employer
Journalist 1	Male	Engagement Editor	Website of a Major Newspaper
Journalist 2	Male	Senior Political Correspondent	Large News Website
Journalist 3	Male	Washington Correspondent	Radio Broadcasting Company
Journalist 4	Male	Chief Correspondent	International Television Broadcasting
Journalist 5	Male	Newsroom Managing Producer	National Nightly TV Newscast
Journalist 6	Female	Television Producer	Cable News Network
Journalist 7	Female	White House Reporter	Wire Service
Journalist 8	Female	White House Correspondent	Large News Website